

Children in Detention: Forgotten Bombs or Innocence Behind Bars? A Generation Distorted by Extremists and Destroyed by Society

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact of the children and wives of Islamic State fighters on the future stability of a specific nation-state and global peace. It argues that the use of Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism methods could play a pivotal role in reducing future risks. The article questions a situation where these children, along with their mothers, are now languishing in detention camps, carrying the stigma of their association with terrorism, and devoid of legal identity, and deprived of basic human rights. The article concludes by proposing an alternative human rights-based approach, focusing on de-radicalization and reintegration through custom facilities, psychosocial support, education, and livelihood programs.

Keywords:

Refugee, Asylum, Countering Violent Extremism, Preventing Violent Extremism, rights-based approach.

Introduction

It has been three years since the end of the war against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and the liberation of the 282,485 km² of land which they controlled, the majority of which was in Iraq and Syria. Iraqi authorities report that IS had recruited up to four thousand children in Iraq, with the likelihood of similar number in Syria. (Khomami, 2018) But, in defeat, the terrorist organisation left behind the most vulnerable and fragile. Today, tens of thousands of their children remain on the outskirts of destroyed cities and within detention camps. They are joined in these detention camps by the wives and children of IS foreign fighters. Collectively, these women and children were left to carry the legacy of ISIS cruelty. To bear the stigma of being the wives and children of terrorists. To face disregard of society and government authorities who refuse to issue them new identification papers. Without such papers, they do not exist legally. They cannot enjoy their right, their human right, to shelter, to health care, to an education. They cannot live in dignity.

The wives and children of IS pose serious questions to international organisations, national governments, and non-governmental organisations: What is the fate of this generation that grew up in an extremist and violent environment? How can they rebuild their lives in these war-ravaged countries that are still suffering from social, economic, and political instability? Will society give those children a chance at all?

The Temporary (and Dangerous) Solution of Detention Camps

The issue of foreign terrorist fighters, IS veterans, and other terrorist groups remains a major source of concern for many nation states. Perhaps the most serious threat is represented by IS's human legacy which left more than 120,000 people, including more than 30,000 children placed within the detention camps in cities throughout Syria and Iraq. The UN Security Council has confirmed (and has been reiterated by many political analysts) that the failure to address this issue will exacerbate the situation in the medium and the long term. Staying in these camps and facilities under harsh conditions and religious influences that feed extremism may encourage those detained, particularly young children, to become radical extremists, a result that will increase the threat already posed by the former IS fighters and other marginalized groups.

The al-Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria is a clear example of the general lack of basic services as well as the growing level of violence within the camps and detention facilities. The camp is located within a vast desert and has approximately 65,000 residents, the majority of

which are Syrians and Iraqis. More than half of these residents are under the age of 18. The camp also includes a dedicated section for foreign "immigrant\Mohajerat" women and their children, representing approximately 57 Western and Arab countries, numbering about 10,000 women and children. According to the Camp Administration, there were 128 killings in 2021. (Seiko, 2018) Of the 128 killings, 3 were children and 19 women. The victims appeared to be primarily Iraqi refugees and displaced Syrians. They were killed with firearms and knives as well as by suffocation. There were also reports of individuals being beheaded. This does not include the 41 attempted killings that resulted in injuries to the victims nor the 13 cases of deliberate burning. In fact, given the spread of extremist ideology inside the camp and the difficulty of securing its boundaries, the al-Hawl refugee camp is much more dangerous than the prisons in which IS members are detained. Yet, repatriation of these individuals is difficult as many are considered a potential threat. As a result, some governments have not yet made plans to allow these individuals to return to their home countries; other governments lack the political will to repatriate their citizens who have been active in Syria for fear of bringing radicalized individuals into the country. As a result, these individuals are subject to an unknown future. But these same individuals, especially the women and children, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

From the counter-terrorism perspective, the potential threats posed by these individuals are contained in the short term; the security method is considered feasible and effective as the principal goal of the intervention is to monitor, track, identify, and neutralize terrorists as well as stop the flow of financial resources. In the long run, however, this particular strategy against terrorism will only cause more extremism and violence. Moreover, this strategy poses the very real danger of violating these individuals' civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression. It also potentially results in the securitization of Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) through specific targeting as well as profiling of a specific group¹. And perhaps most importantly, the detention camp strategy fundamentally ignores the deep-rooted infrastructural factors that drive violent extremism, such as corruption, discriminatory governance, lack of a national vision, lack of policies to guarantee basic collective and individual freedoms, and censorship of the media. It ignores how individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances, victimization, and criminalization of populations intersects with these structural factors to accelerate extremism.

How we respond at this moment, then, will determine the extent to which this issue continues as a significant global security. By continuing to follow the detention camp strategy which treats these individuals purely through a security lens, the camp residents will continue to represent a potential threat in the foreseeable and distant future. We have another choice,

however. That is to address this threat proactively within a vision that understands the humanity of individuals who are also victims of IS.

The Long Term (and Humane) Solution to Detention Camps

The issue of IS women and child detainees will require a human-rights-based strategy targeted at deradicalization of those at risk or already involved in terrorist movements and organisations. This strategy would begin by taking steps to establish custom facilities for this purpose; facilities where individuals can be assessed and classified based on their perceived “extremism” as well as the potential danger posed to themselves or others. Such assessments are necessary to ensure that any actions taken will respond to an individuals' needs in a fashion that enables their eventual reintegration into society. With this information, we can also tailor deradicalization programs for women and young adults to include programs such as participation in religious and ideological debates with detainees; psychotherapy and psychosocial support; and rehabilitation activities. All these activities should be accompanied by programs concerned with personal development, such as those that emphasize education and job creation. For youth, there should also be an emphasis on programs where social integration and community participation work to strengthen social cohesion, promoting collectivist culture and dialogue². Finally, given the unique role of nation-state governments, a primary element of this strategy will be to advocate for governments to develop the capacity to provide such services given their ability to embed a belief in the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups, however, require special care and assistance to successfully reintegrate into (and to become productive members of) society. These children have been subjected to rejection, extreme violence, and significant social isolation. They still endure significant stigma within their community. Establishing effective deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs, however, is a difficult task because of these children's varying personal situations as well as differences amongst their current environments. This situation necessitates the commitment and cooperation of a number of organisations and actors. The broader public and local communities are stakeholders and partners in preventing and countering violent extremism. Thus, engaging youth, women, and community leaders is critical to enhancing the effectiveness of C/PVE activities. Additionally, actors in specific sectors must become involved, such as educators, researchers, information technology workers, social media platforms and news organisations. In effect, those elements of civil society which can create bridges to facilitate reintegration into their local community.

Through this more humane strategy, we can create space for constructive engagement between the nation-state government and citizens through a process that enhances trust and understanding as well as expands community ownership of C/PVE policies and strategies. It is long-term strategy that will not only allow us to identify the underlying causes and drivers of violence, but to treat them through developmental interventions. Indeed, C/PVE supports communities building resilience to violent extremism developing in a neighbourhood or city as it strengthens community bonds. It also enables governments to respond more effectively to local concerns. When considered in its entirety, C/PVE policies, and strategies strengthens the social compact between the state and its residents. In doing so, they also support the creation of inclusive governance and decision-making, marked by the development of effective community and government leaders.

The Continual Recognition (and Complexity) of Human Interactions

The sensitive and political nature of PVE programming means that the very existence of a C/PVE program can increase and create tensions within a community. Some C/PVE programs try to circumvent this by rebranding their program as something other than C/PVE, for example, livelihood creation, leadership skills, or interfaith dialogue. While this provides a way to manage risks related to program perceptions and stigmatization of those involved in the program, it presents an ethical dilemma around the underlying principle of transparency. Not only does this raise the question of whether it is appropriate and fair to intentionally mislead participants, but it also threatens the trust that is built within communities. It is vital, then to adapt the content and language of communications based on an agreed community understanding and use of central terms. Their acceptance and agreement on such definitions is extremely important and essential before and during program implementation. For instance, communities may express sensitivity to the issue of violent extremism, and, as such, it is critical to adopt a participatory, inclusive, and responsive approach in developing the design as well as the content of program activities.

It is also essential to consider how processes of C/PVE programs can affect the targeted population. The principle of “Do No Harm” can encourage us to actively minimize potential negative impacts (as well as maximize opportunities) as individuals share the details of their lives with us, a key element for a successful assessment and building of a support network. A successful C/PVE program creates an ethos that builds an in-depth understanding of the political cultural context of that person’s experience, highlighting the different types of violence and conflict experienced as well as the dynamics that exist between individuals and

specific groups. Developing this ethos enables the creation of programs that help prioritize approaches based on particular needs on the ground.

It is equally critical that C/PVE programming consider gender sensitivity in its design. While C/PVE programming seems primarily focusing on women's role and participation, gender is not just about women. Gender should be understood as a framework for analysis that includes all: women and girls, men, and boys, as well as individuals who identify outside those categories. Gender sensitivity is about considering how individuals experience life differently depending on their gender identity within the context of other factors, such as age, socioeconomic status, life experience, disability, and educational attainment. And based upon their gender identity, individuals face different levels of vulnerability, ranging from exposure to physical, sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual torture, sexual exploitation, and abuse, early and forced marriage.

Political violence can also demand individual shifts in expected gender roles. Women can suffer from having to take on multiple roles within the family and the public sphere, particularly when male family members are pressured, killed, imprisoned, or otherwise have their movement restricted. Men and boys can also be vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, a risk that increases during confinement, arrest, or detention. People of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity are at increased risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence, assault, harassment, and extortion. Therefore, our understanding and consideration of gender sensitivity in its comprehensive sense is necessary to ensure that program are effective and do not cause further harm.

Conclusion

In light of the above, what we should do is undertake an intensive multi-sectoral and actor approach to address the potential threat emerging from the harsh environments of detention camps. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with the most vulnerable of these residents and commit to meeting their comprehensive over an extended period of time. Only providing short-term intervention often results in individuals returning to the same negative coping mechanisms and radical ideas, which also might lead to re-engaging in violent action. Therefore, the focus should be on improving the living conditions of the Persons of Concern (PoCs) and supporting them in moving from a state of vulnerability to a scenario in which offers more prospects to achieve a sustainable improvement in their life. A multi-year intervention period facilitates the relationship with the PoCs required to build the necessary resilience to overcome obstacles. The social protection/multi-actor approach is tailored to

their specific needs, such as access to education and health care, psychosocial well-being, economic livelihood, and legal status. These five core areas constitute the main components of a case management approach while also focusing on gaining a better understanding of the underlying drivers of violent extremism, ultimately addressing those drivers through various tools, and securing the basic needs of PoCs.

The immediate objective of this approach is to build resilience and reduce the threat of violent extremism, by ensuring sustainable personal stability, particularly among children, youth, and vulnerable marginalized groups. As noted above, this humane approach proposes a range of interventions aimed at supporting access to basic needs and creating livelihoods for youth and women while strengthening social cohesion to deradicalize and rehabilitate individuals to be part of the community. Importantly, this approach aims to mitigate the most pressing needs while at the same time identifying and addressing the underlying causes of their vulnerability by developing tailored plans to help them emerge from a state of fragility to a situation where their needs are better met. It enables these individuals to be less dependent on humanitarian or development aid and to re-enter society as active individuals with the opportunity to build a better future for themselves. As such, this integrated strategic approach will also support national efforts to comprehensively address violent extremism and radicalization by enhancing social resilience in society.

However, time is of the essence. Therefore, the return of children, in particular, should be a priority for countries that have a special interest in preserving their national security. Returning children to safer countries prevents further extremism. Also, in light of the risks posed to refugees in refugee and detention camps, increased humanitarian assistance is vital to address the living conditions there, and I will continue to advocate for genuinely holistic efforts that are carried out with passion to assist societies to end violence and reduce whatever stands within the way of growth and prosperity so that they can dedicate their energy to development, innovation and serving humanity; and asking again: what if the solution to the most complex human issues lies in the mind of a child who has been deprived of his/her right to education because of wars and conflicts, or because of disability and the inability of the state and society to find a comprehensive and sustainable solution for him/her?

Hani Al-Rawashda is a Policy and Advocacy Specialist at *Generations for Peace* who cares deeply about protecting civilians and promoting peace. With over 12 years of experience in security operations, humanitarian emergency response, and peacebuilding, Al-Rawashda has developed a deep understanding of the complex power

dynamics that shape our world today. Whether engaging on issues related to national security and counterterrorism, managing multi-sectoral programs and teams in humanitarian emergencies, or building resilient communities and combating violent extremism through innovative strategies, he is committed to making a positive impact on people's lives. In his capacity as a Policy and Advocacy Specialist at *Generations for Peace* (GFP), he contributes to the conceptualization and management of programs encompassing themes as diverse as preventing violent extremism, protection, and mental health. His work also includes his being a Senior Protection Officer and Technical Expert at Medair - an international humanitarian organisation operating in Jordan, where he designed and managed social protection projects for refugees and host communities.

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¹ Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) refers to a set of strategies and initiatives aimed at reducing the attractiveness and impact of violent extremism, especially terrorism. It focuses on addressing the root causes and drivers of radicalization, as well as preventing individuals from radicalizing and recruiting into violent extremist groups. C/PVE aims to work across various sectors, including social, educational, religious, economic, and political, to create an environment less conducive to the spread of extremist ideologies and recruitment.

C/PVE should be distinguished from becoming just a security tool for the following reasons:

Focus on prevention: Unlike traditional security measures that focus primarily on law enforcement and military responses after threats emerge, CVE focuses more on addressing the underlying causes that lead to radicalization in the first place. It aims to prevent extremism from taking hold, rather than simply responding to its consequences.

Holistic approach: C/PVE takes a comprehensive and multisectoral approach involving different actors such as community leaders, civil society organisations, teachers, religious institutions, and social workers. It recognizes that a security-focused approach alone is not sufficient to address the complex drivers of extremism.

Promote social cohesion: C/PVE emphasizes building trust and collaboration among diverse communities, contributing to long-term social cohesion and resilience against extremist ideologies. It seeks to create environments in which individuals are less likely to be influenced by extremist narratives.

Long-term sustainability: By addressing root causes and engaging communities, CVE efforts can create sustainable change that reduces the long-term appeal of extremism. Security-focused measures may offer short-term gains but do not address the underlying factors that lead to radicalization.

In short, C/PVE includes a comprehensive, preventive, and community-based approach to countering and preventing violent extremism. It aims to address the drivers of extremism and create an environment in which individuals are less vulnerable to radicalization, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and peaceful society.

² Examples of such programs include:

Maarifa Centers in Kenya: The Kenyan government, in partnership with international organisations, established "Maarifa Centers" to provide education and vocational training opportunities to vulnerable youth, particularly those in marginalized areas where extremist groups have attempted recruitment. These centers offer courses in various skills, including IT, agriculture, tailoring, and entrepreneurship. By equipping young people with valuable skills, these programs not only increase their employability but also provide alternatives to joining extremist groups.

Sport For PVE: Generations For Peace implemented a "Sport For PVE" Program in Jordan, which aims to empower youth and communities to take an active role in addressing threats to peace and build social cohesion across a diverse group of youth to foster peace and resilience to violence and conflict.

IDare Jordan: This program is dedicated to fostering positive youth development (PYD) for sustainable change. IDare believes in youth as they are the driving force towards developing comprehensive sustainable concepts where social, economic and political dimensions are equally respected. IDare exists to be the platform for the voice and efforts of young active citizens in transforming their societies to achieve remarkable success in all their endeavors.