

# How to reintegrate juvenile violent extremist offenders?

Children in so-called Islamic State territories play an important role in the organisation and are also used for suicide attacks, executions and fighting, say **Liesbeth van der Heide** and **Jip Geenen**. As they can be viewed both as victims as well as perpetrators, can they be reintegrated into society?

**T**he so-called Islamic State (IS) has repeatedly shocked the world with its actions and propaganda images and, in particular, the footage and stories of children as young as eight executing people. It has become clear that children play an important role in the organisation: the children of the caliphate are seen as 'the future of IS', and therefore education and propaganda are an essential method of indoctrination. But children are not only prepared for the future of the organisation: IS uses minors for suicide attacks, executions and fighting.

This socialisation of children during their time living in the caliphate causes concern for a number of reasons: What happens to these children when the caliphate collapses, as a high number of them will be rendered stateless? Secondly, what happens to children returning to their home countries – regardless of whether they were taken by their parents to join the caliphate or travelled there themselves at a young age? It is likely that many of these youths have been socialised into a violent environment, have been trained and prepared to commit attacks and are traumatised by their experiences in the caliphate. As they can be viewed both as victims as well as perpetrators, it leaves governments with the question of what to do with juvenile violent extremist offenders (JVEOs) in order to successfully reintegrate them into society.

Three factors are important when dealing with juvenile returnees – age, attitudes and coping mechanisms. First, the age of the individual can give an indication of the life and role of the juvenile in the so-called caliphate. It is generally assumed that children join the armed conflict when puberty begins. This means that

young children are likely to have had a different experience from teenagers, although it may still be a violent experience. Young children (from birth to approximately nine years old) who were born in IS-held territory, or brought into this territory by their parents at a very young age, should first and foremost be viewed as victims. For older children however, other factors such as indoctrination, training and potential involvement in violent activities are more likely to play a role, demanding an approach that goes beyond the victim perspective.

Second, a relevant study points to the importance of children's attitudes towards the use of violence and violent behaviour. The study concludes that youths who have a tolerant attitude toward violence are more likely to exhibit deviant behaviour (in other words: likely to engage in criminal and potentially violent behaviour) than their counterparts who had actually engaged in violence. This is particularly relevant for the issue of young returnees for two reasons. First, in light of their socialisation into the caliphate of IS, it is much more likely that their attitudes are, in fact, more tolerant or even positive towards the use of violence which, if true, would provide a strong indicator for vulnerability to later (potentially violent extremist) offending. Second, from a more pragmatic perspective, it is often difficult to determine behaviour in hindsight, which provides all the more reason to focus on attitudes when young children and adolescents return from Syria and Iraq.

Another study found that coping mechanisms matter: Are juveniles internalisers (referring to a wide range of behaviour in which feelings and emotional responses are directed inward) or



externalisers (which refers to expressing feelings and emotions into behaviour that is directed outward into delinquent or aggressive behaviour)? The study found that children and adolescents who struggle with problems of internalisation at a young age, not only run a greater risk of engaging in a criminal and potentially violent career as adults, they also face the prospect of: "A level of life failure as serious as that of early onset offenders." As a consequence, the authors conclude that interventions aimed to prevent this risk from materialising should start as early as possible.

Exceptionalising violent extremists in general, and juvenile violent extremists in particular, does not help – not only because exceptionalising terrorism is dangerous, but this tendency also causes professionals and policymakers to overlook knowledge and experiences from other fields. Children engage in violence outside of extremist organisations, and the rehabilitation and reintegration approaches and experiences that are already in place for them can form the foundation of tailored programmes for specific target audiences, such as returned foreign fighters or juvenile foreign fighters.



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Overall, any rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for JVEOs (including those returning from IS territory) need to be based on two underlying assumptions: the importance of age and the importance of attitudes. From a positive perspective, the susceptibility of juveniles to

As states increasingly confront younger people caught up in violent extremist activity, it is up to them to devise corresponding measures. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, especially where numbers of terrorism convicts in general, and juveniles in particular are low. But rehabilitation

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indoctrination can also provide a positive starting point for treatment. Finally, treatment should address the level of internalising behaviours and assess the attitude of youths towards violence – two factors that have shown to be strongly connected to increased vulnerabilities for later criminal (potentially violent) careers.

is considered to work best when tailored to individual needs and policymakers need to take into account the very distinctive needs of juvenile offenders as a separate class of offenders, while respecting all relevant international law and human rights standards in the fight against terrorism.

## Sources

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