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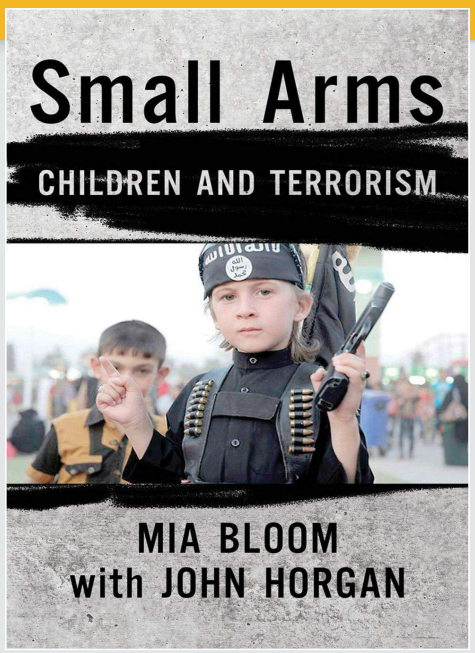
ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

BOOK REVIEW



SMALL ARMS

CHILDREN AND TERRORISM

MIA BLOOM
JOHN HORGAN

Book Review

Monthly Issue - Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition

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Book Review

SMALL ARMS
CHILDREN AND TERRORISM

Small Arms: Children and Terrorism provides a comprehensive examination of children in terrorist groups and makes crucial contributions towards filling the literature gap on the recruitment of children into violent extremist organizations. The two authors present a wide array of case studies with a strong focus on the Islamic State. The authors convey the complexities and nuances surrounding children, terrorism, and individual agency with extensive literature reviews, the incorporation of numerous case studies, primary source evidence with accompanying images provided in the text, and discussions on the implications of their findings.

Holistic View

Providing a particular focus on the Islamic State, comparisons of similarities and differences between the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations offers the reader a grounded understanding on how and why these various groups recruit children into their ranks. The diverse array of case studies woven throughout contribute towards a well-rounded examination of children and terrorism that incorporates evidence from terrorist organizations across ideologies.

By providing a detailed analysis of the ways in which ISIS recruits, coerces, and molds recruited children, the authors demonstrate the dire necessity of having reintegration programs that can address the specific needs of minors vis-à-vis adults as well as the unique circumstances the Islamic State created through an encompassing environment that sought to re-create children's own sense of identity. Some reports concerning children recruited into ISIS have referred to them as ticking time bombs, but such sensationalist descriptions ignore the complexities of extremists' indoctrination of children, the dynamics of varying agency and lack of agency, and grounded analyses based on numerous factors. Additionally, the book counters misconceptions not supported by empirical data about children and terrorism and effectively provides thorough examinations of subject matters that are particularly sensitive in nature.

While gender is not a primary focus, the authors incorporate studies of various gender dynamics and how it relates to children and violent extremism. This includes Islamic State recruiters' attempts to appeal to children abroad and convince them to travel to join the so-called caliphate. The additional angle on gender emphasizes the necessity of incorporating gendered frameworks when researching children and terrorism; factors that also must be taken into account when considering effective measures that programs should utilize to aid their rehabilitation and reintegration process.

Small Arms: Children and Terrorism falls into eight chapters; each chapter addresses one key topic, with some overlapping topics. The overlapping topics, based on a multidisciplinary approach, contribute to making an in-depth and comprehensive study. This review provides a summary of each chapter, followed by a general comment on the content and objectives, the feasibility of research in reintegration and resettlement, the overarching topics and critical ideas, the impact of the emphasis on case study examples related to ISIS and methods to bridge knowledge gaps in this area.

Chapter Layout

Chapter One, What Is a Child, reviews various conceptions of childhood and adulthood across codified legal systems and cultures, the social recruitment networks used to recruit children, and push as well as pull factors as to why children join terrorist groups.

Chapter Two, Child Soldiers Versus Children in Terrorist Groups, outlines the primary differences between child soldiers and children in terrorist groups and the various roles children may undertake and includes an in-depth case study of the socialization process of children into the Islamic State.

Chapter Three, Learning to Hate: Socialization and Cultural Influences, focuses on instructional materials and methods used to indoctrinate children. It includes examples of extremist content in children's textbooks and lessons used in the classroom through primary source examples from ISIS textbooks as supporting evidence.

Chapter Four, Pathways to Involvement: Coercion, is concerned with the social and psychological processes of child recruitment and demonstrates how families are coerced and manipulated by terrorist groups. It draws parallels between sexual predatory grooming and terrorist recruitment followed by an outline of numerous prevention methods.

Chapter Five, Pathways to Involvement: Consensus and Cultures of Martyrdom, studies the impact of martyrdom narratives and cultures of martyrdom on children growing up in these environments.

Importantly, it also includes a discussion of other groups aside from terrorists; serving as a reminder that this phenomenon is not unique to solely a specific ideology.

Chapter Six, Experiences, Apprenticeships, and Careers in Terror, revisits some of the subject matters addressed in Chapter Two but extends the discussion to what occurs after children become involved with violent extremist groups. Through a case study in apprenticeships in the Islamic State, the authors demonstrate the complimentary psychological, social, and coercive processes that take place as the child recruit is groomed into developing a newly molded identity.

Chapter Seven, Leaving Terrorism Behind and Chapter Eight, An End or a New Beginning?, conclude with considerations on how to rehabilitate and reintegrate children into society after being exposed to violence, hatred, and indoctrination. The authors offer policy proposals regarding the currently pressing issue on minor returnees from the camps in Syria; many of whom are now stateless as their birth certificates were issued by the Islamic State.

Defining Childhood

In Chapter One, the authors explore the problematic nature of imposing a strict age marker between these two categories and the misconceptions that may accompany assumptions about accountability, or lack of accountability, for one's actions based solely upon age alone. They discuss how various the conceptions of childhood vis-à-vis adulthood vary across cultures and societies. Oftentimes, this is informed by factors such as physiological changes, the ways in which views on gender influences markers for adulthood, and the fact that a person's birth may not be registered which in turn contributes to the ambiguous nature of establishing an exact age. Following a review of childhood as defined by various legal systems, the authors state that the book makes the distinction between children fifteen and under and those sixteen and older – a distinction validated by their research findings on cross-cultural definitions of maturity.

The authors next examine reasons as to why terrorist groups employ the usage of children including the group adjusting to a decline in power, children's ability to recruit other youth, their ability to escape suspicions when carrying out a mission and serving as props in propaganda. The chapter then delves into social networks of recruitment designed to draw children into these organizations.

One particularly interesting highlighted point is that some militant groups claim not to conscript people under 18 and in the case of the Islamic State, people under 16 according to a claim made by Al-Adnani. However, evidence points to the contrary. The hypocrisy indicates an inherent understanding of the taboo nature of exploiting children in this

manner. The authors discuss numerous instances where the Taliban deceived children who were directed to carry out attacks by telling them that detonating would shower flowers and food.

The authors provide a detailed overview of push-and-pull factors as to why people in general become involved in terrorist activities followed by a detailed review of how these factors become further layered for children. The authors focus particularly on the psychological indoctrination aspects of the recruitment, citing the Islamic State as a unique case where children's presence extend beyond participation in the group in that their presence is also used to shame adults who have not engaged in participation.

Child Soldiers and Children in Terrorist Groups

Chapter Two identifies the differences between child soldiers and children in terrorist organizations. After presenting an historical overview of child soldiers in war and conflicts around the world, Bloom and Horgan identify the most significant difference between child soldiers and children in terrorist groups: the microprocesses of recruitment, such as levels of schooling and the role of education – child soldiers tend not to receive education of any kind (including indoctrination); while, children in terrorist organizations receive ideological indoctrination.

The primary case study in this chapter examines socialization into the Islamic State and establishes five sources of origin for children in the Islamic State:

1. children of local fighters
2. children of foreign fighters
3. local abandoned children
4. children coercively taken away from their families
5. volunteers.

The authors explain how each category serves a specific purpose for achieving a variety of objectives ranging from recruiting other local children to positive publicity for the Islamic State to being used as propaganda tools in videos. Differences in age, nationality and gender also influence the ways in which the group have utilized their presence: children of foreign fighters made appearances in video propaganda, older children received higher task levels and gender restricted the activities girls and boys could or could not engage in. Involvement could range from engagement on the battlefield to informal

involvement, such as supportive roles, spies, legal assistants, recruiters, couriers, and scouts.

It delves into the five areas, identified by the authors, that differ child soldiers from children in terrorist groups: parental and authority figure roles, drug use and abuse, accessibility to education, children's own roles in the group, and the level of girls' participation in combat.

Ideological Indoctrination

Learning may bring to mind positive associations with increased opportunities, pathways to success through education, and empowerment through knowledge. For terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State, educational programs other purposes by providing a systemized method of indoctrination where young students learn extremist rhetoric verbatim and absorb the material. The authors show how the ISIS content centers on violence and permeates every level of the extremist lesson plan in subject matters, such as mathematics where children learn to count with images of weapons of war. The normalization of and desensitization to violence is the ultimate goal. Although the existence of such content at elementary level textbooks is shocking, the authors remind readers that textbooks issued by the US Agency for International Development during the Cold War in Afghanistan incorporated extremist messaging, of encouraging local resistance to the Russians.

Research indicates that adults in terrorist groups have higher levels of education and wealth than peers, and the same cannot be said for children. They cite Sabaoon's research on the Taliban which reveals that the recruitment of children and adolescents strongly correlated with economic deprivation in Pakistan.

Exploitation and Coercion

Chapter Four focuses on parallels between grooming tactics used in pedophile sexual exploitation and terrorist groups' recruitment of children. Major overlaps between these two processes include desensitization to violence with the goal of normalizing the abnormal, isolating the individual from their social networks - including family and friends, incentivizing, online and offline grooming, building rapport, and oftentimes establishing contact with targets online. The authors cite and adapt David Finkelhor's model on the four common preconditions to child sexual exploitation as an applicable framework for understanding how violent extremists target children: motivation, the desire to abuse and exploit children, overcoming

internal and external inhibitions, and overcoming the target's resistance to the activity. Unlike pedophiles, terrorists do not hide their objectives. Using ISIS as a case study, the text highlights how ISIS considers age, gender, and nationality when matching recruiters with their targets who may have a shared or at least similar background.

The chapter categorizes four types of incentives recruiters use to exploit children: material (monetary, gifts, etc.); moral (appeals to self-esteem, religious, etc.); coercive and psychological. To demonstrate the psychological aspects of incentivizing tactics, the authors draw from case studies of ISIS, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and Tehrik-i-Taliban.

The authors propose areas and approaches for prevention: noting the interpersonal elements of recruitment and educating the wider public, focusing on desensitization, and increasing the cost of engagement while decreasing the benefit. Literature and research on pedophilia offer significant insights on how terrorist recruitment and exploitation of children works. Taking a cross disciplinary approach and adjusting models on child sexual exploitation to terrorist recruitment provides a framework from which to understand the psychological and social aspects of grooming used by these recruiters to identify and recruit targets.

Martyrdom

By providing a thorough review of the history of martyrdom as it relates to various faiths (such as Christianity and Buddhism) as well as other violent extremist organizations (including the Islamic State, the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam, and IRA), the authors remind readers of the diverse traditions of martyrdom across sociocultural contexts. They cite Gambetta's distinction between an act of martyrdom and an act of terror: in the case of the former, the individual "kills only themselves...in an act of protest" and in the case of the latter, "kills themselves and others...in an act of terror."

Chapter Five presents numerous case studies of children and how violent extremists cultivate "cultures of martyrdom" – a process that includes the fetishization of an afterlife, portraying to wider society a willingness to die on the part of the 'martyr', celebrating martyred children through propaganda, and commemorating the attack and the 'martyr' following the act. The process of targeting children includes the incorporation of violent teachings through religious classes, mass media, education and, community.

The authors then describe ISIS videos where 'cubs of the caliphate' draw straws to determine the next martyr whereby the selected individual receives positive peer reinforcement, which portrays the event as a euphoric win. From a child psychology

angle, the authors explain that the glamorized violence elicits excitement and adrenaline rushes. Children do not have free choice to consent to participating in such operations, but such groups give the impression that they are willing participants.

Expertise and Training

Chapter Six further explains the why and how dynamics. The section first establishes what involvement in terrorism entails: beyond violent actions, terrorist organizations require nonviolent participation on behalf of their members including financers, propagandists, commanders, recruiters, and other forms of logistical support. For adults and children alike, the dynamic nature of involvement means that they are able to fulfill numerous roles and for children, there are instances where their unassuming and less detectable physical appearance and age make them ideal for specific activities.

Beyond age, the authors also mention gender dynamics and provide Boko Haram as a case study example where young girls have been selected as suicide bombers. Highlighting how both gender and age influence certain outcomes, the chapter specifies that those who are able to have children were not deployed as suicide bombers by the group but were instead viewed as the bearers of the next generation.

The next section discusses "How children learn terrorism." Following a literature review of group psychology as it relates to learning processes, the authors identify "key themes" shared between contemporary terrorist organizations and cults: environments of paranoia, apocalyptic world view, and youth oriented combined with strict control. The text identifies commonalities in how these groups develop "committed insiders" among youth through identity markers, violence, and coercion.

A case study of "apprenticeships in the Islamic State" concludes the chapter. It emphasizes how ISIS balanced a mix of positives and negatives through reward, praise, favoritism, admonishment, threats, learning through repetition, and other forms of violence within a wider framework of children's socialization and identity reformation. Horgan's six stages of child socialization to the Islamic State accompanied by a graphic aid include a particularly helpful summary of this process: seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization and stationing. The summary is not meant to establish a set socialization pathway that follows the steps in any exact order but instead describe the general elements of the socialization process children encountered. The authors outline opportunities for further research by identifying the remaining unknown aspects of the "quality of training received by children" and the exact nature of children's engagement on the battlefield.

Leaving Terrorism

The division between victim and perpetrator is not always clear and age alone does not determine

which side of the line an individual may fall on; as children, just like adults, can occupy both spaces simultaneously. However, even if a child partook in harmful actions as a perpetrator, the authors state that they were still "targeted, groomed, and exploited to elicit violence in service of others."

The reasons for why adults disengage from terrorist groups are varied and unique to each individual and their circumstances, but few reasons explain why children disengage. The authors identify numerous knowledge gaps: what are psychological effects for children who have participated in terrorism? What are long-term effects of children's engagement in violence? What is the scale of 'child militancy'?

Chapter Seven seeks to provide insights that address the first two questions. The authors acknowledge that there are no precise answers to the third question.

To ease reintegration, the chapter references decades of work concerning child soldiers and rehabilitation efforts and how previously effective approaches may not necessarily be conducive for children recruited into the Islamic State. On a grimmer note, the authors state that countries are "ill equipped" to effectively respond to the number of child returnees and the concluding analysis further emphasizes the dire need for more research and development of programs that will be prepared to receive returnees.

Policy Suggestions

The authors continue the discussion on rehabilitation and reintegration with a focus on policy proposals specifically in relation to children returnees from the Islamic State. Following a summary of UN resolutions on "five practical ways in which young people can meaningfully contribute" to stability and peace in their countries, the text provides insights on what must be taken into consideration regarding children from Islamic State territory. The authors propose "carefully considering the range of effects, particularly of the psychological nature, children have potentially been exposed to" under the Islamic State as the first step. Importantly, this chapter clarifies that children who lived under ISIS will have a set of unique experiences in comparison to children from other violent extremist organizations and more generally, child refugees who have also experienced traumas of war. Reintegration models developed from past conflicts are currently helpful, the evidence presented in Small Arms makes evident the necessity of understanding the unique circumstances presented by child ISIS returnees, specifically, the problem posed by statelessness where individuals with foreign fighter parents have Islamic State-issued birth records and documentation. Children may face stigmatization for their association with ISIS thereby adding another hurdle to re-acceptance into society by their peers.

The chapter acknowledges that much remains uncertain and only time will determine how effective reintegration programs are for child returnees. It conveys the urgent need for governments to address needs that are arising and will arise as more people return to their countries of origin. The concluding section provides eight practical actions that can be taken to prevent recidivism into violence:

1. Taking into account local needs and address community-specific contexts;
2. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs must consider gender;
3. Utilize multidisciplinary treatments from programs that have reintegrated people from gangs and cults for example;
4. Ensuring transparency and coherent policies;
5. Building and support NGOs and stakeholders who are equipped to provide social services;
6. Engaging with the families and communities of the child returnee;
7. Including both secular and religious dialogue and address the false nature of extremist narratives;
8. Investing in local economies and invest in countries following conflict.

Conclusion

Small Arms provides a comprehensive and multifaceted study of children's recruitment into, and participation in, violent extremist groups - particularly in the Islamic State. The authors also refer to a diverse array of terrorist organizations: Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam, Boko Haram, Taliban, Al Qaida, Hamas, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, Neo-Nazis, Maoist militants, Provisional Irish Republican Army, and Baader-Meinhof Group. The consistent and more in-depth case studies concerning the Islamic State offer an important juxtaposition on how this group differs from others, including from groups of a similar ideological nature. The pertinent example of the Islamic State further reveals the ever-increasing and pressing need for countries to establish programs that are capable of re-integrating minors upon their return to their home countries. Such initiatives must take an interdisciplinary approach in order to address a diverse set of needs.

Chapter Two provides the differences between child soldiers and children in terrorist groups draws distinguishing factors between these two groups and some case study examples on child soldiers. Although Chapter Two was informative and contributed to a deeper understanding of the topic, incorporating child soldier case studies in other sections simultaneously demonstrates that there remain overlaps in trauma responses and psychological impacts of exposure to violence. Additionally, the detailed discussions on the socialization of children into the Islamic State and adults vis-à-vis children in terrorist organizations included in this chapter may have been better placed elsewhere as to avoid straying too far away from the highlighted topic of the chapter.

Another possibility would have been to provide an equally in-depth examination of a case study concerning recruitment into an organization that utilizes child soldiers. This approach would have provided a baseline to directly compare and contrast a set of selected case studies from both categories which would make the ISIS example more relevant to the chapter's title. Girls in Combat Roles might also fit better in Chapter Six, which discussed Multiple Pathways into Terrorism, coupled with an opportunity for analysis of gendered experiences in the Islamic State, for example.

One of the most important aspects of the book addresses the existence of nuances where division lines are not so clear between child and adult, victim and perpetrator, and recruitment target vis-à-vis recruiter. By establishing the nature of these often poorly defined boundaries, the authors effectively convey the complexities of understanding the dynamics of terrorist groups' exploitation of children. Other crucial takeaways include the discussions on the psychological impact violence has on children, the varying levels of trauma one might experience in the group depending on individual experiences, the positive associations of their former groups individuals may have formed even after disengagement, psychological manipulation by recruiters, the dynamics of coercion, and finally, the parallels between models of terrorist recruitment and other forms of child exploitation such as grooming tactics used by pedophiles.

The exploration of the psychological impact of violence included a literature review of how violence has impacted victims, children and adults, of terrorist attacks. Incorporating these experiences provided an additionally interesting angle in that it pivoted towards victims as opposed to perpetrators and participants (willing and unwilling) in terrorism.

Regardless of one's connection to terrorist violence, the authors highlight how violence can psychologically affect people overall.

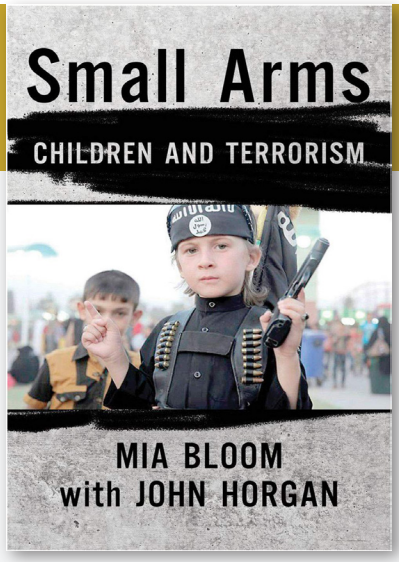
It is important to mention that the book clarifies what is and what is not unique to the Islamic State, and more widely, other terrorist organizations and ideologies. For example, by providing historical context of concepts of martyrdom for various religions and cultures, the authors counter any potential orientalist or essentialist misconceptions about Islam.

Readers who are interested in better understanding terrorist recruitment, extremist propaganda, youth and extremism, the psychological toll of violence on children, the rehabilitation of minors, repatriation policy as it relates to the Islamic State, and the social dynamics of ISIS will come away with a stronger grounding and understanding of these subject matters.

The book also provides suggestions for further research on: the "quality of training received by children in ISIS," specific forms of battlefield engagement they encountered while in the group, the correlation between poverty and terrorist groups' recruitment of children in economically deprived areas, how long children may or may not occupy a certain role in the organization, how potential recruits or individuals currently in training might view recruiters and suicide bombers, and finally, the long-term effects of engagement in violent activities and its impact on children.

Researchers who seek to address these knowledge gaps identified by the authors will find Small Arms as an excellent starting point from which to formulate new approaches and studies.

The authors' work will be especially relevant for practitioners working in rehabilitation, reintegration, and social service spaces; as it includes extensive and insightful policy proposals grounded on thorough research. Policy makers who read Small Arms will find a valuable resource in this book and can, in turn, draw on its research when thinking about the complex realities they must address as debates concerning repatriation continue.



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