IS-Returnees: What about IS-children?

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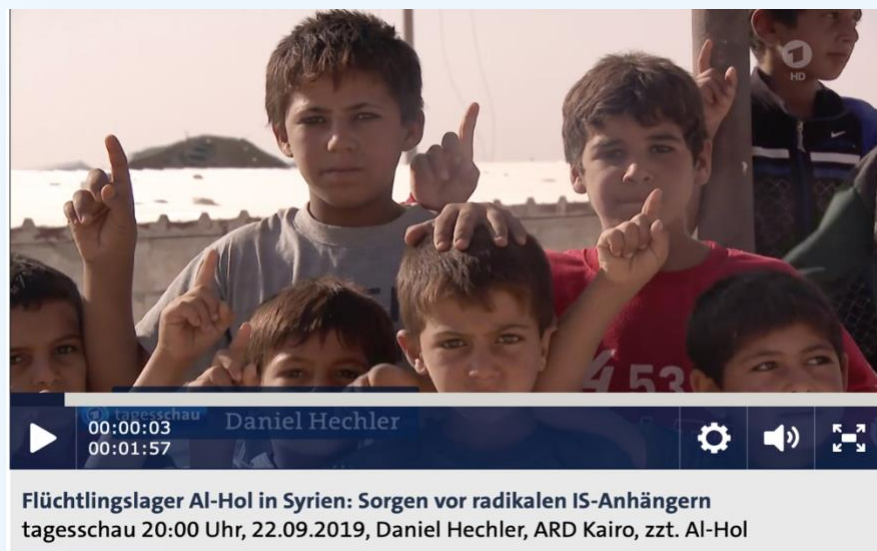
Deradicalization & Security Initiative

English version to the German article on Cicero:
IS-Rückkehrer. Die unterschätzte Gefahr von Frauen und ihren Kindern.

In November 2019, home Secretary Priti Patel blocked the return of about 60 British minors, previously affiliated with the terror group Islamic State (IS) and now living in North Syrian refugee camps. They are posing a national security threat – concerns, supported by defense secretary Ben Wallace and Chancellor Sajid Javid. With this, the initial plan to repatriate the *cubs of the caliphate* in recent weeks has been curtailed.

Their concern regarding these children as possible security threats is valid, but their decision in itself is dangerous. The Islamic State indoctrinated children to continue its transgenerational objective of creating their utopian caliphate by continuing the *jihad* in their or their parent's country-of-origin. Recent media reports demonstrate that the defeat over the terror group has been only territorial but not ideological: minors in refugee camps like *al-Hawl* are chanting ISIS slogans, raising their index finger up in the air, the so-called *tawhid*, and claiming that the *kuffar* must die.

Flüchtlingslager Al-Hol in Syrien: Sorgen vor radikalen IS-Anhängern
tagesschau 20:00 Uhr, 22.09.2019, Daniel Hechler, ARD Kairo, zzt. Al-Hol

Screenshot taken from: Hechler, Daniel/tagesschau.de: "Wir wollen zurück zum IS", 22.09.2019

While every child has to be looked at individually and a generalization of violent IS-children cannot be made, the traditional stereotyping of innocent and harmless minors is not justified. The terror group instrumentalizes its children for fighting and propaganda purposes, picturing children of all ages in combat situations and as suicide bombers. Children are treated as adults, who can arrest and punish adults, granting minors agency and seemingly power. Minors are easy to influence and due to the association with innocence and non-violence demonstrate a target of opportunity. ISIS was able to establish a personal relationship with children and desensitize them to violence by providing them with money, food, social and health-related support. Political psychologist Asaad Almohammad's examination of ISIS-children from 2018 finds that ISIS considers the so-called cubs of the caliphate as the next generation of stronger, better fighters.

European countries have been struggling to find the right solution on how to proceed with the cubs of the caliphate. Meanwhile, Iraq has been convicting and sentencing children from nine to 18 years, for illegally entering Iraq to fight for ISIS, detaining them in juvenile detention centers in Baghdad – despite common knowledge that prisons are not necessarily able to disengage children from radical ideology but rather are often breeding grounds for new or further radicalization. Furthermore, the inhumane situation in refugee camps is also not initiating the deradicalization process, but rather makes children more likely to choose ISIS and its violent ideology again, where they at least felt like someone cared and provided for them in comparison to their lives in camps.

British children need to be taken out of refugee-camps as soon as possible, as they do not and cannot provide a safe environment that fulfill their needs, in addition to risking a radicalization process that could have been prevented.

The UK's approach to deradicalization and prevention include programs such as Prevent and Channel. The former focuses on stopping people from being involved in terrorism, while the latter focuses on the prevention of at-risk individuals into terrorism. Prevent has faced years of criticism, with some demanding its abolition. Thus, the focus in the UK and many countries has been to prevent terrorism, with a lesser focus on deradicalization. Furthermore, it is important to highlight, that despite recent efforts, British but also European deradicalization programs mainly focus on male adults, neglect special needs of women and especially children. Western countries struggle to establish child-appropriate rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Thus, it is advisable to take a look at comparable past and contemporary approaches of authorities dealing with minors, who were convicted for or forced to be part of violent deeds.

After the Second World War it was essential that children – just like grown-ups – should be *denazified*. Around 8.7 million children aged between ten and eighteen had to be part of the *Hitler Jugend (HJ)* and the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen (BDM)* under Hitler's regime. The victorious Allies came to the conclusion that the youth could not be held accountable for the wrong-doings of their nation. Minors were not seen as Nazis, but rather as their victims.

With the age of ten, German children automatically joined the youth organizations of the NS-Regime. Picture shows a certificate confirming the integration of a young German child to the Hitler Youth. © Deradicalization and Security Initiative

With this premise, East German authorities tried to preserve the feeling of belonging to a group by making the youth join the anti-fascist, communist youth group *Freie Deutsche Jugend* (FDJ). In an initially relaxed atmosphere, minors were able to do join activities and talk openly about their experiences. The previous ideology was "simply" exchanged for another one, which historian Alan McDougall described in 2008 as a remarkably trouble-free process. Furthermore, the Soviets ruled out the "amnesty law", overlooking and not allowing public discussions about former memberships. Subsequently the FDJ kept no statistics whether members had previously been members of the HJ or other Nazi organizations – yet, as this caused a non-reflective attitude towards the Nazi regime and their own role within of the young East Germany, its success is questionable. Nonetheless, it granted former HJ- and BDM-members to completely start anew, reinventing themselves and their beliefs in a new manner.

In West Germany, the focus was on *reeducation*. Before and throughout the War, the Nazi's had focused primarily on physical education rather than mental. Consequentially, Germans showed massive gaps of knowledge that needed to be filled. Yet, the school system had to be completely rebuilt, if not even newly established – a process that needed time and

seemed at first not be effective. It was not before the 1960s and 1970s, when the youth gathered into a protest movement against their parents' involvements or the failure of the denazification process, as many former Nazi members still had important governmental positions.

Another case study of children's deradicalization can be found by analyzing rehabilitation approaches of former child soldiers in Africa. By examining the field work of Ilse Derluyn, Eric Broekaert, Gilberte Schuyten and Els de Temmerman, for example, two key findings can be highlighted: At first, children have to be treated medically and psychologically, as many of them are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Secondly, former child soldiers are reunited with their family and their community. Here, however, an intensive preparation of communities has to happen before the return of the child: child soldiers are often blamed for their deeds – be it militarily or sexually (in case of female child soldiers, who are misused as sex slaves). Families and communities have to learn that those former child soldiers are not offenders but victims of totalitarian and radical authorities.

This assumption of children being victims and not offenders is central in the theoretical concept for youthful offenders *Child First, Offender Second* (CFOS) by Stephen Case and Kevin Haines. In this concept, children are more or less in charge of their own rehabilitation and reintegration into society, as they are granted agency and empowerment. Nonetheless, children are understood as children, with the same equal rights as other children in their age group according to the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. This includes among others the right to education, right to be safe from violence and the right to relax and play. Something that should also be granted for children in refugee camps, as their life there is lacking these rights.

A detailed analysis of the above-mentioned case studies leads to the creation of the following six-step plan for a successful reintegration and rehabilitation of minors returning from Syria:

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	1	**Understanding the Child as a Child** • Child is not an offender, but a victim • Child should be granted the same opportunities and rights according to the UN's definition
	2	**Granting a Better Life** • Taking children out of refugee-camps as soon as possible • Offering incentives like money, food, gifts, cinema trips, health care, etc.
	3	**Forming Trusting Bonds** • Having a person of trust that guides the child during the process • Including the child into a youth group that reassembles Islamic brother- and sisterhood and empowers the child
	4	**Dealing with the Trauma** • Counseling of the child with a person of trust • Concentrating on PSTD
	5	**Re-Education** • Creating a non-threatening environment • Filling the knowledge gaps and demonstrating the wrong-doings of ISIS in order to counter violent ideology
	6	**Family Re-Unification and Re-Integration to Society** ⇒ If the child successfully absolves previous stages, it can be reunited with family members who are not indoctrinated with ISIS-ideology and can re-enter society

Children must be understood as children. They are victims of a radical ideology and their parents. Furthermore, as in all cases incentives played a role in order to establish a first notion of trust – ISIS "bought" the children's trust. In order to establish an effective reintegration and rehabilitation program for ISIS's children, trust is one of the most important factors. Each child should be granted their own person of trust – here, it is essential, however, that this person is not part of the family but a trained therapist. The *cubs of the caliphate* were subjects of air raids, possibly took part in combat and may have experienced the loss of family members – possibly triggering PTSD, which a special-trained therapist needs to treat. While some may raise the question of *costs* in this regard, it should be noted that currently there are "only" around 60 British minors that would need this special treatment – costs that in the long

run will be more efficient than risking terror attacks that cost lives and also impose a threat for the financial market.

Throughout the trust-building process, children should also be part of a group that resembles an Islamic brother- or sisterhood. In such an environment, they can feel safe to share their fears and wishes of the future. Nonetheless, it is important that this atmosphere is non-ideological and initially non-religious. This should not indicate that minors should leave their religion behind. Yet, in the first steps it is important – as the East German example demonstrated – that the child experiences a radical change, away from violent religious ideals. Non-Muslim authorities should stay away from defining a "moderate Islam".

If first bonds of trusts are established and trauma-therapy has begun, education is the next key factor. The child is now more open to broaden its horizon and maybe even willing to leave the impression of the West as the enemy behind. It is important to realize, nonetheless, that this will need and take time, as ideology and knowledge do not and cannot change overnight.

At last, it is important that the child gets reunited with its family and reintegrated into society. Just as the example of former child soldiers demonstrated, authorities have to make sure that the child returns to a community that does not trigger any potential grievances by avoiding discrimination and racist remarks.

Conclusively, the program needs to be understood as dynamic process based on age and degree of radical indoctrination. It is therefore not recommended to leave British children to their "fate" in northern Syria – as the security threat they may impose will not decrease but rather increase. The UK, as well as other counties, now have a chance to legally bring them back, start the deradicalization process and monitor them. If they stay in Syria and remain under the influence of the remnants of the Islamic State, their grievances against the UK will increase and can potentially lead to them illegally entering the country in the future, posing a greater threat to the national security.