"Generation War": Syria's Children Caught between Internal Conflict and the Rise of the Islamic State

Benedetta Berti and Axel Bea Osete

The Cost of War for Syria's Future: An Overview

Over the past few years Syria has been the epicenter of regional instability. Its violent and bloody civil war has led to a prolonged humanitarian emergency of colossal proportions and facilitated the growth of radical actors such as the Islamic State (IS). Moreover, beyond the present impact of the conflict on the country and the entire Middle East, the legacy of the war will undoubtedly continue to shape Syria's future, long after the guns fall silent. In particular, the impact of the conflict on Syria's children is an especially devastating and long term aspect of the complex war legacy that both regional and international stakeholders will have to confront if they hope to restore a measure of stability to Syria and the Levant.

Like most of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Syria is a young country; with Syria's children (0-14) and youth (15-24) representing, respectively, roughly 35 and 20 percent of the country's 22 million inhabitants.[1] Not surprisingly, since the initially peaceful popular revolution spiraled into a civil war in 2011, the greatest victim of the hostilities has been the civilian population in general, and Syria's children in particular. Outside of the country, over two of the four million registered refugees are under 18 years of age, while within Syria itself half of the 12 million people depending on humanitarian assistance to survive are children, with over two million of them residing in remote areas where assistance is hard to come by.[2]

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Mapping the toll of the conflict on Syria's children is especially difficult, as the impact is pervasive, affecting not only their psychological and physical wellbeing or their access to basic health care and education, but also deeply impairing their development, and thus their very future. Hence the concern voiced by United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura: "We are having a whole generation of Syrians, young kids, who have seen only war."[3]

With virtually all parties to the conflict conducting deliberate attacks against civilians, children have also been directly targeted, with over 10,000 documented child casualties, and with reports of children as victims of torture, summary executions, sexual violence, and abductions.[4] Already in March 2014 UNICEF reported that child casualty rates in Syria were the "highest recorded in any recent conflict in the region,"[5] and the situation has not improved since. Moreover, despite being clearly prohibited under international humanitarian law, the longer the war continues, the more children are not only victims and witnesses to the conflict, but also direct participants. According to the United Nations, children under 15 years of age, and as young as eight, have been recruited to join the ranks of different armed factions, both on the pro-government and rebel sides.[6] Similarly, Human Rights Watch has documented the use of children in direct fighting, intelligence operations, suicide attacks, and supply of ammunition to the front line, among other tasks.[7]

Young Syrians find themselves directly involved in the fighting for a number of reasons: in certain cases they voluntarily join to defend a cause they believe in; while in others they may seek to become part of an armed group to fulfill a sense of community and belonging, for example after losing their loved ones in the war. Crucially, as combat gradually becomes one of the few available sources of income, children are pushed to enlist by a lack of opportunity and by the need to survive and help support their families. With armed groups – and especially the relatively well-funded Islamic State – able to pay salaries of as much as $400 per month (with the average monthly payment closer to $100), becoming a fighter is increasingly one of the only options available to many Syrians, including children.[8] In other circumstances, and this is especially true for groups like the Islamic State and Jahbat al-Nusra, children have been trained and enlisted through broader educational schemes. Finally, like in virtually all prolonged civil wars, children have also been forcibly recruited for both combat operations and auxiliary roles.[9]

To be sure, not all factions have espoused the same attitude with respect to the use of child soldiers. For instance, in March 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces issued the Declaration of Commitment on Compliance with IHL (international humanitarian law) and Facilitation of Humanitarian Assistance, where they publicly declared that they would "refrain from the recruitment of children and the use of children in hostilities,"[10] a principle reasserted by the group's fighting branch, the Free Syrian Army.[11] Similar commitments have also been expressed by the main Kurdish armed group, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat's (YPD) armed wing, the Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG), and their police force Asayis[12] – although violations of that commitment have been documented over the past few years. For example, in July 2015, Human Rights Watch criticized the YPG for falling short of fully implementing its own guidelines and commitments.[13]

More broadly, children are an especially vulnerable group, and by living in an insecure and impoverished environment, are particular targets for different forms of exploitation, from child labor to sexual violence to recruitment and employment by armed and criminal groups. Child marriage is also an increasingly common phenomenon, both in Syria and within the broader refugee population.[14]

The psychological and developmental scars of long term exposure to the horrors of war cannot be underestimated, nor can the future impact of the lack of access to education. Within the refugee population, providing access to primary and especially secondary and higher education has proven complex, with host governments struggling to accommodate Syrian children. Difficulties that keep Syrian child refugees out of schools include lack of proper documentation, the cost of education, the distance from schools, safety issues, cultural or language barriers, strong differences in the curriculum, and the need for minors to work to support the household.[15] In Syria itself the situation is far grimmer, as roughly three million children are out of school and the educational system has all but collapsed.[16] Enrollment rates have fallen from almost 100 to 50 percent in the past few years, with Syria now having one of the lowest enrollment rates in the world, a trend driven by a combination of the physical destruction of the educational system, the unavailability of

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teachers, and the general lack of access to education due to distance, safety, or financial reasons.[17] Furthermore, attending school is a highly dangerous act in Syria: schools, far from being a safe space, are – together with hospitals and markets – one of the most targeted locales, struck recurrently by the regime in aerial bombing attacks.[18]

The situation is desperate and its consequences stretch way beyond the humanitarian dimension. The economic impact of keeping an entire generation of children out of school is enormous. The prolonged lack of access to education will deeply affect not only the personal and professional development of Syria's young generation, but also the broader resilience of their families and communities and, ultimately, Syria's own capacity to recover after the war. Rebuilding both the physical as well as the social educational infrastructure will require extensive funding and efforts and will not occur overnight. Beyond education, the social impact of the deep collective trauma inflicted on an entire generation of Syrians represents one of the most monumental challenges to overcome in the post-war recovery and transition efforts, affecting a wide range of issues, from social cohesion to the campaign against extremism to the success of mass scale demobilization and disarmament programs.

In this context, it is especially important to zoom in on the role of the Islamic State, a group that extensively focuses on children and "reeducation." General H. R. McMaster has described IS actions as "child abuse on an industrial scale" and "a multigenerational" challenge for stability.[19]

Growing Up in the Islamic State

Any assessment of the impact of war on Syria's children must assign particular attention to the Islamic State, first because of the extreme brutality and violence displayed by this organization. The Islamic State has directly targeted and executed children, while also engaging in other gross human rights violations, including torture and summary execution of minors, mass forced enslavement, and sexual violence against girls as young as 10 years old, mostly from the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq.[20]

But the impact of this organization on the children living in the territories it controls is far deeper. The Islamic State's project is indeed first and foremost political: with the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014, the group declared itself to be the only legitimate political system – rejecting preexisting states in the Levant and their borders – and asserting that all Muslims are obligated to accept the religious and political authority of Caliph Ibrahim (referring

to the leader and "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). The group's ambitions, reflected in its battle cry *baqiya wa tatamadad* ("lasting and expanding"), go beyond territorial control and political power and extend to the notion of engineering a new society with distinct social and cultural mores. To achieve these objectives IS has relied on governance and state-building and intensive media and social media branding, as well as on extreme brutality and an overall offensive military doctrine.[21] In the group's quest to create and impose a new socio-political order, destroying its enemies is not enough; it also needs to "reeducate" its subjects. In this context the group has systematically invested in the young generation, providing both education and military training. Indeed, the group both targets and employs children among its rank and file, with the organization at times relying on minors to carry out executions of prisoners and/or suicide operations.[22] The images of young boys beheading or beating prisoners are then heavily promoted by IS through its communication and media channel, using them as a tool to attract and recruit supporters.[23]

Education is seen as a key platform to prepare the future generations to fight "the crusaders and their allies" as well as a core pillar of the caliphate project.[24] In its own documents, the Islamic State goes to great pains to highlight the importance of education – scientific and religious – and engages in discussions on pedagogy, curriculum design, and revision of the educational system.[25] Taking control of existing educational institutions and either closing them or placing them under the control of their education branch, Diwan al-Ta'aleem, is one of the first actions IS implements after taking over a city or village.[26] Controlling the educational infrastructure also allows the new IS authorities to review and reshape the existing curriculum, making sure it reflects their understanding of Islam and erasing any subject – such as human rights, arts, or political science; or concepts, such as nationalism or "borders" – that they deem illegitimate.[27] To carry out its plans, the caliphate relies on teachers who joined IS from abroad, while also employing local teachers, provided they take a *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance), adopt an "Islamic dress code" (in IS terms), and attend ad hoc *sharia* courses.[28]

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Training camps likewise play a key role in the formation of the next generation of mujahidin.[29] Although camps are not exclusively for children, it is believed that 60 percent of the participants in such camps are under

18.[30] For example, in Aleppo the UN reported "hundreds of boys as young as 10 years of age."[31] Younger recruits in IS training camps can be orphaned, abandoned, or abducted children,[32] but many young participants also join voluntarily, often recruited in refugee camps, through public speeches, sermons,[33] or on the internet.[34] They are promised "salaries, mobile phones, weapons, a martyr's place in paradise and the 'gift' of a wife upon joining ISIL."[35] Institutions such as the Central Cub Scouts of the Caliphate insure that the military and religious training is also combined with a pervasive sense of community, identity, and belonging, thus strengthening the IS grip on the minds of its young recruits. Spending time far from home and the family network also further contributes to draw children further into the IS worldview and ideology.[36]

Children are heavily used in the group's public branding; with young recruits in training camps portrayed as an army loyal to al-Baghdadi and the caliphate, prepared to continue fighting against the disbelievers and apostates.[37] As a trainer in one of those camps declared, "This generation of children is the generation of the caliphate…the right doctrine has been implemented in this children. All of them love to fight for the sake of building the Islamic State."[38] Needless to say, the combination of exposure to brutal IS tactics, combined with the active part in military training (or even fighting) and the overall socialization in the caliphate's educational system will have long term consequences for the "day after" in Syria, as the country will inevitably have to face the challenge of integrating the "cubs of the caliphate."

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Generation War: The Urgency of Investing in Syria's Children

The Syrian civil war, in its massive brutality, is molding Syria's young generations. Today's children suffer physically and psychologically, are targeted and employed by armed groups, and are terrorized and kept out of school by the regime. Tomorrow, the legacy of war will continue to shape their existence, as they will have to rebuild their lives while scarred by heavy psychological traumas but sporting limited educational and professional skills. A severely damaged educational infrastructure and a destroyed economy further

worsen the prospects for Syrian children.[39] This will of course impact not only on Syria's own stability and recovery, but also the recovery of the surrounding region, not only in terms of forced migration but also with respect to fostering both radicalization and criminal activities.

In this context, it is especially important to understand the long term effect of IS and its targeting of children. The group has developed a strategy that not only employs children for military operations but molds them as the new model citizens of the caliphate. Thus it has developed an extensive indoctrination campaign aimed at children that combines exposure to violence, religious orthodoxy, and military training. The curriculum in IS schools and universities couples religious education with languages and sciences; the group is aware of the need to educate its youth in areas fundamental for the future expansion of the caliphate. This ambitious indoctrination campaign represents a future threat to both regional and global stability. In a post-Islamic State environment, the reintegration of the children of war in a post-caliphate society will be an enormous challenge for both domestic and international stakeholders.

In general, demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers is a key challenge in any post-war recovery period; but the situation in Syria is especially dire and, if history is any guide, the stakes are immensely high. An interesting parallel is the impact that prolonged war, geopolitical interests, violence, and massive displacement had on the Afghani population during the decade of war against the Soviet Union. That situation allowed for the establishment of the Taliban movement, while the instability that followed the USSR withdrawal in 1989 facilitated the group's official rise in Afghanistan. An important lesson to learn from this development is how the international community's failure to respond to the humanitarian crisis that enveloped Afghanistan after 1989 generated extensive consequences for local, regional, and global security.

After the Soviet withdrawal the world rapidly lost interest in war-torn Afghanistan, despite the role played by the UN and mostly private NGOs in delivering limited aid:[40] United States aid in 1994, the year the Taliban officially emerged, was only $3.5 million.[41] Children, once again, seemed to bear the brunt of the situation, trapped between a collapsed economy, widespread insecurity, and a destroyed public education system with its lowest official record of registered pupils.[42] Meanwhile, in Pakistan, home to over 3 million Afghani refugees,[43] under-investments in public education, an over-crowded system, and the Pakistani government's lack

of interest in integrating Afghanis in the mainstream educational system led many refugee families to rely on local religious schools, or madrassas, for their children's education.[44] The number of madrassas skyrocketed from 2,500 in 1980 to 39,000 by the late 1990s.[45] Religious schools offered free education, room, and board – enticing incentives for the overwhelmingly poor refugee population. At the same time, many of these schools received little to no government oversight and offered a highly restricted religious education, with numerous schools in the Northwest Frontier province close to the fundamentalist Deobandi current. In some cases, children also received military training. It is no surprise, then, that the Taliban movement originated from this milieu, with many of these students – lacking the necessary cultural and economic skills to engage in endeavors other than religious activities – joining Mullah Mohammad Omar's movement and its self-stated goal to restore peace and security to the country.[46] In this context, the international community's lack of commitment to post-1989 reconstruction further facilitated the growth of the movement and the swelling of its ranks.

If the rise of the Taliban movement in post-Soviet jihad Afghanistan serves as a case study, it is easy to see how the failure to address the fate of Syrian children will continue to haunt the world for generations to come. To tackle this enormous long term security challenge, the international community will have to invest beyond the military realm, commit itself to the day after, and invest in complex and long term social, cultural, and educational approaches to de-radicalization and socialization. An obvious prescription is to increase the investment in education.

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Accordingly, investing in education, both in Syria as well as within the refugee population, should be one of the international community's foremost priorities. Investments are needed to support the educational infrastructure as well as to boost remedial and vocational education to allow children to slowly make up the time they have been forced to spend out of school. Currently this is not happening: only 20 percent of the total funding requested for education by the UN in its 2015 Syria Response Plan 2015 was met by late September 2015. Similarly, while the funds allocated to education and children in the case of Syrian refugees vary from country to country, according to

all available indicators Syrian children have fallen behind, from school enrollment to access to basic healthcare. Recognizing the importance of education, increasing investments, and beginning to devise and implement long term programs is imperative for Syria and the future of its population. Moreover, investing in education is only half of the equation: equally important is tackling the deliberate attacks on schools and educational infrastructure, which over the years have transformed schools from safe to dangerous spaces.

Even this, however, is far from enough, as many of the problems faced by children − from child labor to sexual exploitation to recruitment of children by groups like the Islamic State − are intrinsically connected to the broader dynamics of conflict and displacement, and therefore can only be addressed in that greater context.

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