

# Cultivating Children for War: A Case Study Comparing US Military Recruitment Strategies and Islamic State Radicalization Tactics

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the nuances of opposing systems of government and how they build societies around a militarized culture to attract children to their ranks. This will include a case study of the strategies implemented by the United States' Military to maintain an all-volunteer force by encouraging enlistment and targeting youth with heavy advertisement and enticing benefits; and an additional case study comparing the U.S. Military strategies to the sophisticated and forceful tactics of the Islamic State caliphate to conscript all members of society into their ideology and world of perpetual violence. Extreme differences are noted that come naturally when comparing a democratic republic to a violent authoritarian extremist organization, but there are also significant similarities, as the United States acts as a sovereign state and the Islamic State seeks to become its own sovereign entity. This paper focuses on the recruitment of children as child soldiers, terrorists, and martyrs, who continue to be used in conflicts around the world, even where international humanitarian law is widely recognized and made legitimate on a global scale. Consequences of recruiting children will be recorded, and broader suggestions pulled from various think takes and international organizations will be woven into the conclusive remarks.

**Keywords:** Children, Radicalization, Recruitment, United States Military, Islamic State, Militarization, Targeting Youth, Socialization of Violence, Martyrdom, Glorification of War

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## Introduction

Around the world, state and non-state actors target children to join their ranks. Whether it be for the purpose of protecting and maintaining state interests at home and abroad, or to impose radical ideologies and terror on an unfair, unjust world, people fight for their cultural identity and beliefs. Those fighting, seek to protect themselves and others from opposing values and beliefs that threaten their way of life and ability to be successful. These ‘threats’ have historically demanded collective action and the mobilization of all members of society, especially those that represent the future fighting force: children. In 2001, Dr. Peter Singer, author of *Caution: Children at War*, documented that thirty-seven of fifty-five ongoing or recently ended conflicts (including both state and non-state actors) had children below the age of eighteen serving as combatants; eighty percent of those conflicts involving children included fighters below the age of fifteen<sup>103</sup>.

As we move into the modern era, responsible state actors are seeking more ethical ways to perpetuate war, including working to eliminate the use of children in military operations and limiting child exposure to hostilities. Still, children in countries that use volunteer forces remain targets of rigorous, persuasive advertisement and subversive recruitment strategies. Meanwhile, state and non-state actors that refuse to comply with international codes of ethics persist in their use of children as cheap weapons of war. Violent extremist groups manipulate children to create cultures of violence; to forcibly sculpt societies where extreme ideologies idolizing death and encouraging hatred is the norm.

This paper reviews how and why children are cultivated for war, comparing the strategies of U.S. Military recruiting in the era of the United States’ “War on Terror” to the caliphate’s tactics of radicalization in the Islamic State war of *jihad*.

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Singer, “Caution: Children at War”, *Parameters* 31 (2001): 159, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/Parameters/articles/2010winter/Singer.pdf>.

## Defining the Child

According to Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a “child” is defined as any individual below the age of eighteen<sup>104</sup>. Under this Convention, UN international law states parties must take “all feasible measures” to ensure that members of armed forces under the age of eighteen do not take a “direct part in hostilities”<sup>105</sup>. However, Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was essential in allowing state actors to recruit below the age of eighteen, given written parental permission and proper documentation verifying a child’s age<sup>106</sup>. When the Convention took place in 2000, the United States military was recruiting approximately fifty thousand qualified volunteers at age seventeen each year, so this Article was especially crucial; the U.S. Military continues to maintain the minimum recruitable age of seventeen (with parental consent) to this day<sup>107</sup>. In the United States, 99.75 percent of the total enlisted force are ages eighteen and older by the time they complete training; being able to recruit seventeen-year-olds thus presents little to no setbacks in operations of the U.S. Military, even with the limitations around exposure to hostilities<sup>108</sup>.

On the other hand, and in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, non-state actors are not allowed to involve children in any form of participation of military operations, especially if these operations expose them to hostilities<sup>109</sup>. This is to say that only sovereign states recognized by the international community are allowed to recruit and train children from the age of sixteen, as they are able to control paperwork and validate state-issued identification cards. Of course, the Islamic State, although not recognized as a sovereign state, act as their own sophisticated,

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Dennis, “Newly Adopted Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.” *American Journal of International Law* 94, no. 4 (2000): 790, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2589806>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 791.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 792.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

state-like entity – controlling media, education, religion, and military operations<sup>110</sup>. The IS sees children as weapons, more valuable than adults, and the right of the child is abandoned for the sake of accomplishing IS missions and socializing IS ideologies<sup>111</sup>.

The following sections of the paper will explore the reasons why children are recruited, how they are recruited, the consequences of targeting children, and suggestions for the future in relation to both the U.S. Military and the Islamic State.

## Why Children are Recruited: U.S. Military

Since the draft calls came to an end in 1973, the United States has not required compulsory military service, requiring the U.S. Military to spend more time and money to recruit an all-volunteer force<sup>112</sup>. Targeting children with effective advertisement is necessary to persuade the next generation of fighters to join the cause, and the Pentagon effectively uses approximately \$15,000 per each new recruit in order to achieve its annual recruitment goal<sup>113</sup>. During Fiscal Year 2017 (FY17) alone, approximately 165,000 people were successfully recruited into the active duty enlisted force; 8,500 into the active duty officer corps<sup>114</sup>. These recruits were necessary to maintain and/or increase upon the current numbers of 1.3 million active duty personnel in the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force (as those who have completed their tour of duty retire, exit, depart, or resign)<sup>115</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System.” *United Nations Office at Vienna* (2017): 10–11, [https://radical.hypotheses.org/files/2016/04/Handbook\\_on\\_Children\\_Recruited\\_and\\_Exploited\\_by\\_Terrorist\\_and\\_Violent\\_Extremist\\_Groups\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Justice\\_System.E.pdf](https://radical.hypotheses.org/files/2016/04/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Dennis, “Newly Adopted Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” 790.

<sup>113</sup> Roger Stahl, “Have you played the war on terror?.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180600714489>.

<sup>114</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, “Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2017 Summary Report.” (2017): 3–5, <https://www.cna.org/pop-rep/2017/summary/summary.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.



Because the number of necessary recruits for the U.S. Military are high, implementing rigorous recruiting strategies and spending millions on advertisements each year is crucial.

Enlisted recruits make up ninety-five percent of total recruits yearly; between thirty and thirty-five percent of FY17 enlisted recruits in the Army, Navy, and Air Force and nearly fifty percent of FY17 enlisted recruits in the Marines were ages seventeen or eighteen<sup>116</sup>. Approximately eighty-five percent of all enlisted Marine recruits are between the ages of seventeen and twenty; seventy percent all other branches' recruits are between the ages of seventeen and twenty<sup>117</sup>. Considering the largest pool of recruits each year consists of those who recently graduated high school, the U.S. military is smart to target those below the age of recruitment. Additionally, the Fair Labor Standards Act in the United States permits minors to legally begin working as early as fourteen years of age (with limitations on hours) and fully enter the work force at age sixteen (the same minimum age a minor is legally allowed to drop out of high school)<sup>118</sup>. The U.S. Military must compete with the current economy to attract well-qualified candidates, and thus, if they are to continue to maintain an all-volunteer force, must heavily target children, even if they are below the legal minimum age of recruitment (seventeen).

Currently, the job market is hot in the private sector, and President Trump and his administration are working to increase the overall numbers of the military after years of downsizing, making recruiter's jobs even more difficult<sup>119</sup>. Other limitations preventing recruit eligibility include educational achievement (must have a high school diploma or GED at a minimum), possessing a criminal record, a history of drug use, physical fitness ability, and tough medical requirements that restrict people with color-blindness,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 22–23.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, "Age Requirements | U.S. Department of Labor." 2019. Dol.Gov. Accessed 3 August 2019, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/youthlabor/agerequirements>.

<sup>119</sup> Dave Philipps, "As Economy Roars, Army Falls Thousands Short of Recruiting Goals." *The New York Times* (New York), September 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/us/army-recruiting-shortage.html>.

allergies, eczema and much more<sup>120</sup>. In a 2018 *New York Times* article, the Army reported that nearly two-thirds of young adults are not eligible to be recruited due to poor physical fitness or “other issues such as drug use”<sup>121</sup>. Age is also a limiting factor, as the maximum age you may enlist ranges from twenty-eight to thirty-nine depending on the branch; this serves a dual purpose, ensuring that those in military service are healthy and physically fit for duty, and because full retirement benefits may only be received after twenty full years of service<sup>122</sup>.

All of these factors considered, the U.S. Military pouring in massive amounts of money to engage with children comes as no surprise. It is necessary to ensure force sustainability and growth. Additionally, the U.S. government does not wish for war to become a family business and aims for the military to resemble the demographics and diverse socio-political perspectives of the United States. In order to preserve the integrity and proper representation of American values, military recruiting is targeted at the entire American population of children, hoping to encourage continued national support and military volunteerism. Reading onward, it becomes clear that this is a stark contrast to the Islamic State objectives of transforming all of society into fighters for their cause; however, the idea that creating a society supportive of your values and interests remains the same, and is necessary for maintaining an effective fighting force.

## Why Children are Recruited: Islamic State

Violent non-state actors have many reasons for recruiting and using children in combat. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), children are recruited by terrorist and violent extremist groups for the following reasons: visibility and propaganda, demography,

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<sup>120</sup> U.S. Government. “Join the Military | USAGov.” 2019. Usa.Gov. Accessed 3 August 2019, <https://www.usa.gov/join-military>.

<sup>121</sup> Philipps, “As Economy Roars, Army Falls Thousands Short of Recruiting Goals.”

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Government, “Military Pay and Pensions | USAGov.” 2018. Usa.Gov. Accessed 3 August 2019, <https://www.usa.gov/military-pay#item-35352>.

community expectations, economic considerations and effectiveness, control, and tactical advantages<sup>123</sup>.

In 2017, UNODC wrote that within a six-month data set of Islamic State propaganda, there were 254 recorded events that included images of children; thirty-eight percent of those images were “children engaged in acts of violence or being exposed and normalized to violence”<sup>124</sup>. The images are used to shock, recruit internationally, and ultimately to show the power and merciless resolve that the Islamic State is capable of<sup>125</sup>.

In poorer areas where there are more fatal cases of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), children often outnumber adults, thus making them the most available to recruit (and abduct)<sup>126</sup>. In areas where violent non-state actors are seen as a defensive force against other violent actors (state and non-state), families and communities expect and encourage children to join the fight; in areas where the violent extremist and terrorist organizations are not widely supported, children are easier to manipulate, recruit, and abduct than adults are, and thus become the most viable option to maintain/expand support and power<sup>127</sup>.

As members of the force, children require less food to survive and can be paid little or nothing at all, making them more economically viable than adult fighters<sup>128</sup>. Thanks to the evolution of warfare and an increase in lightweight, easy to use small arms (which are more poorly regulated than larger weapons with greater firepower), children are also capable of being just as effective as adults in combat<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> UNODC, “Handbook On Children Recruited and Exploited,” 10–11.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

Because children appear less suspicious, they are able to get closer to targets and spy, deliver messages, and undertake suicide attacks much easier<sup>130</sup>. They are also less capable of understanding or analyzing risk, and therefore display less anxiety; compared to adults, they also have a higher propensity for following orders without asking questions<sup>131</sup>.

By forcing the indoctrination of children into the Islamic State, the IS is also able to fan the flame of extremism from the beginning of one's life, ensuring Islamic State ideology of hate and violence will be passed on for generations<sup>132</sup>. As noted by *Quilliam*, a think-tank based in London and focused on counter-extremism:

Islamic State ... is not just a rebel group, but an aspiring state, and it needs societies, not just soldiers. As such, its recruitment tactics feed into its long-term strategy by enrolling the whole family, not just youth ... Children watching from the outside come to believe that the practices they witness are the norm, and a positive course of action for them"<sup>133</sup>.

The Islamic State needs its methods and ideologies to become normalized; they create a society of families and communities where the children are brought up to believe and trust in IS systems and values, so that generations to come will remain homogenous and supportive.

It is important to note that girls are also sought out for specific and malicious purposes. Young girls are used frequently in propaganda as they attract more media attention than young boys<sup>134</sup>. The recruitment of girls also contributes to establishing a normalized culture, creating functional households where terrorists are taken care of by wives who birth and raise the next generation of IS fighters<sup>135</sup>. This attracts future recruits and

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, "The Children of Islamic State," *The Quilliam Foundation* (2016), 30–33.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>134</sup> UNODC, "Handbook On Children Recruited and Exploited," 14–15.

<sup>135</sup> Benotman and Malik, "The Children of the Islamic State," *The Quilliam Foundation* (2016): 30–33. [https://www.globalgovernancewatch.org/library/doclib/20160317\\_TheChildrenofIslamicState.pdf](https://www.globalgovernancewatch.org/library/doclib/20160317_TheChildrenofIslamicState.pdf).

successfully demonstrates the Islamic State's ability to build a sustainable society<sup>136</sup>. Girls are also subject to systematic sexual violence and are often used and sold as sex slaves; the use of sexual, gender-based violence bolsters the Islamic State's power through increased financing, the recruitment of male fighters, and the destruction of existing communities of the non-compliant, resistive 'other'<sup>137</sup>.

In summary, the Islamic State exploits and manipulates children as they search to manifest their desires of statehood and expand the reaches of their violent ideology, successfully depriving children of their basic needs and internationally recognized fundamental human rights.

**An Islamic State militant gives a football to a boy during street preaching event, Raqqa Province, Syria**



Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, "The Children of the Islamic State" (London: Quilliam, 2016), 35.

**A US Army 1st Lt. observes as two students from Gordon Elementary School in North Carolina don his pilot gear**



Capt. Adan Cazarez, "Students try on pilot gear [Image 4 of 4]," *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, 2016.

"Socialisation involves initially interacting with children, usually in public spaces... and encouraging engagement... by offering free toys and candy, or the opportunity to hold [a] ... flag, and in some cases, weapons. At this stage, children are exposed to... ideology and are drawn in through the narrative of the so-called... military successes, its utopian society, and the alleged benefits for those who have already joined"<sup>138</sup>.

<sup>136</sup> UNODC, "Handbook On Children Recruited and Exploited," 14–15.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Benotman and Malik, "The Children of the Islamic State," 35.

## How Children are Recruited: U.S. Military

After the Twin Towers fell on 11 September 2001, the shock of terror drove the United States to quickly become a militarized state, where security, vigilance, and punishment resulting from stricter law enforcement sharply increased. Eighteen years later, the generation of those born into the War on Terror are coming of age, eligible to take up arms and continue the fight that once belonged to the prior generation. One of the longest military campaigns in United States history, the Global War on Terrorism has permitted the creation of a culture around military structure and discipline. Radio, television, film, and gaming platforms distribute media glorifying war heroes and the power of U.S. military forces and technology, all the while demonizing existing threats to the U.S. and its allies<sup>139</sup>. Military-preparatory institutions have been created and spread throughout the nation, including the four-year Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program in high schools, from which approximately forty percent of all participants enter the U.S. Military<sup>140</sup>. Recruiters' assigned 'zones' are determined geographically by the location of existing school districts, and there are monetary incentives for efficient and fast recruitment<sup>141</sup>.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001/2002 includes a section that explains how the act gives U.S. Military recruiters access to high school students' personal information, equivalent to that given to private sector employers and college recruiters, without requiring the obtainment of prior parental consent<sup>142</sup>. With this information, recruiters are able to send letters to students and call both them and their households<sup>143</sup>. Recruiters

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<sup>139</sup> Matthew Friesen, "Framing symbols and space: Counterrecruitment and resistance to the US military in public education." *In Sociological Forum*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2014): 77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12070>.

<sup>140</sup> Lila Hollman, "Children's Rights and Military Recruitment on High School Campuses." *UC Davis J. Int'l L. & Pol'y* 13 (2006): 226–229, [https://jilp.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/volume-13-2/Hollman\\_5\\_14\\_07.pdf](https://jilp.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/volume-13-2/Hollman_5_14_07.pdf).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

also conduct in-person visits to schools, which includes anything from setting up booths in the cafeteria and handing out pamphlets, rolling in an eighteen-wheel cinema van with virtual tank simulators and rock walls, to landing Blackhawk helicopters on the baseball field<sup>144</sup>. Online, recruiters comb through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit; as technology advances and kids interact with less traditional forms of media, social media becomes the new best way to reach out to potential recruits<sup>145</sup>.

Media advertisement targeted at youth also include PG13-rated (Parents' Guidance for those age thirteen or younger) big-budget Hollywood films glorifying the military and presenting military duties and way of life in a positive light<sup>146</sup>. All branches of the military and the Department of Defense (DoD) have liaison offices on the same floor of a building in Los Angeles, California, so that they can work closely with Hollywood producers and directors<sup>147</sup>. Any movie that displays U.S. Military bases, weapons, aircraft, ships, and personnel wearing official uniforms, in order to receive military support must first be approved by military officials<sup>148</sup>. This includes movies like *Top Gun*, *American Sniper*, *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Ben Ghazi*, *Lone Survivor*, *Twelve Strong*, the *Transformers* series, and most recently, *Captain Marvel*, which contributed to an Air Force constructed female-targeted ad campaign in a time when the Air Force was met with a pilot shortage of 2,000 people<sup>149</sup>. The short-video-style ad campaign, released on International Women's Day 2019, is titled, "Every Hero has an Origin Story," and consists of different real-life female pilots telling their stories

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<sup>144</sup> Joseph Rosendale and Mary Leidman, "Locked-in on Our Youth: An Inquiry into American Military Recruiting Media." *American International Journal of Social Science* 4, no. 1 (2015): 23, [http://www.aijssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_4\\_No\\_1\\_February\\_2015/4.pdf](http://www.aijssnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_1_February_2015/4.pdf).

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>146</sup> Deepa Kumar and Arun Kundnani, "Imagining national security: The CIA, Hollywood, and the War on Terror." *Democratic Communiqué* 26, no. 2 (2014): 73–74, <https://journals.flvc.org/demcom/article/download/83968/80894>.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

<sup>149</sup> U.S. Air Force, "Every Hero Has an Origin Story." 2019. Airforce.Com. Accessed 3 August, 2019, <https://www.airforce.com/originstory>.



of how they became ‘superheroes’ through joining the United States Air Force, accompanied by heroic background music directly pulled from *Captain Marvel*<sup>150</sup>. One of the women featured in the advertisement was Brigadier General Jeannie Leavitt, the first female fighter pilot of the Air Force, and the airman that helped prepare Brie Larson for the role of “Captain Marvel,” the main character of *Captain Marvel*: a strong-willed, brave ex-fighter-pilot-turned-superhero that saves the universe<sup>151</sup>. Campaigns like these work to harness youth imagination and spark hope for future generations, drawing in children and young adults alike with fantasies of heroism, fame, and empowerment. Corporate media companies are fine with campaigns like this, where they may lose a little autonomy over their editorial work in exchange for extremely expensive and difficult to access equipment, as well as free use of real military personnel as extras and the opportunity to work with real military consultants<sup>152</sup>.

Former Spokesman of the Department of Defense Kenneth Bacon once said, “If we can have television shows and movies that show the excitement and importance of military life, they can help generate a favorable atmosphere for recruiting”<sup>153</sup>. But while the U.S. Military is presented in a favorable way, the enemy of the United States is not so lucky. The U.S. Army launched its extremely successful, cutting-edge, free first-person-shooter computer game, *America’s Army*, in 2002, which accumulated six million registered users at the end of 2005, and, as of 2014, has had forty-one new releases/updates across different gaming consoles (including Xbox and PlayStation models)<sup>154</sup>. After 9/11 and the release of *America’s Army*, game companies began pushing out more war-theme games, and attempted to keep up with relevant conflicts, creating games like *Prisoner of War*, *Medal of Honor: Frontline*, *Desert Storm*, *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, and the *Call of Duty* series; games where players hunt insurgents,

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Kumar and Kundnani, “Imagining national security: The CIA, Hollywood, and the War on Terror,” 73–74.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>154</sup> Stahl, “Have you played the war on terror?,” 122.



like the *Tom Clancy* series, *SOCOM: Navy Seals*, *Conflict Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad*, and *Desert Combat* have also been manufactured<sup>155</sup>. Many of these games put a target on the people of the Middle East, with combat centered around the desert lands of the Middle East; these games and other media like it draw feelings of violence towards the Arab community, and the format of video games allow players to become desensitized to killing this ‘other.’ Additionally, commercial war games have created patriotic slogans like, “All Americans Pledge Allegiance. A Select Few Show It.” and “You don’t play. You volunteer”<sup>156</sup>. This type of branding, whilst helping gaming companies create loyal customers willing to ‘take up arms’ and ‘answer the call’ as each game sequel releases, also adds to the real number of recruits each year<sup>157</sup>. *America’s Army* sparked a surge of competitive games of the same genre, and thus popularized the military across the United States. One colonel once bragged that *America’s Army* has “achieved the objective of putting the Army in pop culture”<sup>158</sup>. Another sergeant noted, “Every seventeen-year-old that comes into my recruiting office has aspirations of being a Marine sniper because they grew up playing *Call of Duty* video games”<sup>159</sup>. Video games successfully ‘game-vertise’ and normalize the use of violence for teens, especially against Middle Eastern terrorist threats and insurgents, while spotlighting patriotism and idealizing military duty.

Media, as well as the heavy presence of retired military JRTC instructors and active recruiters, effectively socialize military values into American society starting from a young age. National holidays like Memorial Day and Veteran’s Day pay homage and respect to those who ‘fought for freedom and justice,’ formally acknowledging that service to the country is of the highest honor, and that your life in service is for the greater good of society. Civilians are constantly heard repeating, “thank you for your service,”

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 118–125.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Rosendale and Leidman, “Locked-in on Our Youth,” 23.

and military members are proud to serve. This support and recognition is necessary for the maintenance of an all-volunteer force, and as described later, the socialization and establishment of American military culture is necessary – just like the systematic socialization of ideologic violence, terror, and death propagated by the Islamic State is necessary for them to create the illusion of legitimacy and functionality.

Besides extensive forms of advertisement, the U.S. Military also uses a combination of short-term contracts and high-value social and economic incentives, consequently targeting low-to-mid-income households with benefits like large signing bonuses, housing, grocery allowance, extended paid leave (thirty days per year); life insurance and TRICARE services for all members, spouses, and dependents (covers medical/dental insurance); Veteran's Affairs (VA) educational benefits like the Post-9/11 GI-Bill, which offers four years of paid tuition and a monthly stipend for housing and books (may be transferred to your spouse or dependent); and of course, incredible retirement benefits (members who retire with twenty years of service get a monthly annuity for life)<sup>160</sup>. Nearly sixty percent of all who enlisted in FY17 came from neighborhoods with average annual household incomes of less than \$63,000, and approximately forty percent were from households with annual incomes of less than \$40,000<sup>161</sup>. According to the U.S. Census of 2017, the median household income across the nation was \$60,000<sup>162</sup>. Giving financial incentive and tools that could help one afford an education and escape poverty encourages young adults to join the military, despite the risks. In fact, adolescents differ from adults in that, in their stage of development, they are more likely to take risk with regards to health and safety; U.S. and international law is purposefully in place to ensure that children are given special protections because of their

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<sup>160</sup> U.S. Government, "Military Programs and Benefits | USAGov." 2019. Usa.Gov. Accessed 3 August, 2019, <https://www.usa.gov/military-assistance>.

<sup>161</sup> Office of Under SecDef, Personnel and Readiness, "Population Representation in the Military Services," 21–22.

<sup>162</sup> Gloria Guzman, "Household Income: 2017 American Community Survey Briefs." United States Census Bureau (2017): 3, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/acs/acsbr17-01.pdf#page35>.

immaturity and deficiency to make choices with lifelong ramifications<sup>163</sup>. As one study puts it into words, “it would be difficult for anyone, especially a seventeen-year-old child, to realistically calculate the benefits of an enlistment bonus, worth thousands of dollars, to the reality of war and the genuine potential of mortality”<sup>164</sup>.

In any such case, the Islamic State does not ever permit the pining over such a choice. Under Islamic State caliphate, there is no freedom to choose.

## How Children are Recruited: Islamic State

The Islamic State is capable of creating child terrorists and child martyrs through creating a society accustomed to death, exploiting feelings of humiliation and sentiments of frustration, and strategically targeting poor, broken communities in search of a better life. According to Dr. John Horgan in an issue of the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, there are six steps of socialization children outside of the Islamic State go through to become integrated into the IS forces: seduction, schooling, selection, subjugation, specialization, and stationing<sup>165</sup>. In societies fully controlled by the Islamic State, the stage of seduction (propaganda, the reaching out of individual members, etc.) becomes less necessary, as the society and communities within the IS have been corrupted to the point that becoming a fighter is only natural, and ultimately the only acceptable way of life<sup>166</sup>.

The Islamic State passes down its radical ideology, indoctrinating children from a young age and intensifying training from ages ten to fifteen, as they are sent to training camps where death and violence are desensitized (children as young as twelve have been noted to participate in executions of

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<sup>163</sup> Hollman, “Children’s Rights and Military Recruitment,” 229.

<sup>164</sup> Rosendale and Leidman, “Locked-in on Our Youth,” 24.

<sup>165</sup> John Horgan et al. “From cubs to lions: a six stage model of child socialization into the Islamic State.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 645–664, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221252>.

<sup>166</sup> Benotman and Malik, “The Children of the Islamic State,” 8–9.

the opposition) under shari'a law and the name of *jihad*<sup>167</sup>. The Islamic State uses a sophisticated method of mandatory education (homeschooling is *haram*/forbidden) and strict curriculum to ensure that freedom of thought is eliminated, so that all education gained may be used for the sake of the State and not the individual<sup>168</sup>. Subjects like social studies, philosophy, music, and drawing have been eliminated, and others are limited, like history textbooks that only teach the history of Islam, and geography textbooks that only name continents (delegitimizing existing sovereign states and presenting the world in a way that makes it appear ready to conquer)<sup>169</sup>. The majority of time in school is spent intensely studying the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, and '*Jihadi Training*' replaces normal physical education (P.E.), and the P.E. book teaches workout routines including swimming and wrestling, as well as instructions on how to assemble, fire, clean and store small arms<sup>170</sup>. Girls are veiled at the start of primary education and taught to be good wives, learning to stay and maintain a household for male fighters so they may be preserved to birth the next generation of fighters<sup>171</sup>. Teachers are forced to undergo shari'a training and repent for teaching 'false, disbelieving' curriculum; they are closely monitored to ensure they successfully pass on IS ideology, and teachers who refuse to conform are executed<sup>172</sup>. Teachers trusted by children are made vulnerable by lifelong exposure to violence, and readily accept the views taught to them without much, if any critical analysis; the Islamic State takes advantage of this vulnerability to "light the flames of extremism at a young age"<sup>173</sup>.

Those ages ten to fifteen, who show great promise, are systematically selected and taken to IS training camps, disciplined, specialized in a certain role (messenger, fighter, suicide bomber, etc.), and then given a specific

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 30–33.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 30–33.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

mission/duty station<sup>174</sup>. This is somewhat similar to the U.S. military, who provide a test – Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), to determine a person’s qualifications for certain vocations. The U.S. military then sends them to a basic training camp to prepare them for the profession of arms and specialization in a certain field (infantry, communications, intelligence, etc.), and then assign them to a specific mission/duty station based on their specialty. In terms of sophistication, the Islamic State has acquired the infrastructure and resources to act as efficiently as the Nazi party did when instrumentalizing German youth, and they function with all the power of a legitimate authoritarian state<sup>175</sup>.

In addition to controlling formal education to guide the hearts and minds of children, mothers are given books and instructions outlining how to raise *jihadi* children; the socialization of Islamic State ideology requires the enrollment of the entire family<sup>176</sup>. By creating a heritage of hatred, the IS successfully creates a society of terrorists to do their bidding. Socialization also includes engaging positively with children in public arenas, where IS members may distribute toys or candy, let kids wave an IS flag, and hold IS fighter’s weapons<sup>177</sup>. Children give speeches encouraging others to join the fight, attracting new recruits, both child and adult alike, and IS fighters are made to look like war heroes, who lead utopian lives and receive benefits under the Islamic State<sup>178</sup>. Children become lured by the ideology that their lives could become meaningful, fulfilled, and appreciated by the masses through life and death for the Islamic State; coming from a war-torn society with economic struggles, children are compelled to join and achieve higher economic status and gain enough power to overcome their feelings of disenfranchisement, humiliation, and powerlessness<sup>179</sup>.

As discussed previously, the U.S. Military uses similar tactics to paint the portrait of American soldiers as heroes and protectors of American values.

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<sup>174</sup> Horgan et al. “From cubs to lions,” 645–664.

<sup>175</sup> Benotman and Malik, “The Children of the Islamic State,” 30–33.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 34–35.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

If the military is not respected and supported by society, then that military and its government becomes susceptible to self-destruction. However, there exists a large difference in how these societies are structured, as one encourages participation through the promise, maintenance, and evolution of individual freedom, while the other strips away individual civil and human rights in the name of the state – forcing conformity, only granting protection, food, shelter, sex, and fame in exchange for giving up control of one’s own life. If one refuses to conform to the Islamic State way of life, they are made an example of and executed; even if one does not agree, fear drives them to submit to the ruthless regime<sup>180</sup>.

Besides crafting child soldiers for the purpose lifelong servitude to the caliphate, children are often the most willing age group to sacrifice their lives, and thus are often used as suicide bombers and in messages of martyrdom. Growing up in a world of violence contributes to the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in children, which results in the re-experience of violent events through play and in their dreams, or through images and sounds associated with that violence<sup>181</sup>. Children with PTSD fear the recurrence of violence, absorb a warped understanding of right and wrong, and begin to have a pessimistic outlook of the future, feeling that they will never reach adulthood<sup>182</sup>. These same children that grow up with “extreme poverty, violence, and institutionalized harassment during prolonged periods of conflict” are surrounded by violent political movements and “repeatedly exposed to a culture of martyrdom” under the Islamic State<sup>183</sup>. This ‘culture of martyrdom,’ where one’s death is made meaningful and beneficial to the community and the ‘greater good,’ becomes appealing to children who grow up with violence and hopelessness; they become overly-willing to give up their lives, rather than live them<sup>184</sup>.

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<sup>180</sup> UNODC, “Handbook On Children Recruited and Exploited,” 30–31.

<sup>181</sup> Mia Bloom, “Pathways to Involvement: Consensus and Cultures of Martyrdom,” in *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press), 108.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 108.

A culture built around martyrdom like this is key in establishing the loyalty and coming-together of many, as ethnic groups in conflict tend to empathize with those who practice self-sacrifice, and the experiences of the few are felt by the masses<sup>185</sup>. Ongoing suffering, violence, and humiliation of a people permits the language, narrative, and cultural practices of that people to revolve around pain and death; this opens the door for martyrs to stand center stage, giving the audience the ability to view martyrdom as a means to work together to overcome conflicts around identity<sup>186</sup>.

For the Islamic State, it was necessary to spread and normalize the concept of martyrdom in order to create a culture around it. They use children's education, media, and programming directed at children to spread the message that martyrdom is equivalent to fame; and through martyrdom, one makes the ultimate sacrifice of their earthly desires with the promise of continuing life in paradise<sup>187</sup>. This is necessary to make clear, as the Qur'an states, "Do not kill yourselves, for God is merciful to you. If any of you does these things out of hostility and injustice, we shall make him suffer Fire: that is easy for God" (4:29)<sup>188</sup>. The Islamic State works to distinguish martyrdom from suicide, making it seem as if the ultimate paradise is waiting for those who work as *Allah's* soldiers and do His bidding against those deemed hostile and unjust. However, there is no need to brainwash children to believe that death is greater than life after generations of martyrs have existed, as most children are made to go their whole lives with an extreme appreciation for death and the afterlife<sup>189</sup>.

This is what the Islamic State has accomplished. They use and have used martyred children in a calculated strategy to mobilize more adults and children, and celebrate martyrs in the media to the point where a mother's greatest pride, and a child's greatest accomplishment, comes out of being

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 110–115.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 118.

a martyr<sup>190</sup>. Propaganda revolving around martyrdom is pushed out: last-will-and-testament photos and videos of adult and child martyrs, images of civilians killed by enemies of the Islamic State, and a series known as “the smiling martyr”<sup>191</sup>. The IS praises martyrs who chose to die for the cause, idolizing them. And those who die as innocent victims are mourned over, spotlighting the injustice perpetrated by the ‘other’<sup>192</sup>. Child martyrs are almost always shown as alive and well in propaganda, showing how they will be joyously remembered by IS society, rather than showing images of dead ‘cubs’ that could potentially cause families to shield their children from joining ranks<sup>193</sup>.

This culture of martyrdom created by the Islamic State contributes greatly to convincing communities and parents of the value of death for the cause and displays how children can contribute alongside adults<sup>194</sup>. This ecosystem breeds justification for making a family business out of dedication of life and death to the IS. The more that die for the cause, and the more that are killed by the enemy, the more people are willing to take up arms and give up their lives for the cause. Destruction of a culture like this, or any widely accepted, homogenous belief, would prove extremely difficult, as it is so deeply engrained into each individual’s identity.

## Consequences of Targeting Children

According to a pediatric journal on the effects of war, terrorism, and armed conflict on young children, kids aged zero to six in particular are in a developmental period distinguished by rapid and multiple physiological, cognitive, and emotional changes that build the foundations for perspective and positive and negative values; therefore, this is a time when exposure to traumatic events and violence would be most detrimental to long-term

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 123.



development<sup>195</sup>. Children exposed to violence often show signs of PTSD, as well as warped emotional development and perceptions of right and wrong, making them difficult to integrate into non-violent society if they ever leave their roles as non-combatants<sup>196</sup>. Dr. Mia Bloom and John Horgan explain that “violence is self-perpetuating; like a drug. It sparks excitement, and an adrenaline rush, and so demands a repeat performance, in the same way that a drug becomes addictive”<sup>197</sup>. It becomes difficult to exist as a functional member of peaceful society when you experience withdrawal symptoms to a drug you have been exposed to all your life. This is the life of the former children of the Islamic State.

Another consequence of the indoctrination of children into the IS, is that it becomes increasingly difficult to change the culture of violence and combat ideological hatred as generations come to pass. The more control the authoritarian regime has, the more integral extremist values become to the society. It then becomes less likely that members of that society can develop the freedom of thought that would allow them to break away. The Islamic State has effectively brainwashed millions of people.

In the United States, the military-centric society established after 9/11 and the start of the War on Terror, has created a renewed sentiment of patriotism. Under the current administration, it has encouraged feelings of nationalism and isolationism. Unfortunately, the War on Terror has created a large anti-Muslim sentiment, as media platforms have demonized Arab society, which makes it difficult for many U.S. citizens to empathize with and be willing to take on refugees from Middle Eastern countries, as they have learned to fear the ‘other.’ Since the NCLB Act gave access to the personal information of children enrolled in public primary institutions, many parents feel as though their children are at risk of being convinced to take up a career path with a high mortality rate, and fight to ‘counterrecruit’<sup>198</sup>.

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<sup>195</sup> Michelle Slone and Shiri Mann, “Effects of war, terrorism and armed conflict on young children: a systematic review.” *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 47, no. 6 (2016): 962, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-016-0626-7>.

<sup>196</sup> Bloom, “Pathways to Involvement: Consensus and Cultures of Martyrdom,” 108.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>198</sup> Friesen, “Framing symbols and space: Counterrecruitment.”

The military also faces the consequences of high PTSD rates in conjunction to adults' exposure to violence, and fights to lower the abnormally high suicide rates within the military community. Behind accidents, suicides are the second leading cause of death in the U.S. Military<sup>199</sup>. As war has evolved, combat-related deaths have become much less frequent<sup>200</sup>. It is interesting to note that, between 2008 and 2010, soldiers ages seventeen to twenty-four made up sixty-one percent of total suicide attempts and forty-seven percent of total suicides<sup>201</sup>. One might speculate that adolescents who were not prepared for the risk, or who did not calculate the level of stress they may encounter, were not able to come to terms with their profession of arms and, sadly, took their own lives. It is also possible that the lack of an in-depth mental health screening prior to the start of service contributes to a higher suicide rate directly after the start of enlistment. As the military focuses much time and many resources into preventing and treating mental illnesses, it is hard to establish a conclusive understanding of the soldier suicide dilemma, and thus would require further research<sup>202</sup>.

Despite these negative consequences, millions of Americans find opportunity through the military to make a better life and increase one's socio-economic status. The U.S. Military gives members, their spouses, and their dependents the ability to achieve a free or more affordable higher education with VA Educational benefits; according to The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, in Fiscal Year 2018 (FY18) alone, there were 893,725 beneficiaries of VA Educational benefits, with six different benefit programs giving out a total of eleven billion dollars<sup>203</sup>. Nearly 9.5 million people are granted healthcare insurance through the TRICARE

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<sup>199</sup> Nigel Bush et al. "Suicides and suicide attempts in the US military, 2008–2010". *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 43, no. 3 (2013): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12012>.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>202</sup> U.S. DoD: Military OneSource, "Mental Health Resources for Military Families." [Militaryonesource.mil](https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/mental-health-resources), 2019. Accessed 3 August, 2019. <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/mental-health-resources>.

<sup>203</sup> Veterans Benefits Administration, "Education Benefits for Veterans Education." U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2018): 1. Accessed 3 August, 2019, <https://www.benefits.va.gov/REPORTS/abr/docs/2018-education.pdf>.

program<sup>204</sup>, and those who complete twenty years of service enjoy rich benefits for volunteering a significant portion of their life to their country. In FY18 alone, the DoD reported that the total cost of retired pay recipients came to fifty-nine billion dollars, paid to 2.3 million military retirees and survivors<sup>205</sup>. These are certainly benefits combatants for the Islamic State will never see, with the expectation of a lifetime of servitude to the caliphate.

Both the U.S. and the IS have the similar end goal of mobilizing the people to fight for and truly believe in a cause. The difference is, one entity pours millions of dollars and resources into persuading citizens to volunteer, and the other brainwashes those it conquers and demands conformity. Therefore, the most significant differing consequence and end result is that there exists a country of free people with a choice, and there exists a false state that terrorizes people into submission.

## Suggestions and Conclusions

Children are still at war, and those who have been removed from conflict still live with PTSD and other issues into adulthood. Efforts must be continuously made to protect and save children from exposure to raw violence and hostilities. UNODC has suggested a focus on preventing violence and strengthening protective factors at the community level (rather than seeking to identify and target at-risk youth)<sup>206</sup>. By targeting families and communities, the Islamic State can be met with the same strategies that they implement – a potential to create an equal but opposing force to combat the Islamic State. UNODC also suggests to identify and facilitate opportunities for youth to achieve status without engaging as a member of the Islamic State; they additionally express that effective child protection

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<sup>204</sup> TRICARE, "TRICARE Eligibility Check and Verification." Eligibility.Com. January 28, 2019, <http://eligibility.com/tricare>.

<sup>205</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Military Retirement: Background and Recent Developments." (2019): 2. Accessed August 3, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL34751.pdf#page17>.

<sup>206</sup> UNODC, "Handbook On Children Recruited and Exploited", 30–31.

and welfare systems, as well as policies and programs designed to address child labor, could potentially be effective in tackling and preventing ‘push-factors’ that drive children into the IS<sup>207</sup>.

As far as reintegration into peaceful society, Quilliam suggests the creation of a “Commission to Protect Future Generations from Radical Violence” to “oversee effective monitoring and re-integration of children within the EU. The body would house an intelligence system of at-risk children... and ensure proceedings [of re-integration] uphold standards of international human rights”<sup>208</sup>. This may entail judicial proceedings and placement, as well as the establishment of support networks of other adults and peers that share their spiritual, intellectual, ideological, social, and emotional values; all so that the child may continue to feel safe while they learn a new way of living and are ‘deradicalized’<sup>209</sup>.

As for the United States, suggestions are less extreme, and include allocating funds to spend on conducting joint operations in the media, working to de-militarize our society and encourage future generations to find peaceful solutions to conflict – including the War on Terror. Admittedly, the search for peace is a difficult task for the U.S. Military; putting an end to senseless violence and acts of terrorism perpetuated by radicals is often difficult without the use of force, and the DoD does already allocate funds for researchers and military members to find more routes to peace. However, the ‘War Machine’ still functions as an integral part of modern-day military operations, so perhaps more funding can be given to find not only peaceful resolutions to conflict, but also a way to reach the children of the Islamic State before they meet U.S. Military men and women in battle. In addition, expressing the seriousness of the mission of the military and warning American adolescents of the stress and violence they may be exposed to could be key to ensuring there are less unsuspecting recruits; increasing retainment levels while decreasing soldier suicide rates. Although, considering how dedicated the U.S. Military

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Benotman and Malik, “The Children of the Islamic State”, 9.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

already is to preserving and caring for soldiers' physical and mental resiliency and health after they begin their service, perhaps a better recommendation could be to invest in more in-depth mental health screenings prior to enlistment, in order prevent a high enlistment rate of those with prior mental health issues<sup>210</sup>.

Ultimately, children will continue to be targeted by militaries of all-volunteer forces in order to maintain numbers and protect state interests; and violent extremists will continue to manipulate children and exploit them in their quest for power. However, efforts must be made by those responsible state actors (those whom abide by international humanitarian law) to enforce the same ethical expectations on the entirety of the globe, if not but to protect the childhood of little boys and girls everywhere. Powerful states must continue to give aid to weaker states that rely on children out of necessity (lack of adult population), and those who purposefully create child martyrs in pursuance of death must be stopped. Life is a human right; the only means to protect that right from malice is an active effort by the whole of the human society.

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<sup>210</sup> U.S. DoD: Military OneSource, "Mental Health Resources for Military Families".

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