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Children of War: Multi-generational Impact of the Syrian Conflict

By Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

Children are being recruited in multiple capacities and significant numbers within the ranks of armed groups in the Syrian conflict. The participation of children in the conflict carries an inevitable multigenerational impact; violence is likely to continue beyond the cessation of hostilities.

Commentary

A RECENT report by the UN Children's Fund has estimated that at least 8.4 million Syrian children, which represent more than 80 percent of the country's youth, are affected by the conflict that began in 2011. A substantial number of these children are not only victims of the violence inflicted upon them, but are also recruited for participation in armed groups.

Although many terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) are perceived as the chief recruiters of children in the Syrian conflict, other groups also enlist children within their ranks. As such, the exact numbers remain unclear, but the Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported that children have fought on the frontlines, acted as spies and snipers for non-state armed groups, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic Front and Ahrar al-Sham. Consequently, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) affiliates, including the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) continue to make use of young boys and girls in armed combat despite their claims of demobilising them.

The Expanding Roles of Children in War

The recruitment of children under 18 in armed conflict is banned in International humanitarian and human rights laws in accordance with the straight-18 approach. Moreover, the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1948 prohibits enlisting children under the age of 15 in any capacity within armed groups. Broadly, the participation of children is not only limited to partaking in armed combat, but is inclusive of acting as human shields, spies, snipers, executioners and messengers and treating the wounded. Over the years, the need for a larger fighting force and tactical considerations have facilitated the role of children frontrunners in armed conflict, whereas previously they possessed secondary roles as logisticians, spies or informers.

The exploitation of children in conflict is not unique to the Syrian case or Islamist cause. Children have participated actively over the years in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli security forces forcibly recruited Palestinian children as informants, whereas Palestinian armed groups, specifically Hamas, utilised children within their ranks as suicide bombers and human shields. In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have conducted door-to-door forcible recruitments, abducting children as young as eleven years old and conducting vast propagandist campaigns to attract children to their cause.

Children provide a low-cost pool of recruits that can act as human shields to protect experienced and invaluable fighters from attacks. Moreover, the involvement of children in the Syrian conflict makes all children potential targets for suspicion resulting in interrogation, abduction and torture at the enemy's hands. Children also provide leverage over the enemy, as the Syrian army has arrested and taken hostage countless children from families and members of rebel groups, in order to force them to surrender.

However, symbolically the significance assigned to children in war goes beyond their tactical utility. The youth represents the future generation and gaining their support ensures that the groups preserve and intensify their operational presence, while garnering ideological resonance as well. As such, the children recruited today will be the fighters and leaders of the various armed groups tomorrow.

Lack of Schooling - An Opportunity to Ideologise

According to UNICEF, more than two million children were out of school in Syria in 2015, and the number is growing with the progression of the conflict. In this scenario, terrorist organisations and militia groups have been able to recruit children with ease as more than half of the schools in Syria shut down.

In particular, IS frequently conducts recruitment campaigns for children under the guise of providing free education, with an approximate number of 670,000 children out of school in IS-held territories. IS as the purveyor of 'Islamic values', seeks to indoctrinate children through its curriculum that demonises the apostates or disbelievers. This demonisation legitimises violence in the eyes of children and tends to desensitise them.

Such propagandistic efforts are not isolated to IS, but are consistent within the

training and indoctrination of other groups in the Syrian conflict as well. Thus, militant groups searching for a radical change to the existing status quo in the Syrian conflict tend to prioritise children to ensure their ideology reverberates. The training of children in war also denotes an emphasis on the current and successive generations symbolising and fighting for each group's cause.

The Multigenerational Implications

As the conflict reached its 5 year mark, a UNICEF report stated that 1 in 3 Syrian children have been born and grown up amidst the conflict. Research has indicated that the consequences of recruiting youth in conflicts don't end after cessation of hostilities. A study on the long-term effects of persecution and violence on Jewish children in Nazi Germany, revealed that children subjected to repeated war violence experienced 'sequential traumatising'. In this sense, repeated exposure to and participation in violence makes children susceptible to continual psychological trauma. This traumatising has been linked to suicide and psychological illnesses in the case of adult war veterans, and also tends to increase the likelihood of continued involvement in violent activities and recidivism in children as well. Moreover, other studies have also suggested that the involvement of children in wars could possibly lead to the steady internalisation of violence as the norm.

Consequently the participation of children in armed conflict induces a cyclical pattern of violence that is likely to persist at three levels, (a) children involved in violence are likely to fall back towards the same, (b) children will continue to represent and fight for their respective groups in light of the systemic indoctrination (c) and the present generation of children will act as a catalyst for the mobilisation and recruitment of subsequent generations.

Thus, it is evident that the use of children in conflict lays the ground for future instability in Syria. Moreover, regardless of an end to the conflict, the effects of the war will be manifested within the youth from the ranks of the varying stakeholders for generations to come.

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