



# CHILDREN

INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE

# AND EXTREME

ON CHILD TRAJECTORIES INTO AND OUT OF

# VIOLENCE

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

'STATE OF RESEARCH' BRIEF

REBECCA LITTMAN



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## UNU 'State of Research' Workshop

The United Nations University (UNU), in concert with UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the governments of Luxembourg and Switzerland, is leading a research initiative examining child trajectories into and out of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in contemporary conflicts, including those listed as terrorist and characterized as “violent extremist.”<sup>1</sup> This project will produce programmatic guidance for preventing the recruitment and use of children by, and effectively disengaging children from, NSAGs that employ extreme violence. As part of an initial desk review process, UNU convened a series of “state of research” workshops to draw upon perspectives, expertise, and experience that traditionally have not been included in United Nations policy and programmatic discussions in this area. To summarize the workshops, build on the empirical findings discussed, and promote cross-learning, UNU has published a three-part “State of Research” series, which, in addition to this brief, includes *Insights from Criminology on Child Trajectories Into and Out of Non-State Armed Groups* and *Viewing Non-State Armed Groups from a Brand Marketing Lens: A Case Study of Islamic State*.

This brief is based on a 22 October 2016 workshop UNU hosted with scholars from anthropology; sociology; political science; and developmental, social, and clinical psychology, to discuss how their own research and that of their fields more broadly could be brought to bear to better explicate child association and disengagement with contemporary NSAGs. This “State of Research” Brief provides a summary of the workshop discussions combined with a limited literature review drawing from the studies and research cited during the workshop. The brief is not a comprehensive review of *all* the relevant work in this area, nor does it examine *all* the factors that influence child association with and exit from NSAGs (e.g., structural factors). Rather, it outlines a few of the robust findings and points of consensus across the academic disciplines and practitioner experiences, focusing on those with implications for understanding child trajectories into and out of contemporary NSAGs.

Before proceeding, it is important to provide three caveats. First, much of the psychological research on child development and, to a lesser degree, political violence presented in this brief is based on studies conducted in Western laboratory settings. Thus, there are questions about whether the findings are applicable in and across other contexts (such as other high-stress situations). Second, much of the research on political violence is drawn from adult samples, and whether children are motivated in the same ways as adults is debatable. Third, the research studies on NSAGs cited in this brief differ in their sampling

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<sup>1</sup> There is no binding definition of “violent extremist” in international law. The term is used by different actors to describe a wide array of groups and activity. What is “extreme” depends on context, with the result that the term “violent extremist” may have different connotations in different contexts.

and focus, hence the occasional references to studies on terrorist groups, extremists, or NSAGs more broadly. To ensure accuracy, each reference uses the language of the study cited. While context- or sample-specific conclusions may not apply across all situations, the studies highlighted in this brief are worthy of consideration because they contribute to a knowledge base in an area where there is limited scientifically rigorous quantitative and longitudinal research, and taken together they highlight some of the dimensions that may influence differences across groups and contexts.

# 1 Why Do Children Become Associated with NSAGs?

Children are often forcibly recruited into armed groups, but in many cases children exercise some agency in joining a NSAG. What contributes to this decision?<sup>2</sup> When trying to answer this question, it is often assumed that negative emotions such as anger or hatred for another group are central motivations. Indeed, revenge is often cited in advocacy literature<sup>3</sup> – and

in some academic research<sup>4</sup> – as a motivation in joining a NSAG (e.g., retribution for the death of a loved one). Yet social science research suggests that children primarily have positive and prosocial motivations for joining armed groups. These include a need to belong, a desire for a sense of significance in one's life, and the power of peer influence.

**NEED TO BELONG** Human beings are social creatures. We seek out opportunities to connect with others and have a fundamental need to belong to meaningful groups.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly the case when people feel bad or uncertain about who they are and where they fit in the world, or are faced with their own mortality.<sup>6</sup> Children, particularly in adolescence, struggle with their identity, what they want out of life, and where they belong. NSAGs that provide a ready-made community, identity, and the opportunity to be part of a cause can be particularly attractive to young people, a possibility that is not lost on many NSAG commanders.<sup>7</sup> This may be especially true in uncertain and dangerous contexts, where NSAGs provide some semblance of order and human connection.

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<sup>2</sup> Even when children appear to choose to join an armed group, that "choice" is often made under some degree of duress.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Emily Delap, "Fighting Back: Child and Community-Led Strategies to Avoid Children's Recruitment into Armed Forces and Groups in West Africa" (London: Save the Children, 2005), p. 13; and Meg Aubrey, Rosie Aubrey, Frances Brodrick, and Caroline Brooks, "Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight: Vulnerability and Resilience to Recruitment by Violent Extremist Groups in Syria," (London: International Alert, 2016), pp. 10-11. There is also some academic work that touches on revenge as a motivation for terrorism. For example, see Assaf Moghadam, "Palestinian Suicide Terrorism in the Second Intifada: Motivations and Organizational Aspects," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 26, No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), p. 418.

<sup>5</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (1995).

<sup>6</sup> M. A. Hogg, Z. P. Hohman, and J. E. Rivera. "Why Do People Join Groups? Three Motivational Accounts from Social Psychology," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 2 (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Beber and Blattman find that Joseph Kony used spiritual practices in an explicit attempt to create new social bonds among group members and instill a sense of belonging. Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Winter 2013), p. 87.

**QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE** In addition to a need to belong, people have a desire to feel a sense of meaning in their lives.<sup>8</sup> This underlying desire to matter in the world and feel respected is activated when a person feels humiliated or deprived, anticipates a loss of significance, or is reminded of her/his own mortality,<sup>9</sup> feelings that often arise after trauma exposure. Numerous NSAGs have exploited feelings of humiliation and frustration – and striven to imbue their missions with a sense of significance – in their strategic communications in order to recruit young people.<sup>10</sup>

**PEER NETWORKS** Peers can have a strong influence on behaviour by serving as role models and signaling social norms. Coupled with the need to belong, the behavioural effect of norms within peer networks is powerful. Research shows that children are particularly susceptible to peer influence, including pressure to engage in antisocial behaviours.<sup>11</sup> Understanding peer influence is important for considering child trajectories into NSAGs. Children are more likely to join NSAGs if they have peers or relatives who have already joined the group. Evidence from numerous cases supports this finding, including among Muslim diaspora communities in Europe, where estimates suggest three-quarters of people who join Al-Qaida or Islamic State (IS) were brought in through peers.<sup>12</sup> While peer networks can be central to understanding why children become associated with NSAGs, they potentially have a role to play in extricating children and supporting them after they leave, particularly in providing basic psychological support (e.g., sense of belonging, identity).

**RISK ACCUMULATION** While we might not know what particular combination of factors leads a child to become associated with a NSAG, evidence suggests that amassing a certain number of social risk factors, including exposure to violence, separation from family, poverty, and other negative life events, may increase a child's likelihood of involvement. In the broader literature on developmental psychology, there is strong evidence that children repeatedly exposed to the same risk factor are more likely to experience adverse child outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Exposure to multiple risk factors is even more detrimental.<sup>14</sup> Numerous studies have found evidence that children exposed to multiple risk factors have a significantly higher likelihood for developing psychological problems, exhibiting problem behaviour, and experiencing poor cognitive development.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Belanger, Anna Sheveland, Malkanthi Hetiarachichi, and Rohan Gunaratna, "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism", *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 1 (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Numerous studies have found that when reminded of mortality, people are more likely to seek significance in their lives, which can take various forms, including embracing collective identities and cultural causes. For example, see Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "Psychological Factors in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels of Analysis", *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Kruglanski et al., "Psychology of Radicalization".

<sup>11</sup> Laurence Steinberg and Kathryn C. Monahan, "Age Differences in Resistance to Peer Influence", *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Scott Atran, "The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace", Address to the UN Security Council, 23 April 2015. Also see Sageman's study of 172 mujahedin, in which he identifies social bonds (friendship, kinship, and discipleship) as being key to understanding who joined Salafi terrorist groups. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Research has found that a single traumatic event does not increase a child's odds of developing subsequent behavioural problems, but repeated exposure to such an event can increase that risk. J. W. B. Douglas, "Early Hospital Admissions and Later Disturbances of Behaviour and Learning", *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, Vol. 17 (1975).

<sup>14</sup> Rutter's study of children from the Isle of Wight found that those with zero or one risk factors (e.g. parental discord, low socioeconomic standing, household overcrowding, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and child involvement with foster care) were no different in their likelihood of adverse outcomes. When a child accumulated two risk factors, however, the likelihood of adverse outcomes increased fourfold; and at four risk factors, the likelihood jumped exponentially. Michael Rutter, "Protective Factors in Children's Responses to Stress and Disadvantage", in M. W. Kent and J. E. Rolf, eds., *Primary Prevention in Psychopathology, Volume 8: Social Competence in Children*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> For example, in one study, four-year-olds exposed to five or more risk factors had a nearly threefold probability of psychological distress as compared with children with one or no risk factors. A. J. Sameroff, R. Seifer, R. Baracos, M. Zax, and S. Greenspan, "Intelligence Quotient Scores of 4-Year-Old Children: Social-Environmental Risk Factors", *Pediatrics*, Vol. 79, Issue 3, (1987).

Risk accumulation is a potentially useful approach for predicting risk of involvement in other violent groups,<sup>16</sup> including gangs<sup>17</sup> and extremist political groups.<sup>18</sup> Cumulative risk is likely particularly acute in active conflict contexts, where “risks accumulate rapidly, and children typically lack space in which to ‘unpack,’ or think through and come to terms with, the multiple adversities.”<sup>19</sup> In responding to war-affected populations, humanitarians often focus on children who have suffered acute stress, but it is possible that those who have accumulated a number of less visible stressors over time will be at greater risk for a range of problems, including NSAG association.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, while some of the risks to children may dissipate with a ceasefire, many do not; poverty, marginalization, and loss, among other factors, are likely to endure and continue to make children vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>

**IMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR** Impulsiveness and risk-seeking behaviour are more common in children than adults.<sup>22</sup> While children are often smart, logical, and – in adolescence<sup>23</sup> – just as capable as adults in many ways, they have more trouble inhibiting impulsive responses. This is particularly the case when children are in the presence of their peers. Research suggests that, particularly for adolescents, the presence of peers primes a state in which they are very sensitive to immediately available rewards.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, adolescents are more likely to make risky choices entailing short-term benefits than in safer alternatives offering benefits accrued over the long term. This peer-driven impulsivity for dangerous behaviour could have significant consequences should a child join a NSAG, which is then difficult to leave.

**BUCKING AUTHORITY** Joining a NSAG may in part appeal to children because it gives them a sense of power and a chance to assert their autonomy. Adolescents in particular often react against authority figures who threaten their personal agency, leading them to buck traditional authority and assert themselves.<sup>25</sup> If children feel they are not afforded a sense of autonomy in their home life, they may be more susceptible to joining a NSAG as a way of asserting their independence. There are some questions about how cross-culturally relevant these findings are, however, raising the possibility that this impulse may be more relevant for adolescents brought up in Western, developed states than in other contexts. Evidence from IS-controlled areas suggests the group is trying to capitalize on domestic discord and encourage children to rebel against their parents by joining the group.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder, “Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism,” *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Terence P. Thornberry, Marvin D. Krohn, Alan J. Lizotte, and Carolyn A. Smith, *Gangs and Delinquency in Developmental Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and David Eitle, Steven Gunkel, and Karen Van Gundy, “Cumulative Exposure to Stressful Life Events and Male Gang Membership,” *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004). Research finds it requires a greater accumulation of risk factors for youths to become involved in gang violence than for youth to be involved in violent offending on its own. Finn-Aage Esbensen, Dana Peterson, Terrance J. Taylor, and Adrienne Freng, “Similarities and Differences in Risk Factors for Violent Offending and Gang Membership,” *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2009), p. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Daphna Canetti, Brian J. Hall, Carmit Rapoport, and Carly Wayne, “Exposure to Political Violence and Political Extremism,” *European Psychologist*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 27-28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> B. J. Casey and Kristina Caudle, “The Teenage Brain: Self Control,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>23</sup> Adolescence is the period between the “onset of puberty and the establishment of social independence.” While there is no standard age parameter for adolescence, the most common chronologic definition for adolescence uses the 10- 18-year-old range. Alexa C. Curtis, “Defining Adolescence,” *Journal of Adolescent and Family Health*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, Article 2 (2015), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Dustin Albert, Jason Chein, and Laurence Steinberg, “Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013).

<sup>25</sup> Christopher J. Bryan, David S. Yeager, Cintia P. Hinojosa, Aimee Chabot, Holly Bergen, Mari Kawamura, and Fred Steubing, “Harnessing Adolescent Values to Motivate Healthier Eating,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States (PNAS)*, Vol. 113, No. 39 (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Mara Revkin, presentation to the “Applying a Brand Marketing Lens for Analyzing Non-State Armed Groups that Employ Extreme Violence” State of Research Workshop, New York, NY, 16 January 2017.



## 2 How Do Children in NSAGs Become Violent?

Once inside a NSAG, children fill many roles, not all of which necessitate violence (e.g., cooks, porters). However, some children in armed groups serve in combat roles and engage in violence. In this section, we will explore the latest insights from social science on how children in armed group contexts become violent.

**IN-GROUP IDENTITY** An important first step is understanding how children adopt a group identity. Similar to adults, children have existing identities when they join a NSAG, but these identities are not as entrenched in children as they are in adults. This makes it easier to impose a new identity on a child. For example, when children are given a novel, arbitrary identity in a laboratory setting (e.g., the “blue group”), they immediately adopt and enforce group norms, breathing life into the group’s narrative.<sup>27</sup> A study of child soldiers in Uganda demonstrates support for the proposition that, compared to adults, children more easily take on strong new identities when they become associated with NSAGs. Even children who were abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) eventually came to feel an allegiance to the group and its leader, a devotion that grew dramatically the longer they were in the group.<sup>28</sup> Another study on the LRA found that those who committed violence as part of the indoctrination process increased identification with the group.<sup>29</sup> Children’s particularly strong adherence to group identity may be key to understanding how they come to commit violence in the group’s name.

In conflict, people are primarily driven by love for their own group, rather than by hatred for another group.

**IN-GROUP LOVE** A key insight from psychology is that in contexts of intergroup conflict, people are primarily driven by their love for their own group, rather than by hatred for another group.<sup>30</sup> This “in-group love” drives behaviour that helps the group survive and thrive. However, once there is an “us vs. them” dynamic, people’s efforts to help “us” often end up hurting “them”.<sup>31</sup> For example, research suggests that when people become extremely identified or “fused” with their group, coming to see members of their NSAG as family, they become more willing to fight and die for their group.<sup>32</sup> A study of Libyan rebels found that those who were most fused with their battalion were more likely to fight on the frontlines.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Scott Baron and Yarrow Dunham, “Representing ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Building Blocks of Intergroup Cognition,” *Journal of Cognition and Development*, Vol. 16, Issue 5 (2015).

<sup>28</sup> Beber and Blattman, “Logic of Child Soldiering,” pp. 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> Rebecca Littman, “Perpetrating Violence Increases Identification with Violent Groups: Survey Evidence from Former Combatants,” 2017 working paper.

<sup>30</sup> Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Psychology of Prejudice: In-group Love or Outgroup Hate?” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 55, Issue 3 (1999).

<sup>31</sup> Naomi Ellemers, “The Group Self,” *Science*, Vol. 336, Issue 6083 (2012).

<sup>32</sup> William B. Swann, Ángel Gómez, D. Conor Seyle, J. Francisco Morales, and Carmen Huici, “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 96, Issue 5 (2009).

<sup>33</sup> The researchers think there are two possible explanations for why: “One possibility is that high levels of fusion with the battalion may have caused people to volunteer for frontline combat; a second possibility is that fighting may have fostered fusion with the group.” Harvey Whitehouse, Brian McQuinn, Michael Buhrmester, and William B. Swann Jr., “Brothers in Arms: Libyan Revolutionaries Bond Like Family,” *PNAS*, Vol. 111, No. 50 (2014), pp. 17783-17785.

While people are typically motivated by love for their own group, they often view the other side as motivated by hate.<sup>34</sup> This perceived threat makes it both easier and more desirable to harm people from a competing outgroup.<sup>35</sup> Research shows that people start to feel less empathy for those on the other side of a conflict, and can even begin to take pleasure in their pain, a response known as *schadenfreude*.<sup>36</sup>

**DEHUMANIZATION** Despite media representations of violence as exciting or cathartic, research from military history and moral psychology suggests that, at their core, humans are averse to committing violence.<sup>37</sup> People tend to avoid harming others, even at personal cost, and they experience physiological and psychological distress when they do engage in violence.<sup>38</sup> In an intergroup context, one way that people overcome this aversion is by dehumanizing their enemy.<sup>39</sup> Dehumanization removes moral prohibitions against hurting others and makes it easier to engage in violent behaviour. In NSAGs, the feeling of social connection among its members facilitates the dehumanization of those outside the group. For example, a series of studies found that experiment participants who were manipulated to feel more socially connected were more likely to dehumanize members of other social groups, and in turn more likely to recommend harsh punishments for those they dehumanized.<sup>40</sup> Consistent with this finding, another study found that Christian subjects who dehumanized Muslims reported more willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war.<sup>41</sup>

**SOCIAL NORMS** Individual behaviour can be heavily influenced by social norms, which are perceptions of what is typical or desirable in one's social group.<sup>42</sup> Even young children and adolescents adopt and enforce group norms.<sup>43</sup> Within NSAGs, violent behaviour is often common and encouraged, which may lead members – particularly children, who are especially keen to adopt group norms – to view participation in violence as typical and desirable group behaviour. This belief does not necessitate a personal desire to engage in violent behaviour, although positive attitudes about violence may be a byproduct of the child's environment and behaviour.

**"RADICALIZATION"** While the concept of radicalization is increasingly discussed in media and policy circles, participants at the workshop highlighted several problems with the term. Some rejected the concept outright. First, participants asked, what is the definition of radicalization? Does it refer to a set of beliefs, actions, or a process<sup>44</sup> of changing beliefs or behaviour? The group could not agree on a definition, but concurred that the word lacks

<sup>34</sup> Adam Waytz, Liane L. Young, and Jeremy Ginges, "Motive Asymmetry for Love vs. Hate Drives Intractable Conflict," *PNAS*, Vol. 111 (2014), 15687-15692.

<sup>35</sup> Reicher et al. describe a model in which people become identified with an in-group, exclude targets as external to their in-group, see these external targets as a threat to the in-group, come to see the in-group as uniquely good, and eventually celebrate the eradication of the outgroup in the defense of virtue. Stephen Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, and Rakshi Rath, "Making a Virtue of Evil: A Five-Step Social Identity Model of the Development of Collective Hate," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Mina Cikara, Emile Bruneau, Jay Van Bavel, and Rebecca Saxe, "Their Pain Gives Us Pleasure: How Intergroup Dynamics Shape Empathic Failures and Counter-Empathic Responses," *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology*, Vol. 55 (2014).

<sup>37</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little Brown, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Molly J. Crockett, Zeb Kurth-Nelson, Jenifer Z. Siegel, Peter Dayan, and Raymond J. Dolan, "Harm to Others Outweighs Harm to Self in Moral Decision Making," *PNAS*, Vol. 111, No. 48 (2014). See also Fiery Cushman, Kurt Gray, Allison Gaffey, and Wendy Berry Mendes, "Simulating Murder: The Aversion to Harmful Action," *Emotion*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (2012), and Shira Maguen, Barbara A. Lucenko, Mark A. Reger, Gregory A. Gahm, Brett T. Litz, Karen H. Seal, Sara J. Knight, and Charles R. Marmar, "The Impact of Reported Direct and Indirect Killing on Mental Health Symptoms in Iraq War Veterans," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2010).

<sup>39</sup> Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, "Dehumanization and Infrahumanization," *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 65, No. 5 (2014).

<sup>40</sup> Adam Waytz and Nicholas Epley, "Social Connection Enables Dehumanization," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2012).

<sup>41</sup> G. Tendayi Viki, Daniel Osgood, and Sabine Phillips, "Dehumanization and Self-Reported Proclivity to Torture Prisoners of War," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2013).

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Tankard and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Norm Perception as a Vehicle for Social Change," *Social Issues and Policy Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016).

<sup>43</sup> Marco F. H. Schmidt and Michael Tomasello, "Young Children Enforce Social Norms," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2012).

<sup>44</sup> In their work examining the mechanisms of political radicalization, McCauley and Moskaleiko concede: "There are many possible meanings of radicalization [e.g., belief, feeling, and behaviour]... Of course it is the radicalization of behavior that is of greatest practical concern..." McCauley and Moskaleiko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization," p. 416.

The relationship between radical beliefs and radical behaviour is unclear. Contrary to conventional wisdom, often beliefs are not a good predictor of whether someone will engage in political violence.

clarity.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the relationship between radical beliefs and radical behaviour is unclear. Contrary to conventional wisdom, often beliefs are not a good predictor of whether someone will engage in political violence. Many around the world express support for political violence, but few actually engage in it. For example, a World Bank survey found that 33.7% of the population in Djibouti believed that attacks on civilians were “morally justified,” but very few people from Djibouti actually join NSAGs involved in such attacks.<sup>46</sup>

Second, when does radicalization occur? Policymakers often assume radicalization occurs before a person joins a NSAG or engages in violence, but research from social science suggests that engagement with a NSAG or violent actions may often precede “radicalized” beliefs or ideology.<sup>47</sup> If radicalization does not always happen at the front end, can it be distinguished from indoctrination?

Third, what does it mean to be “radicalized,” especially given the relativity of the term?<sup>48</sup> What is radical today may be perceived

very differently years from now, and what is considered “radical” behaviour in one society may be seen as normative in another. Is this a useful category of analysis?

Despite these problems with the term, there is some relevant research on “radicalization” processes in the social sciences.<sup>49</sup> For example, a study of Islamic youth in the Netherlands found that holding “radical beliefs” – defined as beliefs that act as catalysts for terrorism – is related to perceptions of personal uncertainty, injustice, and group threats.<sup>50</sup> Another study on Christians and Muslims in Kenya found that “radicalization” – defined as support for violence to achieve religio-political objectives – is associated with psychological trauma, religious identification, and exposure to radical networks.<sup>51</sup> Despite some interesting work in this area, there are still many basic questions and conceptual challenges that need to be addressed on the topic of “radicalization” before the term can be meaningfully employed.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, (2010). This article has a helpful discussion on the existing definitions of radicalization and why the term is problematic when used to refer to an absolute state.

<sup>46</sup> Youssef Kiendrebeogo and Elena Ianchovichina, “Who Supports Violent Extremism in Developing Countries? Analysis of Attitudes Based on Values Survey”, Policy Research Working Paper 7691, World Bank Group, June 2016. The numbers of citizens of Djibouti who have joined violent groups is hard to estimate accurately, but it is telling that with regard to the Syrian conflict, there is very little evidence of involvement of Djiboutis despite involvement from surrounding countries. For examples of involvement by country see The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015.

<sup>47</sup> James M. Olson and Mark P. Zanna, “Attitudes and Attitude Change”, *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 44 (1993).

<sup>48</sup> Highlighting the relative and contextual nature of the term, Neumann points out that in the United States, many of the country’s Founding Fathers were “radicals” who today are seen as key drivers of positive and progressive change. Peter R. Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalization”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2013), pp. 876-877.

<sup>49</sup> A group of scholars has created a model of radicalization – defined here as “the process of supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) as in violation of important social norms (e.g., the killing of civilians)” – wherein individuals, motivated by a desire for significance, develop an ideology that identifies violence as an appropriate means for achieving this goal, and then network with others who share in their ideology and engage in violence. Kruglanski et al., “Psychology of Radicalization”.

<sup>50</sup> Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van den Bos, “Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 69, Issue 3 (2013).

<sup>51</sup> Anselm Rink and Kunal Sharma, “The Determinants of Religious Radicalization: Evidence from Kenya”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, (2016).

## 3 Why and How Do Children Exit NSAGs?

Once a child is associated with an armed group, leaving may seem daunting and dangerous. Children often face logistical challenges (e.g., they have been taken far from home and do not know how to get back). Evidence from Uganda suggests that children abducted by the LRA had difficulty leaving because they were not familiar with their surroundings and did not know how to put together an escape plan.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, children may fear retaliation from other group members, as well as rejection by family or community members who did not approve of their participation in the NSAG. These are also concerns for adults associated with NSAGs, but children are more reliant on their families when they leave the group, so the idea of rejection may serve as an even more powerful deterrent. Evidence suggests that finding ways to inform children about how to leave their group and communicating that they will receive support once they do may be crucial for motivating their exit. Recognizing this, one intervention in Northern Uganda used messages broadcast from helicopters, flyers dropped in the bush, and a local radio programme to provide not only information on how to escape or surrender, but also promises of forgiveness from the community to entice combatants – overwhelmingly children or young adults who were abducted as children – to leave the LRA.<sup>53</sup>

## 4 How Can Children Reintegrate After Leaving a NSAG?

When children leave an armed group, they need support as they adjust to civilian life and reintegrate into their communities. The following section highlights some specific ideas about the type of support that children need after leaving a NSAG.

**MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS** It has long been recognized that when children leave a NSAG, they may be suffering from mental health issues such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>54</sup> During their time in a NSAG, they may also have developed appetitive aggression, which leads them to perceive perpetrating violence as exciting or fascinating. Those who join NSAGs at a younger age are more likely to develop appetitive aggression, as their socialization occurs within an armed group instead of in a civilian context.<sup>55</sup> These mental health issues can hinder children's social integration and increase the likelihood they will engage in future violent behaviour, so it may be necessary to intervene before children are reintegrated.

<sup>52</sup> Research on the Lord's Resistance Army found that abductees were purposely disoriented (e.g., the first day's march would deliberately backtrack) and taken far from home (e.g., to bases in Sudan) to ensure that escape was impossible due to the distance, disorientation, and hostile populations in between. Younger children were less likely to exit the group through voluntary or premeditated escape, and were less likely to know their location when they did escape. Beber and Blattman, "Logic of Child Soldiering," p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> Lindsay Branham, *Come Out and Live Among Us: How Zande Communities Can Influence the Combatants to Surrender from the LRA*, (Discover the Journey, 2013), and James Palmer, "The Power of Radio Helps to End Uganda's Long War", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Phuong N. Pham, Patrick Vinck, and Eric Stover, "Returning Home: Forced Conscription, Reintegration, and Mental Health Status of Former Abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda", *BMC Psychiatry*, Vol. 9, (2009). See also Kirsten Johnson, Jana Asher, Stephanie Rosborough, Amisha Raja, Rajesh Panjabi, Charles Beadling, and Lynn Lawry, "Association of Combatant Status and Sexual Violence with Health and Mental Health Outcomes in Post-Conflict Liberia", *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, Vol. 300, No. 6 (2008).

<sup>55</sup> Roland Weierstall, Roos Haer, Lilli Banholzer, and Thomas Elbert, "Becoming Cruel: Appetitive Aggression Released by Detrimental Socialization in Former Congolese Soldiers", *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, Vol. 37, (2013).

Existing treatments such as Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)<sup>56</sup> have proven effective in reducing symptoms of traumatic stress with ex-combatants in many contexts around the world.<sup>57</sup> Interventions aimed at addressing PTSD by decreasing associated symptoms and engaging youth in trauma processing may be more appropriate in the longer term, when children are living in more stable, safe environments. When children are reintegrated into unstable contexts, some degree of avoidance and hypervigilance – symptoms of PTSD – can be helpful and adaptive during ongoing conflict. In these contexts, interventions focused primarily on skill development and competency building with the goal of symptom management might be more useful than those focused on symptom reduction. In addition, concrete interventions that focus, when possible, on reducing social environmental stressors secondary to reintegration might help to decrease vulnerability to mental health issues.<sup>58</sup>

There is no consensus on what ‘deradicalization’ should entail and little evidence that existing efforts are necessary or effective.

**“DERADICALIZATION”** While there is broad agreement that reintegration programmes for children should focus on social and economic integration, education, and mental health, there is less agreement in the social sciences about the need for “deradicalization,” despite the increased interest from policymakers. The premise for deradicalization programmes appears to be that children have internalized radicalized ideologies, and that interventions are needed to help them abandon these ideas and shift their norms around violence. However, there is no consensus on what this approach should entail and little evidence that existing deradicalization efforts are necessary and/or effective. In addition, such interventions likely carry stigma and could make reintegration more difficult. Fundamentally, the concept of deradicalization suffers from many of the same issues as the concept of radicalization, discussed above.

**STRESSORS REMAIN AFTER CONFLICT** There is often an assumption that once children have demobilized, the stressors associated with conflict are gone. However, as children leave a NSAG, they are often reintegrated into contexts of poverty and violence, and are subject to many of the same stressors that were present when they initially became associated with the NSAG.<sup>59</sup> This is particularly the case in situations of active conflict, but even post-conflict environments tend to be socially and economically unstable.<sup>60</sup> This being the case, the question arises as to whether, under such circumstances, any programmatic intervention – no matter how well tailored and resourced – can effectively facilitate a child’s reentry into civilian life and prevent recidivism or association with another armed group. These realities also highlight the importance of addressing continued stressors and secondary traumas that children are likely to be dealing with in reintegration programme settings (e.g., loss of a parent, separation from family).

<sup>56</sup> Narrative Exposure Therapy is a short-term treatment for traumatized survivors of violence whereby an individual is asked to construct a narrative of her/his life story, with a focus on traumatic experiences. The therapy helps to transform fragmented memories into a coherent narrative, and assists with the processing of painful emotions. M. Schauer, F. Neuner, and T. Elbert, *Narrative Exposure Therapy: A Short-Term Treatment for Traumatic Stress Disorders*, 2nd edition, (Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe Publishing, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Tobias Hecker, Katharin Hermenau, Anselm Crombach, and Thomas Elbert, “Treating Traumatized Offenders and Veterans by Means of Narrative Exposure Therapy,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 6, No. 80 (2015).

<sup>58</sup> B. H. Ellis, A. B. Miller, S. Abdi, C. Barrett, E. A. Blood, and T. S. Betancourt, “Multi-Tier Mental Health Program for Refugee Youth,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (2013); Stevan E. Hobfoll, Anthony D. Mancini, Brian J. Hall, Daphna Canetti, and George A. Bonanno, “The Limits of Resilience: Distress Following Chronic Political Violence among Palestinians,” *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 72, No. 8 (2011); K. E. Miller and A. Rasmussen, “War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide Between Trauma-Focused and Psychosocial Frameworks,” *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (2010).

<sup>59</sup> Miller and Rasmussen, “War Exposure”.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Justino and Philip Verwimp, “Poverty Dynamics, Violent Conflict, and Convergence in Rwanda,” *Review of Income and Wealth*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2013).

**ADDRESSING DECREASE IN POWER** When children are in an armed group, they are often afforded status and responsibility that they would have difficulty obtaining outside the group. This presents a challenge for reintegration, as children who leave a NSAG are at risk of experiencing an acute loss of the power they enjoyed as a member. For example, when children disengage from a NSAG and return to school after years away from the classroom, they suddenly find themselves in a new power dynamic – taking instructions from a teacher and being matched with much younger students at their reading level. This can be a difficult and frustrating experience. In fact, research suggests that when powerful people feel a threat to their ego – in particular when they feel a lack of competence – they tend to become aggressive.<sup>61</sup> The good news is that boosting one’s self-worth tempers this aggressive behaviour, and gaining a sense of agency reduces the desire for power.<sup>62</sup>

## 5 Potential Implications for Programming

A number of the empirical findings and points of consensus across disciplines highlighted by the workshop have potential policy and programmatic implications. The suggestions below are not comprehensive; rather, they highlight some interesting and fairly general considerations for child-oriented prevention and release and reintegration efforts that may be applicable across contexts.

While peer networks can lead children into NSAGs, they can also be harnessed to help children exit or prevent them from joining in the first place.

### **HARNESS PEER NETWORKS AND ADDRESS IDENTITY AND SIGNIFICANCE NEEDS**

While peer networks can draw children into NSAGs, they can also be harnessed to help children exit NSAGs, and possibly prevent them from joining in the first place. NSAGs may provide young people with a meaningful social identity that satisfies a fundamental need to belong and a desire for significance in one’s life. To prevent children in vulnerable contexts from joining (or rejoining) NSAGs, interventions can focus on building strong social networks that provide children with an identity and a feeling of belonging to something important.

Interventions aimed at encouraging children to leave NSAGs and facilitating their reintegration into civilian society must also recognize that during their time in a group, children may become psychologically reliant on the peer network, identity, and sense of purpose the NSAG provides. Exit programmes that fail to address these psychological needs may fail. Harnessing peer networks – including peers who have already left the group and/or those who are seen as popular or influential – may be a fruitful approach.<sup>63</sup> Messages spread over social media or through in-person networks about avoiding or leaving

<sup>61</sup> Nathanael J. Fast and Serena Chen, “When the Boss Feels Inadequate: Power, Incompetence, and Aggression”, *Psychological Science*, Vol. 20, No. 11 (2009).

<sup>62</sup> Joris Lammers, Janka I. Stoker, Floor Rink, and Adam D. Galinsky, “To Have Control Over or to Be Free from Others? The Desire for Power Reflects a Need for Autonomy”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2016).

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Hana Shepard, and Peter M. Aronow, “Changing Climates of Conflict: A Social Network Experiment in 56 Schools”, *PNAS*, Vol. 113, No. 3 (2016).

NSAGs are likely to be more persuasive if they come from these influential peers than from adults, NGOs, or other institutions.

**MAKE USE OF FORMERS** Interventions can make use of “formers” – people who were members of NSAGs as children and have since left. These formers can provide support and guidance as part of an intervention, and can serve as examples of success outside of NSAGs. It should be noted, however, that employing formers involves risks and challenges, including the potential that they can easily lose their perceived authenticity and insider status if they are viewed as having moderated or been coopted by the state.

**INVOLVE CHILDREN IN THE PROCESS** Beyond the use of formers, it is important to involve children in the process of developing prevention and release/reintegration programmes. Children can help programmatic staff better understand their needs, as they have inside knowledge about the specific issues facing their peers in a given context. Researchers have begun to develop methods for involving children in developing assessment tools, such as the Child Led Indicators approach used in Nepal.<sup>64</sup> Children can also be engaged in designing and implementing the programmes themselves: For example, in one study, adult facilitators used semi-structured scripts and activity guides to help children develop student conflict prevention programming specific to their schools, with impressive results.<sup>65</sup> By engaging children in designing programmes, the resulting interventions are more likely to be well received by the children who participate and tailored to their needs. Most important, engaging children in programme implementation directly targets their feelings of insignificance and ineffectiveness by providing them with an opportunity to become active participants in resilience building and recovery.

**TEACH ABOUT PATHS TO NON-VIOLENCE** It is important to recognize that children may join NSAGs because they have a desire to create social change and gain personal significance. Interventions can acknowledge and build on these desires by working with youth to realize their goals through non-violent means. In other words, the goal can remain the same, but the means shifts from violence to non-violence. This approach may not be appropriate for active conflict settings, however, where opportunities for this method of social change may be limited or unfeasible, and such interventions may actually heighten frustration when they highlight the lack of non-violent channels for change.

**EXPLOIT THE DESIRE TO BUCK AUTHORITY** Since part of the appeal of joining a NSAG for some children may be that doing so gives them a chance to assert their autonomy, interventions to get children out of NSAGs or prevent them from getting involved in the first place can take advantage of this same desire to buck traditional authority and assert oneself.<sup>66</sup> For example, IS appears to be using this strategy as a recruitment tool, trying to capitalize on domestic discord and depicting joining the group as an act of defiance against

<sup>64</sup> Child Led Indicators are context specific indicators of positive and negative psychosocial well-being developed through a child participatory process. Rohit Karki, Brandon A. Kohrt, and Mark J. D. Jordans, “Child Led Indicators: Pilot Testing a Child Participation Tool for Psychosocial Support Programmes for Former Child Soldiers in Nepal,” *Intervention*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009).

<sup>65</sup> Those schools that had child-led interventions saw more than a 30% reduction in conflict in just one year. Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Hana Shepard, and Peter M. Aronov, “Changing Climates of Conflict: A Social Network Experiment in 56 Schools,” *PNAS*, Vol. 113, No. 3 (2016).

<sup>66</sup> Bryan et al., “Harnessing Adolescent Values”.

one's parents.<sup>67</sup> It would be interesting to consider the potential utility of interventions that cast leaving a NSAG – or resisting association in the first place – as a way to take a stand against manipulative adults and demonstrate independence.

**INITIATE PREJUDICE REDUCTION WITH DOMINANT GROUPS** Given that many motivations for joining NSAGs originate in response to the real or perceived rejection/threat from dominant populations, reducing prejudice in the latter is essential for curbing the desire to join NSAGs. For example, emerging research demonstrates that the extent to which Muslims in the United States perceive being dehumanized by other Americans predicts greater support for violent collective action and greater unwillingness to assist counterterrorism efforts.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, diminishing inclinations towards violence among at-risk children will likely require just as much work changing the attitudes of the dominant groups these children may oppose as it does changing the attitudes of the at-risk children themselves.

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<sup>67</sup> Revkin, "Applying a Brand Marketing Lens".

<sup>68</sup> Nour S. Kteily and Emile G. Bruneau, "Backlash: The Politics and Real-World Consequences of Minority Group Dehumanization," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2017).



## About UNU's Workshop Brief Series and Acknowledgements

This research brief is part of a three-part series that UNU has published in the lead-up to the release of an edited volume examining why and how children become associated with, are used by, and exit NSAGs in contemporary conflicts, including those listed as terrorist or characterized as violent extremist. The analysis and research presented in this brief feeds into the larger desk review published as part of the volume, forthcoming in late 2017. The volume includes three conflict case studies – Syria, Mali, and Nigeria – that explicate the factors that influence child trajectories into and out of NSAGs. The volume also features a chapter exploring the thorny legal questions that arise in contemporary conflicts, particularly around the legal limits of the humanitarian response and how legal obligations to uphold the rights of children stand up when viewed as being in tension with national security legislation.

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## NOTES

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**DOMIZ REFUGEE CAMP, IRAQ** Domiz Refugee Camp was established by local authorities in April 2012 to host the Syrian Kurds. The camp located 20 kms southeast of Dohuk city, in Iraqi Kurdistan and some 60 km from Syria/Iraq border. As of November, 2013, the total number of Syrian refugees in Kurdistan region is 60,151.

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