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Islamic State: Breeding a New Generation of Jihadists

By Syed Huzaifah bin Othman Alkaff

Synopsis

The terrorist group ISIS is institutionalising an education system that will perpetuate its violent legacy by moulding the young in its fold with ideas of bigotry and hatred. The group has been belligerent about its intention to perpetrate violence and provoke conflict globally.

Commentary

THE ISLAMIC State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has not only been promoting ideas of religious hatred and violence globally by the use of online platforms for their propaganda, the group has exploited the education systems that it has taken control of in Iraq and Syria to institutionalise its brainwashing efforts.

Clearly, the revamp is aimed at nurturing future generations of jihadists and violent militants. In June 2014, just before ISIS declaration of a self-styled Caliphate, it announced that it was restructuring the education system in areas it controlled in Iraq and Syria.

Education under Islamic State

Since then, it has revamped the syllabus and content of the subjects in schools with the help of about 400 individuals. In February this year, the group was reported to have a list of subjects that they retained and removed. The subjects kept were monotheism, mathematics, physics, chemistry, natural sciences, and Arabic and English languages, with geography recently re-added to this list. The subjects removed were music and the arts, national education, social studies, history, fine arts, sports (physical education), philosophy, psychological studies and geography.

The group, despite its throwback to the past, acknowledges the instrumental importance of the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry, as well as the natural sciences. Indeed, ISIS is in need of engineers, doctors, accountants, and many such professionals. These sciences and their practitioners – grown organically – are deemed useful for the production and deployment of technologies to advance the group's agenda of conflict and violence. ISIS also recognises the role of languages to communicate its propaganda to the other parts of the world, and hence its acceptance of foreign languages such as English in its education system.

A study of the changes in the syllabus and curriculum will show the most pronounced as being the social sciences, which have been effectively obliterated. The subjects that are more specifically affected are the ones that require the use of critical analyses and logical arguments. Indeed, ISIS abhors the use of logic, especially in the interpretation of Islamic teachings. In its fundamentalist view of the religion, it approaches religious sources in a dogmatic and literal sense without regard for hierarchy of values, and the need to take into account time and space.

Deconstructing identities

The rejection of critical analyses and the use of logic have their precedents in the practice of those who believe that a blueprint for a social order may be lifted from the literal stipulations of the Qur'an and Hadith. It regards as unacceptable the use of logic and reason in the approach to religious sources, and neither attempts to contextualise nor extract the moral purposes behind the scriptural stipulations. The strict rejection of the use of logic and disregard for context issue from the teachings on monotheism of the Saudi-based scholar-warrior Mohammed ibn Wahab.

In his book those whose beliefs lie outside the theological boundaries of monotheism are infidels or apostates, whose killing or subjugation into slavery constitutes a religious obligation. Juxtaposed against ISIS 'cubs of caliphate' project where youngsters are regularly exposed to violent images of beheadings and even taught to carry them out, one can expect only the most extremely violent and brutal militants to emerge from such a system.

In ISIS pursuit to fashion a radical utopia of an Islamic Caliphate, it has attempted to remove all manner of social identities that it regards as being the antithesis of a true Muslim and an Islamic social order. To this end, it has replaced all references to the 'Syrian Arab Republic', 'national', 'home', 'Syria', 'my nation' with 'Islamic State' and condemned any references to ethnicity. In short, ISIS believes that the sole identity of a person should be a religious one, in particular its understanding of who constitutes a true Muslim and the sole identity of a state as being one that implements the criminal laws of seventh century Arabia.

Moving forward

The extent of dissemination of ISIS' ideas is extraordinary. It is reported that between an estimated six million and eight million people are living under ISIS, of which one-third are believed to be children. Imagining the success of their education on this high number of children, the brutalised future of the coming generation is worrisome to say the least.

Generations like them who are also taught to reject other values and teachings, in addition to confining themselves to selective values and teachings, will have difficulties living alongside other cultures and communities. Their instilled binary worldview - looking at the world with the distorted value of either right or wrong without considering anything in between - will create a barrier and a "group tent" mindset. The outcome for these generations will be one which will not be open to diversity of cultures, values and customs.

Knowing ISIS strategy in exploiting the education system, the international community will need to relook the counter-strategy against the group. While the communities remain vulnerable, the group continues to promote the binary worldview and shaping the young generations to continue its legacy of violence and brutality.

The longer the group stays in a conquered area, the more it can control and influence the populace. Hence, the immediate military defeat of the group is vital. Disruption of its controlled areas is also needed to curb their exploitation of the people, in this case, shaping the young ones to be like them. The group is able to achieve what it wishes for since no one is entering its territory to disrupt its day-to-day operations.

ISIS exploits children under the pretext of educating them: using them as slaves, teaching the children to kill and instil immoral values in them. If the exploitation persists, mitigating the effects of the children's ideologies and violent thinking in the future will prove an impossible challenge.

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