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## **Engaging Youth as a Bulwark Against ISIS Extremism**

*By Kumar Ramakrishna and Stephanie Neubronner*

### **Synopsis**

*ISIS considers psychologically vulnerable youth as a strategic resource to be exploited. It is thus important for governments, civil society and businesses to harness youth as a bulwark against ISIS extremism.*

### **Commentary**

IT IS well known by now that as part of efforts to keep its embattled movement alive both in the Middle East and abroad, the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has systematically indoctrinated youth so as to turn them into hardened militants. The strategic objective of the ISIS leadership seems to be to create a new generation of ideologically committed fighters wedded to its vision of a so-called global Caliphate and utterly desensitised to the use of extreme violence to destroy unbelievers and apostates that stand in their way.

Observers on the ground in Raqqa, for example, the putative capital of ISIS in Syria, have testified how hundreds of orphaned Syrian children were brought together into converted schools where they were from day one, immersed in the virulent extremist ideology of ISIS on the one hand and trained to handle weapons on the other.

### **Cubs of the Caliphate**

Moreover, recent videos uploaded by ISIS – sadly, only a click away – have documented “training exercises” where so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate” engage in “search-and-destroy” type missions to hunt down terrified captured prisoners and execute them in cold blood. Southeast Asia is not immune to these disturbing trends.

By some estimates, about a thousand fighters and their families from the region, mainly Indonesians and Malaysians, but also a handful of Singaporeans, have made their way to Syria. There, they have been organised into a Malay-speaking unit under ISIS command, called Katibah Nusantara (KN), or the Malay Archipelago Unit.

More to the point, the children of KN have been training in the so-called Azzam Academy – named after the ideological mentor of Al Qaeda icon Osama bin Laden – and a Malay-language video uploaded on social media in 2015 proclaimed that these next generation of Southeast Asian fighters would aim to “finish all oppressors, disbelievers, apostates”.

### **Youth Vulnerability to ISIS Appeals**

While there are many formal definitions of youth adopted by international bodies such as the United Nations Secretariat and the World Bank, a fairly common standard identifies “youth” as someone aged between 15 and 35. On the other hand the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child adopts a definition of “youth” as “child until 18”. In any case, many observers have opined that ISIS is a “youth organisation”. The question is why.

The answer is complex, but three factors appear pertinent.

First, neurologically, youth are very sensitive to contextual pressures. If the social milieu is defined by amicable intergroup relations, the brains of young people will be hardwired accordingly to promote similar social arrangements when older. Conversely if youth – like the unfortunate Cubs of the Caliphate – are socialised into out-group violence and trauma from young, their neurological architecture will be configured differently, creating a potentially lifelong affinity for violence and visceral antipathy toward certain out-groups.

Second, family structure has been shown to affect the emotional stability of youth. Research worldwide suggests that the absence of strong, stable parental influence in the formative years creates a psychological instability and need for both external structures of emotional support and absolute cognitive certainty. This deep-seated need for “father figures”, surrogate families and fundamentalist religion is what draws troubled youth in politically and socio-economically distressed communities towards the structure and meaning that ISIS provides in its social and ideological systems.

Finally, male youth in particular are generally stimulus-seeking individuals. Hence, they are unsurprisingly drawn to ISIS propagandists’ skillful social media output emphasising how engagement with their grand project promises excitement, status, material and even sexual rewards – both in this life and the next.

### **Need for Exciting Counter-Narrative – By Youth, For Youth**

The British actor Riz Ahmed – of Star Wars fame – recently told the British Parliament that extremists are able to sell heroic storylines to youth because the latter come from minority communities and are repeatedly depicted as “bit players or villains”.

Ahmed, who was invited by the British Parliament to speak, also said that the film industry's failure to connect with minorities could prove fatal as the shadow industry operated by ISIS, which produces slick propaganda videos, are targeted explicitly at these marginalised youth. Perpetuating negative stereotypes and constantly portraying youth as the perpetrators of violence will add to society's misstep of not representing youth appropriately in its mainstream narratives.

Consequently, Ahmed said young people will further "retreat to fringe narratives, to filtered bubbles online and sometimes even off to Syria". The message communities as a whole send to youth, as well as the development of a vision of a future that captures their collective imagination, offering hope and the possibility of tangible change, is hence, crucial in preventing the advancement of ISIS extremism.

### **Crafting Their Own Counter-narratives**

In this connection, one strategy that seems much in need of a ramp-up is the systematic involvement of youth in crafting their own counter-narratives against the ISIS appeal. This approach has been tried in Singapore. In October 2015, at an event organised by the Indian Muslim community, 20 outstanding Indian Muslim young people were appointed "Ambassadors of Peace", trained to reach out to other Muslim youth to answer their concerns about religion, extremism and terrorism.

Another potentially useful initiative worth exploring is the "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Hackathon". During such hackathons, small groups of young people from around the world compete with one another to come up with innovative and user-friendly counter-narrative products such as social media apps or online games. The composition of each group is deliberate: One member must be a carefully selected former extremist; one a graphic designer, an IT practitioner or gaming specialist; and the rest can be tertiary students who have an interest in countering violent extremism.

As compared to something that is conjured by overworked counter-terrorism practitioners alone, government agencies, civil society and social media agencies like Google, Twitter and Facebook could work together with youth on such Hackathons, and craft authentic, youth-relevant themes and products that are more likely to appeal to the hearts and minds of young people.

In short, given the strategic focus of ISIS on youth, it stands to reason that governments and civil society must expend equal if not greater effort in engaging youth in the formulation of counter-ISIS messaging ideas, perhaps in national and regional policy forums. More fundamentally, ensuring the meaningful participation of youth in the processes that will influence their lives and futures is also necessary if Singapore – and the wider world for that matter – is to make effective headway in the generational struggle against ISIS extremism.

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*Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor, Head of Policy Studies and Coordinator of the National Security Studies Programme in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang*

*Technological University. Stephanie Neubronner is an Associate Research Fellow in the National Security Studies Programme.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)