The Effect of Violence on Education in Anbar Province During ISIL Occupation

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In cooperation with the Iraqi Ministry of Education, Directorate of Preparation and Training, Anbar

2019
Introduction:

Anbar Province, is the largest governorate in Iraq by area. Encompassing much of the country's western territory, it shares borders with Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The provincial capital is Ramadi; Anbar has more than eleven major districts. Other important cities include Fallujah and Haditha. Most of its people work in agriculture, trade and government jobs. The majority of its population is Sunni Arab Muslims and it is a tribal in character.

Violent extremist organizations have increasingly mobilized children into their ranks. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIL, for example, has trained thousands, of young children for front-line military engagement. Due to the disturbing events of Syria and the ambition of ISIL to expand and take more territories; Anbar Province was occupied by ISIL in 2014. This happened because ISIL began to seize the remote villages, one after another, and put them under its control and after that ISIL could start moving to other villages to annex them to its alleged state. Eventually, ISIL controlled all the cities and towns of the province except Haditha, Habbaniyah and Amriya. Hence, ISIL began establishing the corners of its state by opening schools in most of the districts of the province and forcing the educational staff to join these schools. ISIL reprinted new curricula containing extremist materials calling for violence and murder and using warfare methods in teaching. The goal was to brainwash children’s minds and incite them to join its army. Why children? According to Rami Abdulrahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIL uses children because it is easy to brainwash them. They can build these children into what they want, they send them to ISIL schools instead. While the view may be that children are brainwashed, ISIS inveigles children using non-coercive indoctrination, through a gradual socialization into ISIL’s ideology and world-view. The organization socializes children in a number of ways - most visibly through public events aimed at raising awareness of ISIL’s apocalyptic vision and purported benefits of membership. Some of these events attract children by offering them free toys, candy, or ice cream just for showing up. To talk further about this topic, we interviewed a number of people. One of them is from Qaim City, he says: “I had two sons Ahmed and Thair, 12-14 years old. They enrolled in one of these schools”. He added: “ISIL abolished the Islamic education subject and replaced it by Aqidah. Aqidah subject was full of ISIL’s ideology. Another example is the mathematics subject. They illustrations used in the textbook were bullets and weapons. Also, there was the study of physical geography, as regard history, it was only about the Islamic conquests and linked directly to ISIL victories”.

The most important subject for ISIL was physical education course. While teaching it, ISIL was focusing on some military trainings, ex. how to carry weapons, some military exercises, etc. “it was like a training camp for soldiers”. The father added that “After twelve days in ISIL school, I began to feel very concerned about my children and began to think of escaping from ISIL strong grip in order to protect my family and my children; as for my daughters, I had major concerns about them”. The interviewer asked him: Did ISIL open schools for girls? He said “Yes”. He decided after long thinking that he must flee and leave everything behind. He
continued that, “I was able to escape and took my family through a smuggler, I was barely able to afford the fees of smuggler by selling my car and gold jewelry of my wife”. I asked him who was teaching in ISIL schools. He said “The same school teachers were called by ISIL and they were forced to teach their curricula; otherwise they will be brought to ISIL court”. Among the things he mentioned when the teacher entered the classroom with a member of ISIL. ISIL soldier accompanied the teacher into the classroom. He narrated the story of his neighbor who lost his kids after joining an ISIL school and so far he hasn’t found them. As can be deduced from these lines, the occupation of ISIL has caused negative effects for children like losing any sense or good feelings towards others, aggression behavior, filling them with the feelings of rejecting others and hatred, teach children how to murder and being violent extremists. ISIL dedicates all its efforts to target children to control them and be its future soldiers. Those children were out of their minds and fully controlled by ISIL. In the past three years, ISIL has sent over 400 children to their deaths in a variety of roles, from suicide car bombers (including children as young as 10 driving the vehicle) to propagandists, to commandoes in joint operations with adults. ISIL targets children in unique ways that differ from those deployed by other terrorist groups. Historically, a number of terrorist groups have formalized the inclusion of youth by creating youth wings or children’s brigades. In most of these groups, children are not activated for front-line activities until after they turn 16. By contrast, ISIL targets children from a young age and engages them on the front-lines early on. ISIL has recruited children in mosques, schools, and public areas where execution by stoning, beheading, crucifixion, and other violent acts are carried out. By exploiting children, ISIL gains what they see as comparative advantages, notably the element of surprise and increased media attention for breaching societal norms and psychological barriers. The exploitation of children represents an alarming new development, both tactically and strategically. These terrorist groups are grooming the next generation of terrorist operatives.

Secondly: The bitter experience of teachers who were forced to teach ISIL curriculum was very hard one. It has a negative impact on them that reflecting clearly in their behavior. Before ISIL occupation, they were used to teach children the Iraqi government's curriculum, and then without any notice or consultancy, they teach a strange, weird, bloody curriculum and they were unsatisfied with what was happening. The difficult thing was that they were teaching their own children these extremist curricula and describe the situation as if they were giving poison to their children. This is the a very negative impact, not to mention that they felt that they were involved in the destruction of their society by their hands. But what they could do!!!! They were forced to do so under the threat of weapons; either be killed or threatened to forfeiture their property. As a result, they taught these unsound curricula reluctantly.

Thirdly: The process of teaching lasted more than 3 years and then Iraqi government forces with coalition forces launched military air campaigns on ISIL headquarters in order to prepare for the liberation of the province. During this period, ISIL shut down schools, and people were then receiving news about the liberation of some villages and districts with great joy. They weren’t able to express their happiness publicly fearing of being killed by ISIL. When the war
was over and the Anbar Province was liberated, schools were reopened to receive pupils and students. Teachers now have a sigh of relief and they dumped ISIL curricula and methods for ever because of their destructive negative ideology. ISIL curriculum focused on creating a generation of jihadists who would in future implement the ideas of the ISIL without any objection or argument. ISIL was trying to groom the next generation of terrorist operatives.

Fourthly: After the liberation of the province and the return of the people to their areas, the international humanitarian organizations rushed to help the returnees and staynees and provide them with any possible help in order to mitigate the negative effects of the ISIL occupation of their cities. However, we did not find any organization that worked to build the capacity of teachers and equip them with skills and methods to enhance tolerance, cooperation, accepting others and peace values. Most of the activities conducted were short ones, approximately a day or two long and focused on psychosocial support, a positive education programme and life skills.

Fifthly: The occupation of ISIL and the violence acts that were witnessed by children as well as their poisonous media spots had resulted in creating violent children. During ISIL period, arms phenomena and executions of innocent people were witnessed by children besides many other untold criminals. This situation made children involuntarily aggressive, non-emotional and not sound. This can be observed in the children’s behavior, ex. when children fight with their peers inside the school, etc. Even playing at school or on the street were in a violent way and not children’s act. They have become as if they were members of gangs or terrorist groups. What follows is some of our own observations of some children, more specifically in camp schools. They are bullying all the time and engage in a constant argument with their peers. Some of the children are singing ISIL songs, ex. “We are the sons of the Islamic state”, etc. Some children utter ISIL words: “I will take your head off your body!”. These words were uttered by ISIL members and not in schools.

Sixthly, children are the most precious thing that we have. They are the national treasure of every nation because they are the future. Children are more affected ones during the crises of ISIL occupation because of their age and not fully mature. They are more vulnerable and easily deceived by deception, delusions and rumors. So we must protect them constantly from dangers that threaten them mentally, psychologically and socially, as well as protecting them from dangers that threaten them physically. Therefore, we have to provide the necessary support, especially their essential needs, i.e. security and safety. Bringing back the children’ lives needs efforts and time. Here, we suggest some of the things that we believe it will reduce
extremism or wipe out what the children have acquired from ISIL. The most important suggestions are:

1. Provide safe places for children, instead of their destroyed schools. Also, in these schools they had witnessed the violent acts instead of playing and learning.
2. Provide PSS and programmes for educational staff who witnessed ISIL crimes.
3. Provide PSS for traumatized children.
4. Involve children in certain programmes that let them express themselves freely.
5. Involve children in sports and artistic courses.
6. Training the educational staff on how to deal with children who have trauma.
7. Increase community awareness of how to deal with children, especially parents in ways and methods that meet their needs and work to empty their negative energies in a positive and beneficial way.

Seventhly: Below are statistics for the final numbers of teachers and students who were unable to flee from ISIL-captured territories are given in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Number of Primary Teachers</th>
<th>Number of Secondary Teachers</th>
<th>Number of Pupils</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Ramadi</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>760</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fallujah</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>4600</td>
<td>5800</td>
<td>11620</td>
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<td>Ana</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>1610</td>
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<td>1000</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1925</td>
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<td>2500</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>4230</td>
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<td>700</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>3000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>1210</strong></td>
<td><strong>13200</strong></td>
<td><strong>12500</strong></td>
<td><strong>29255</strong></td>
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