

## Child soldiers: Strategic recruitment and systematic use

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### Abstract

*Child soldiers are often discussed as a tragedy of war, but with numbers skyrocketing and their use being more diversified than ever before, the “collateral damage” discourse does not seem too fitting anymore. Hence, this paper aims to contribute further to the literature on the recruitment of child soldiers, within the implications of a demand side viewpoint. In doing so, our study focuses on the aspect of strategy and its relation to children in warfare. Indeed, we can wonder to what extent child soldiers are used as a strategy by armed forces, following the principle of children as a highly sought-after asset. This entails in our case that the utilisation of child soldiers will be studied as a pathway towards broad achievements by armed forces, either purely military, political, ideological, or as a compound between different goals, and would explain their mass utilisation, and more than ever before in combat and intelligence positions.*

TW: violence, murder, sexual violence

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## Introduction: Child soldiers, a rising but not unknown issue

As warfare evolves through time, its belligerents, the laws surrounding it, the settings, the tactics, and mainly everything that once described it are prone to change. In recent decades, new conflicts have reshaped the way we “make war”, such as the war in Syria or the Libyan conflict. The issue of child soldiers is one that has caught the attention of human rights activists, policymakers and international actors.

Child soldiering is not a new phenomenon. The Roman Empire was already enlisting children as young as fourteen in combat<sup>1</sup>. Napoleon was notorious for using teenagers in his armies in 1814, and both World Wars saw children on the battlefields on all sides. Notably, during the Second World War, the *Hitlerjugend* or “Hitler Youth” was put in place in Germany and comprised more than one million youth, with the average leaders of the groups being between sixteen and seventeen<sup>2</sup>. A whole branch of this movement, the *Deutsches Jungvolk*, was dedicated to the enlisting of even younger children into the military, aged between ten and fourteen years old<sup>3</sup>.

The international outrage against the recruitment of minors in conflicts may be explained by factors not directly related to the core of the issue. First, the image of the child soldier in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century has been vastly imagined as an African child holding an assault rifle as large as him<sup>4</sup>. The importance of this image resides in the discourse behind it, depicting a violent post-colonial Africa. On the other hand, the children that were involved in conflicts in Europe or the American Civil War in previous times were subjected to the “heroic” discourse:

*“During the American Civil War or the First World War, the participation of child soldiers was promoted and perceived through a very specific discursive register, that of the child hero. The actions of these children were “heroicized” and their eventual deaths seen as sacrifices in the name of a greater good, often the nation’s. Conversely, the participation of child combatants in the African wars is always perceived in a negative manner, through the registers of the victimised child and the stolen childhood.”<sup>5</sup>*

Thus, the turn towards the issue of child soldiers cannot be seen as a purely neutral act, and to a certain extent, still represents a Western-centric view and judgement of African and Middle Eastern states. Added to this fact, the era following the Second World War and the changes it brought to warfare pushed for an era of formalising the rules of war, most notably on the protection and rules surrounding civilians and children. Thus, the international outrage that child soldiers now generate today is also vastly linked to the legal framework that was created around the minimal age and requirements needed in order to be enlisted, and which are now ingrained in moral, as well as legal, norms within the international

<sup>1</sup> Eigen, L.D. (2009). Child Soldiers Are Unfortunately Nothing New. [online] Scriptamus. Available at: <https://scriptamus.wordpress.com/2009/11/02/child-soldiers-are-unfortunately-nothing-new/>

<sup>2</sup> Singer, P.W. (2005b). The New Faces of War. In: Children at War. Pantheon.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jézéquel, J.-H. (2006). Les enfants soldats d’Afrique, un phénomène singulier ? Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire, 89(1), pp.99–108. translated in English by Edward Gauvin. Available at: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/0605-JEZEQUEL-UK-2.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

community. Indeed, the post-war era has seen the proliferation of international laws concerning children involved in armed conflicts. While the treaties, and thus their violations, may only be applied to states who are signatories, the use of child soldiers in warfare is seen in the international sphere as a breach of a profound moral code, given the characteristics usually attributed to children. Concerning the legal frameworks, Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines children as any person under the age of eighteen<sup>6</sup>, while the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups elaborate on the involvement of children in warfare, describing:

*“Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”*<sup>7</sup>

The Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention of 1949 strengthen the protection of children, stating that states must not involve children that have not attained the age of 15 to take part in direct combat or hostilities<sup>8</sup>. Under the Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Court of Justice, doing so may also be categorised as a war crime<sup>9</sup>. Further, the most notorious treaty on the subject, Articles 1 and 2 of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict<sup>10</sup>, also known as the child soldiers treaty, clearly prohibits the compulsory enlistment of children under the age of 18, or their participation in any form of direct hostilities. In addition, Article 4 of the treaty also forbids non-state armed groups from recruiting children under any circumstances.

However, despite the numerous legal frameworks intending to protect children from involvement in warfare, their numbers are increasing. For example, this body of international laws did not impede the widespread use of children in the war in Uganda, in which the Lord’s Resistance Army recruited many child soldiers over two decades. As of now, UNICEF reports that: *“Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher”*<sup>11</sup>.

Further, the report of the Secretary General of the UN to the General Assembly in 2019, on the topic of the promotion and protection of the rights of children, states that grave violations against children during conflicts are still widespread, mostly by non-state armed groups. Out of fifteen countries

<sup>6</sup> UN General Assembly. Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). [online] United Nations Treaty Series. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

<sup>7</sup> UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The Paris Principles. Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups. (2007). [online]. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/465198442.html>.

<sup>8</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (1977). Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I). [online]. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36b4.html>.

<sup>9</sup> UN General Assembly. (1998). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. [online]. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3a84.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. (2002). UN General Assembly. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/47fdfb180.html>.

<sup>11</sup> UN Children's Funds (UNICEF) (2021). *Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups*. [online] UNICEF. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>.

mentioned, ten were part of the Middle Eastern and North African Region (MENA) and demonstrated an increase in child soldier recruitments, among other violations.

Indeed, the number of children reported to have been recruited or used by armed actors in conflict increased from 2019 to 2020 in the MENA region, according to a report by Save the Children (2021)<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, three of the countries present in this region, are the top countries with the highest share of children living in conflict zones, with almost all children at risk of recruitment by armed groups. Indeed, the percentage is 98% in Afghanistan, 97% in Syria and 89% in Yemen. On a regional level, the Middle East has the highest share of 33% of children living in conflict zones at risk of recruitment and use. Africa has the second-highest share, with an all-time high in 2020 of 19% of all the children on the continent – up from 14% in 2019. This means one child in six in Africa is at risk of recruitment. Along with those statistics, the report also states a decrease in the use of children by state forces, but notices a large increase from non-state actors, tripling from 38 in 2010 to 110 in 2020<sup>13</sup>. As the Middle Eastern and North African Region is the seat of many conflicts involving non-state actors, such as militias, and terrorist organisations expanding their influence such as the Islamic State (IS), the statistics are coherent with the area. Thus, as an epicentre of conflict, the MENA region is now plagued by the widespread use of child soldiers, which human rights organisations are denouncing day by day.

On another point, armed groups are less likely to be bound or affected by the international repercussions of breaching international laws and codes. Thus, some groups are using child soldiers profusely in their propaganda, or in the construction of their public image, such as the IS. Indeed, videos published by the IS demonstrate children as kamikazes, fighters or even executioners. One set of images, for example, showcased children aged around ten years old, shooting and beheading prisoners in Syria<sup>14</sup>.

Works on the logics of recruitment have been one of the streams studied, but the research remains sparse. While socio-economic or general systematic factors are undeniably linked to the enlistment of child soldiers, demand-side factors are gaining more importance as they seek to explain the commodification of children as valuable assets in warfare, which is rather a recent change. This means that if progress is made towards the political stability or economic opportunities in states with high rates of child soldiering, the rate of recruitment may still remain steady.

## I - Child soldiers as a mean toward military effectiveness: the power of youth

First, in order to elucidate the relationship between the systematic recruitment and use of child soldiers and their ability to impact the military effectiveness of the enemy, it is necessary to define military effectiveness. It is considered as *“the ability to produce favourable military outcomes per se, including the outcomes of minor skirmishes at the tactical level of war and the outcomes of wars or even*

<sup>12</sup> Save the Children (2021). *Stop the war on children: A crisis of recruitment*. reliefweb. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SWOC%205%205th%20pp.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Al Arabiya English. (2017). Disturbing ISIS video shows kids beheading and shooting prisoners. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2017/01/10/Disturbing-ISIS-video-shows-kids-beheading-and-shooting-prisoners> [Accessed 5 oct 2022].

*long-term politico-military competitions at the strategic or grand strategic levels of war*<sup>15</sup>. In a nutshell, one can relate military effectiveness to the notion of military success, of the achievement of objectives which will be considered as positive over the course of a conflict. For the purpose of this study, we chose not to limit military effectiveness to the scope of the battlefield. Favourable military outcomes may be linked to a variety of short- or long-term military successes. In the case of child soldiers, the encounter between military units and child soldiers may undermine their military effectiveness, in any setting related to their duty. This includes encounters on the battlefield, but may also involve meetings outside these settings.

Another topic of importance is the definition of children and childhood. As we mentioned before, these notions are defined by a set of international laws and treaties, with some degrees of variations. Indeed, as adopted by the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are defined as individuals under the age of eighteen. However, this definition gives us little insight about the perception of individuals as children. In order for soldiers to be destabilised by the use of child soldiers, they need to recognise them as such. The definition of childhood and children varies vastly across cultures and nations around the world<sup>16</sup>. Hence, out of the scope of international treaties, all that is left is a social construct. Thus, their involvement in military endeavours in some populations may not be impeded by defining them in characteristics linked to non-combatants, such as innocence and weakness, or more largely as a part of the population under the wing of the protected side during warfare. The relation of children with political capacity, an understanding of moral or even agency, whether total or partial, therefore relates to a new stream of the concept, and is highly linked to a westernised point of view. Within those different perceptions of childhood, the involvement of children in warfare may be seen as the norm in some cultural contexts and as an anomaly in others. Hence, soldiers and military units who share this westernised view of childhood are more likely to be destabilised by the presence of child soldiers, thus risking a negative impact on their military effectiveness.

## II - Military strategy: Operation Barras

One important case, often referred to as one of the earlier failures of a successful engagement with child soldiers, is the case of the West Side Boys in Sierra Leone, which led to Operation Barras. In August 2000, Sierra Leone was in a severe civil war, with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) fighting against the government forces as well as the peacekeepers deployed as part of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). A unit of the Royal Irish Regiment got surrounded by a local militia on a roadblock, named the West Side Boys, a faction of the RUF. The group was composed of numerous child soldiers, and were depicted by locals as highly violent, due to the circumstances of their recruitment, which involved the killing and raping of family members. The patrol was subsequently captured. However, the factors contributing to the regiment being taken hostage have been documented as linked to the fact that the militia was primarily composed of children, and not only due to military disadvantages or excessive violence. Indeed, the commander in charge of the patrol decided not to shoot

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<sup>15</sup> Biddle, S. (2017). Military Effectiveness. International Studies.

<sup>16</sup> Honwana, A.M. (2006). Child soldiers in Africa. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

the militia, describing them as “*children armed with AK-47s*.”<sup>17</sup>. As a consequence, the hostage situation and the failure of negotiations to liberate the soldiers led to a rescue mission, Operation Barras, that was qualified by soldiers as “Operation Certain Death”<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, the mission entailed two simultaneous attacks, in villages comprising many rebels thoroughly armed, and the need for a superior assault force added to the surprise effect<sup>19</sup>. While the outcome of the operation was more successful than anticipated with only one casualty, this case has been cited as one of the most apparent failures to respond successfully to an engagement with child soldiers.

Going back to the link between the use of child soldiers and military effectiveness, we can argue that the situation leading to Operation Barras might be a clear example of it. Indeed, the reaction of the Commander when facing child soldiers illustrates how the nature of children is a factor destabilising even trained soldiers. Here, as the patrol was deployed by British Army peacekeepers, we may assume that their perception of children was a westernised one. A quote from Colonel Charles Borchini of the US Army gives us a clear insight of it:

*“Child soldiers are a problem all over the world, but it is something we in the West are not accustomed to. We raise our own children and bring them up and having to fight children is not something we are ready for.”*<sup>20</sup>

Hence, we can argue that a different approach towards child soldiers may have had a more positive impact on the military effectiveness of the patrol. Indeed, their refusal to fire or use force against the militia composed mainly of children led to void negotiations, which pushed the special forces to intervene in what was understood as a highly dangerous rescue mission by other soldiers. It is important to precise here that the research suggests that it was mainly the decision of the commander, and no position in favour of an opposite tactic was found.

A case where a militia comprising child soldiers had to face Western troops is not a unique situation in the Middle Eastern and North African Region. With US and NATO troops deployed in the region, added to numerous peacekeeping operations directed by UN agencies, the number of Western soldiers encountering child soldiers are rising<sup>21</sup>. Apart from a setting in battle, Western troops may also encounter child soldiers in suicide bombings attacks, for instance. This phenomenon entails attacks in which the life

<sup>17</sup> Singer, P.W. (2002). Children at War. Brookings Institute. [online] Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/children-at-war/>.

<sup>18</sup> Fitzgibbon, F. (2020). Operation Certain Death. [online] Medium. Available at: <https://historyofyesterday.com/operation-certain-death-6016b7a85a1e>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Tynes, R. (2008). Child Soldier as Tactical Innovation. *Air & Space Power Journal*, (1).

<sup>21</sup> General Assembly and Security Council (2019). *Children and armed conflict Report of the Secretary-General, A/73/907-S/2019/509*. [online] United Nations. Available at: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2019/509&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2019/509&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

General Assembly and Security Council (2020). *Children and armed conflict Report of the Secretary-General, A/74/845-S/2020/525*. [online] Undocs. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/117/04/PDF/N2011704.pdf?OpenElement>.

General Assembly and Security Council (2021). *Children and armed conflict Report of the Secretary-General, A/75/873-S/2021/437*. [online] Undocs. Available at: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2021/437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2021/437&Lang=E&Area=UNDOC).

of the “bomber” is sacrificed, as within a wide range of targets often include Western troops. Child soldiers are also often used in this role, as the armed groups believe that as children, they have better chances of reaching the desired target or location of the attack without interference. Hence, we could argue that Western troops are more likely to be subjected to a moral dilemma when facing child soldiers, which could undermine their military effectiveness, linked to a certain form of unreadiness on the part of troops.

### III - Military doctrines and their shortcomings

A study of the Western military doctrine and its relation to encounters with child soldiers may give a useful insight into whether Western troops are prepared for such scenarios, as well as the weight of the child soldiering issue within Western military documents. A lack of formalisation on the subject hence could be analysed as a weakness from the Western militaries, which could be explored by the armed forces recruiting child soldiers.

First, it has been advanced by a wide range of scholars and military officials that the military doctrine of the West is not set to respond with efficiency to encounters with child soldiers. The United States Department of Defence Law of War Manual hence describes that:

*“If children are nonetheless employed in armed conflict, they generally are treated on the same basis as adults, although children may be subject to special treatment in detention because of their age”<sup>22</sup>.*

Thus, no special military strategies or tactics should be employed if US troops find themselves facing child soldiers. This however goes against what Colonel Borchini explained about the difficulty to grasp the idea that the lethal opposants the troops are facing are actually children, in accordance with the Western perception of them. Hence, this doctrine does not take into account the reticence and hesitation that arise in soldiers when they may need to fire at child soldiers, drawing on our explanation of the Operation Barras case. Further, Colonel Borchini elaborates on the fact that US troops are and will indeed face child soldiers, but their treatment of the situations is however framed through an emotional response which is impossible to neglect. He therefore advances that hesitation or a moral dilemma are part of the equation and may lead to a lethal outcome:

*“Not only have U.S. forces faced child soldiers in the past , it is nearly inevitable that they will face them again in the future. If a 14 - year - old points a weapon at a U.S. serviceman , what should he do? No Marine , no soldier , sailor, or airman wants to kill a 14-year-old. But a 14-year-old with an AK - 47 is just as deadly as a 40-year-old with an AK - 47. If one hesitates , then he and his buddies might be killed ; if he shoots, then he might have to deal with the potential psychological consequences of killing a child. This presents a terrible dilemma.”<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> Department of Defense law of war manual. (2015). [online] Washington, Dc: General Counsel of The Department of Defense.

<sup>23</sup> Trawick, M. and Ebrary, I. (2007). Enemy lines: warfare, childhood, and play in Batticaloa. Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press.

Further, within the Rules of Engagement (ROE)<sup>24</sup> of the US military forces, there is no adaptation available for when child soldiers are identified as present in a specific area concerned with an intervention. Colonel Borchini recognises the apparent dilemma that may result in facing child soldiers, and moreover to have to engage militarily with one, and thus emphasises that the static ROE are not in the advantages of the troops, since they ignore the moral dilemma that may arise. This crucial idea that we mentioned several times now, is however backed up in a publication of the Department of the Army, which pushes forward that armed groups considered as threats may use child soldiers based on the knowledge of the cultural bias of the US troops. Moreover, there is an opposition towards the idea of removing the troops for a specific situation which could involve child soldiers, as this will only delay their unmissable encounter with them if they are within the delimited area in which the forces are intervening, hence only furthering the phenomenon of child soldiering. The gaps in the preparation of the military are also shown in the fact that during military training, child soldiers are identified as able to pose a threat, either regular or irregular, and therefore it is necessary to have a precise assessment of their objectives and location within the delimited area. However, as argued by Buckhart in his study of the shortcomings of current army policy and doctrine on child soldiers, this does not specify *“how, or in what way to deal with them [the child soldiers], but rather simply stat[e] the need to deal with them”*<sup>25</sup>.

On a similar note, Dallaire, former Canadian general and one of the most important activist for the cause of child soldiers, argued that:

*“well over 100,000 peacekeepers, has been deployed with nearly two dozen UN missions in conflicts where child soldiers are used in tactical altercations and yet their rules of engagement (ROE) do not specify any special procedure to employ when using force against child soldiers, either when the peacekeeper’s life is directly at risk or when the task could be compromised. Any moment of hesitation on the part of the protection forces, be they foreign or national, can provide a tactical advantage to those who use the child soldier weapon system.”*<sup>26</sup>

Hence, this pushes forward the gaps in the military doctrine about the engagement with child soldiers, while those encounters seem inevitable, which on the most important note impede the chances of rescuing the child soldiers from their situations, and may often lead to their death, as it was the case in Sri Lanka with huge losses for forces facing a branch of the Tamil Tigers composed mainly of child soldiers. In addition, many scholars note the danger of not having the adequate preparation for those encounters, which may lead to higher than necessary use of violence, post-traumatic stress disorders, moral dilemmas, military ineffectiveness on the side of the Western troops, while the ongoing goal of removing the child soldiers from their situation is unreachable under such conditions.

Those calls for reforms in the military doctrine of the West do not come from nowhere. While it has been established that the use of child soldiers is still widespread, a large number of them being present in the MENA region, what is also important to mention is their rise in roles where they have a higher chance of encountering Western troops, such as in combat or during suicide missions. Hence, while recounts of encounters that happened during ongoing conflicts may be complicated to obtain, as well as personal recollections of the Western soldiers present in the cases, the presence of more child soldiers in the front

<sup>24</sup> The Rules of Engagement concern the circumstances, conditions, degree and manner in which the use of force may be used by military forces and describe what or may not be acceptable in different situations.

<sup>25</sup> Buckhart, J.A. (2016). Watch out for the children: Naval Postgraduate School.

<sup>26</sup> Dallaire, R. (2011). They fight like soldiers, they die like children. London: Arrow.

line always indicates a higher chance of encounters with foreign soldiers, who, as we have previously shown, are not adequately prepared for it.

On a last point, the calls for reforms and the rise of child soldiers at the front, suggesting higher chances of encounters with Western troops, led nowhere. As a leader in the matter, Canadian Armed Forces developed in 2017 a new military doctrine aiming “to specifically address the unique challenges faced by military members confronted by child soldiers while deployed on operations<sup>27</sup>”. This new doctrine involves an in-training preparation focused on the dealing with child soldiers, with a focus on safeguarding the security of both the troops and the child soldiers. The emergence of this new doctrine has been heavily criticised by Romeo Dallaire, who campaigned for a review of the military doctrine and the inclusion of this issue within it, as previously mentioned. Moreover, encounters between Canadian Forces and child soldiers were also stated as a reason for this shift:

*“Our forces have been facing child soldiers in Afghanistan, they’ve been facing them in Iraq now with the special ops [...] With no systems in place and a dearth of training, the soldiers have instead responded in an ad-hoc way that leans heavily on their emotions. They’re making up their solutions to that very challenging moral dilemma, as well as a dilemma that has an impact on the overall success of their mission.”<sup>28</sup>*

Hence, the strategic manoeuvre behind child soldiering may appear clearer in the light of these facts, as striking where the “enemy” is not well-prepared and relying on an emotional response can be a strong incentive for groups already known for recruiting child soldiers, and levels the apparent “benefits” of using children as pawns in wars.

#### IV - Child soldiers, the key to survival?

Child soldiers may be the subject of recruitment because they offer an important tactical advantage for the armed forces using them, by playing on the moral codes of the opposers. However, the use of child soldiers on the battlefield is not systematic. Indeed, they may act in support roles, such as cooks, spies, sex slaves, porters and more. Their presence in posts outside the battlefield does not, however, impede their strategic usefulness. For example, it has been argued that children are recruited as child soldiers due to the natural advantages they bring as children to intelligence missions, as their presence is not usually regarded as threatening, relating to the fact that they are supposed to be an object of protection. This is to show that the reason to recruit child soldiers as a valuable commodity is not necessarily due to a purpose directly linked to combat. Hence, an incentive for the recruitment of child soldiers would also be linked to the survival of the group, in order to achieve a certain long-term goal, most often closely related to ideology.

<sup>27</sup> Defence, N. (2017). Canadian Armed Forces sets precedent with Child Soldier Doctrine. [online] www.canada.ca. Available at: [https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/03/canadian\\_armed\\_forcessetsprecedentwithchildsoldierdoctrine.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2017/03/canadian_armed_forcessetsprecedentwithchildsoldierdoctrine.html). [Accessed 5 oct 2022].

<sup>28</sup> The Guardian. (2017). ‘React first’: Canadian army issues guide to dealing with child soldiers. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/19/canadian-army-guide-dealing-child-soldiers-react-first>. [Accessed 4 oct 2022].

Indeed, different forces have been denounced as recruiting children in warfare, from state forces, rebel groups or terrorist organisations and affiliated. However, in the same manner as our previous argument, not all groups are susceptible to use child soldiers for the specific purpose mentioned above. The propensity to use child soldiers to create a moral dilemma for the opposition troops may depend on the cultural bias of the opposers. Therefore, in order for armed groups to possibly recruit child soldiers based on our hypothesis, we have to take into account the variations between armed groups and whether or not they have an already existing ideology and a goal broader than short time-framed successes, in order to recruit child soldiers with the aim of using them to ensure the longevity of the group and the achievement of the goals.

Taking the example of Afghanistan, the Taliban, the Islamic fundamentalist political movement which partially ruled from 1996 to 2001, before regaining power in 2021, have for main goal the remodelling of Afghanistan and its rule, based on their specific ideology. Indeed, their rule is planned to be supported by the creation of their own ideology, called Talibanism, which is based on “*a more tailored and unwritten mixture of puritanical beliefs wrapped in Islamic sharia*”<sup>29</sup>. In previous decades, the Taliban were rather hostile towards other Islamist doctrines competing with Hanafi Islam, such as the Salafi Islam doctrine. Hence, the goal of the Taliban is still the establishment of a pan-Islamic state in Afghanistan, in the long run. However, with the presence of the Afghan branch of the Islamic State, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which is widely opposed to a solely Hanafi Afghanistan, the fight for a pan-Islamic state is not won. Thus, with the presence of a specific and transgenerational goal and a precise ideology, which are closely linked, the Taliban group indicates a desire to exist and rule post-conflict in a certain ideologically-based state, and could therefore recruit children for this end.

Another case is the one of the Islamic State (IS), which is present majorly in Iraq and Syria (formerly ISIS) and Afghanistan (ISKP). The widely known terrorist organisation is perhaps the closest armed group to our argument here, due to its massive usage of media to pursue propaganda purposes, which led to a certain consensus about the organisation’s goals and ideology. Indeed, the Islamic State follows the Salafi jihadi ideology, but tends towards a highly radical side of it, uncompromising on doctrinal matters. Moreover, since their creation, IS has spread progressively in the Middle Eastern region. In June 2014, the armed group proclaimed the rise of the caliphate, therefore asserting its authority over all Muslims in the world and calling for their allegiance. The goal of the Islamic State intertwined its religious beliefs with territorial dominance. Given those characteristics, the Islamic States combined both an ideology, closely related to a goal broader than short-term military successes, which necessitates the long-term survival of the group. Given this fact, it is necessary to see how and why children would be the right assets for the survival of the group, in comparison to adult recruits.

It was theorised that children were considered as “blank slates”<sup>30</sup>, or as individuals not needing re-education or conversion, therefore better suited for an indoctrination process. Applying this case to the Islamic State, it is argued that this “blankness” within the children’s minds would frame them as

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<sup>29</sup> Ahmad, J. (2022). The Taliban’s religious roadmap for Afghanistan. [online] Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/talibans-religious-roadmap-afghanistan>.

<sup>30</sup> National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and General Intelligence and Security Service (2017). *The Children of ISIS The indoctrination of minors in ISIS-held territory*. [online] Available at: [https://radical.hypotheses.org/files/2018/01/Minderjarigen\\_bij\\_ISIS\\_ENG.pdf](https://radical.hypotheses.org/files/2018/01/Minderjarigen_bij_ISIS_ENG.pdf).

“potential better versions of the current fighters”<sup>31</sup>. The idea of the IS is thus to perpetuate the caliphate, through the training and preparation of a younger generation, with strong processes of indoctrination. Here, we can deduce that the goal in question that needs to be achieved will play a role in the propensity to recruit child soldiers, and its specificities. IS’s indoctrination process starts very early, and thus ensures that the learned behaviours are seen as normal by the future fighters. Reported by Human Rights Watch, a former recruit recounted that *“the leader of the camp said [ISIS] liked the younger ones better”*<sup>32</sup>.

The presence of individuals with malleable minds makes logical sense as to why children would make better recruits for an armed group with a specific ideology, looking to survive in the long-term. An interview conducted with a former child soldier of the IS gives a statement backing up this argument, as he stated:

*“I gave everything I had to Islamic State's victory because I thought it was being oppressed by everyone. They said you should give everything to them, even sacrifice yourself. [...] They are making a new generation for the Caliphate to fight infidels. There are many children who now have absolute loyalty.”*<sup>33</sup>

This indoctrination process hence creates an army of child soldiers with total loyalty to the armed group. Therefore, the importance of loyalty in the narrative surrounds the child recruits of the IS, named the Cubs of the Caliphate. In the hypothesis that they are recruited to take the place of current fighters to ensure the continuation of the caliphate, loyalty is crucial, otherwise the core of the armed group will not be assured of survival, if the ideologies are no longer shared by future fighters.

The involvement of children is in this case a well-ingrained strategy to ensure the survival of the group, and the practicalities to ensure a smooth transition are not only from a pure indoctrination perspective. Indeed, the system in place ensures a feeling of belonging since the Islamic State is providing everything a regular State would, such as education even if deviated, housing, security, objectives, and others. Hence, through this highly institutionalised system, the children have developed a feeling of loyalty, which ensures their future place and therefore the whole future of the organisation.

## Conclusion

The tragedy that child soldiering encompasses is no more to create. Thus, many institutions are pushing the issue forward on the international stage, while multiplying the frameworks to help and reintegrate former child soldiers (For more information, see the article “Child soldiers, a warlike socialisation

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch (2014). *‘Maybe We Live and Maybe We Die’ Recruitment and Use of Children by Armed Groups in Syria.* [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/22/maybe-we-live-and-maybe-we-die/recruitment-and-use-children-armed-groups-syria>

<sup>33</sup> Williams, E. (2015). Transcript: Children of ISIS. [online] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/children-of-isis/transcript/>.

through force and manipulation”<sup>34</sup>). However, this response to a surge in the number of child soldiers is very loosely grasped by verification mechanisms. Indeed, these methods rely on numerous criteria and procedures, making it difficult to keep statistics on the actual number of child soldiers up to date with the facts. It appears clearly that there is a necessity to update military doctrines and understandings in order to counter the strategies of armed groups which saw an advantage in using children in warfare. Deepening the knowledge into why, how, and in what specific areas child soldiers are used is the first step to hopefully curbing the rise in their use in armed groups, and thus starting their reintegration into civilian life.

Child soldiers have been a part of warfare for longer than portrayed, but their utility and the assets they bring to armed forces, in different settings, are just now being considered, with some armed forces rejecting the morality behind the employment of children in favour of profit-making strategies. Hence, it is necessary for opposing troops to take into consideration the possible encounters with indoctrinated and trained child soldiers in order to have a suitable response that will not lead to human damage and the death of the child in a situation that can be reversed.

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<sup>34</sup> DIDIER, C. (2021). Child soldiers, a warlike socialization through force and manipulation. Generation for Rights Over the World. [growthinktank.org](https://www.growthinktank.org). [online] Mar. 2021. Available at: <https://www.growthinktank.org/en/child-soldiers-a-warlike-socialization-through-force-and-manipulation/>

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