



Children of the Caliphate: Young IS Returnees and the Reintegration Challenge

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Introduction¹

In recent years, the world has been shocked time and again by gruesome images and actions of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (IS), but the footage and stories of children as young as eight executing people caused international outrage (Winter 2016). Children play an important role in the organisation: the children of the caliphate are seen as ‘the future of IS’, and education and propaganda are an important way of indoctrination (Engel 2016). IS has used children, from toddlers to teenagers, for suicide attacks, executions and fighting. Research has shown that IS propaganda between 2015–2016 included 89 eulogies of children and youths – a number that steadily increased on a monthly basis, showing that IS opts for this gruesome tactic gradually (Bloom et. al 2015–2016, 2). The role of minors and their future causes international concern for a broad range of reasons: growing up and potentially fighting in armed conflict will cause trauma for a number of these children (RAN 2016). Also, what will happen with these children if the Caliphate collapses? Human Rights Watch expressed concerns about the birth registrations that will most likely not be recognised by the international community – potentially leaving children stateless (Houry 2016).

This article focuses on minors returning from IS-territory.² When the Caliphate was declared, IS called on individuals to travel to the territory and settle in the caliphate together with families, including kids – a call that people from all over the world responded to positively (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016; The Soufan Group 2015). Additionally, research shows that these so-called Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) have become younger over time (The Soufan Group 2015, 13). The UN (UN Security Council Resolution 2174, 2014) and EU

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² In this article, the terms children and minors are used interchangeably to refer to those who are distinguished from adults, in most countries this group is seen as those aged 0-18 or 21 years old; the term juveniles is used in the context of the criminal justice system, referring to those above the national age of criminal responsibility who, by law, are distinguished from adult offenders in the criminal justice system on account of their age.

(Council of the European Union 2017) have expressed their concern about FTFs, and recently this concern increasingly focused on returning FTFs and the risks this might pose: not only are these returnees possibly sent home with an assignment to commit an attack or recruit people, but a number of returnees has committed crimes abroad or might return with mental health problems (for example, AIVD 2017). The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) published a report in April 2017 titled “Minors with ISIS” (*“Minderjarigen bij ISIS”*) (AIVD and NCTV 2017). The report does not solely focus on what to do with young returnees, but largely on what life for minors looks like in the Caliphate, underlining the importance of these experiences when determining the needs of returning children. As a number of these returning FTFs (both adults and minors) will be prosecuted for offences committed in Syria and Iraq, it is important to consider rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, in order to mitigate risks and minimise the chance of recidivism.

Before looking more closely at approaches to rehabilitate and reintegrate these juvenile violent extremist offenders (VEOs) and IS returnees, it is important to have a proper understanding of the scope of the issue. Establishing the number of children living in the Caliphate is difficult: information coming from within IS territory cannot be verified. It is even more difficult to verify the numbers of children born in Syria or Iraq (RAN 2016). The EU emphasizes the large differences between these children and the context within which they were either brought to IS-territory by their parents or born there (Council of the European Union 2017, 3, 6). They distinguish between four groups of children: 1) minor refugees; 2) minor FTFs; 3) children born and raised by European FTFs in Syria/Iraq; and 4) children remaining in the EU, whilst parents/siblings have travelled to Syria and/or Iraq (Ibid, 3). Some countries have published statistics on minors in IS territory, for example, the Dutch security services claim there are at least 80 children with a ‘Dutch link’ in Syria and/or Iraq: half of them travelled with their parents, the other half was born there. 50% is therefore three years or younger, 30% is between four and eight, and under 20% is nine years or older (AIVD 2017, 6).³

Balancing risks and rehabilitation

But what risk do these children pose? And what to do upon their return in order to reintegrate them? Firstly, it is important to briefly note that age matters: naturally, there is a difference in both the short term and long term security risks posed by a 3-year-old child or a 15-year-old juvenile. To illustrate this, children of the Caliphate are perceived as ‘cubs’ growing into

³ ‘Dutch link’ refers to one or two parents with Dutch nationality or parents that lived in the Netherlands for a long period of time.

‘lions’: once they hit puberty, they can join the armed conflict (anywhere between the ages of 9-15) (AIVD 2017, 5). Secondly, as noted by the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (CTC) to the Council of the EU states, minors can be both a threat and a victim – with regards to children in armed conflict, posing a threat does not exclude being a victim (Council of the European Union 2017). This asks for a multidisciplinary reintegration approach for these juvenile returnees. In practice, that means law enforcement and security agencies as well as child protection services need to be included with a focus on both welfare and security (Ibid.). The Dutch security services report also argues that these minors are first and foremost victims of the so-called Islamic State, due to the stress and trauma inflicted by the violence experienced. The report emphasises this does not mean there should be no attention for the risks these minors potentially pose to Dutch society or for the crimes they potentially committed abroad (AIVD 2017, 16-17).

The combination of training children might have received, potential crimes committed, the sheer volume of propaganda and indoctrination they experienced and potential traumas they might suffer, can provide a lethal mix – the security risks of which cannot be underestimated. These children are potential perpetrators of violent crimes, a fact that warrants an approach that goes beyond the view of victimised individuals. Even though the ultimate goal of any government initiative should be aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating these minors (back) into society, they should be based within a clear security/law enforcement framework. As governments are shaping responses to returning FTFs, and the juvenile/youth aspect has shown to become increasingly relevant, it is important to understand *if* and *how* juvenile violent extremist offenders (JVEOs) are different from either regular juvenile criminal offenders or from adult violent extremist offenders.

In this article, we will look at the challenges regarding this specific group of FTF returnees. In part one we ask ourselves: What do current rehabilitation programmes for terrorists worldwide look like? And what do countries do differently for foreign terrorist fighters as opposed to ‘regular’ terrorist reintegration and rehabilitation programmes? In the second part we zoom in on the question of what sets juvenile VEOs apart from either their ‘regular’ criminal counterparts or adult terrorists?; and what do countries currently do regarding young children and adolescents who have engaged in (extremist) violence?; Third and finally, we aim to answer the question: what are the implications of these programmes and differences between offender types for the approach towards returning children of the caliphate and young violent extremist offenders in general?⁴ A number of initial recommendations will be

⁴ A note on terminology: in this article, we follow the definition of violent extremism as proposed by Schmid (2013, 10), namely people who are ‘positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power’. Terrorism is defined as ‘a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action

presented based on the analysis, aiming at contributing to a comprehensive approach in dealing with JVEOs.

Rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremist offenders: current approaches

In the past decade, numerous rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremists have been developed. For example, comprehensive programmes have been established in Europe (Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom, Germany), Southeast Asia (Singapore, Indonesia), and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt). Each of these countries has developed its own approach to promote desistance from terrorism or violent extremism. The desistance process has been labelled differently as well, for instance, what is called rehabilitation in some countries could be labelled as reformation, re-socialisation, de-radicalisation, disengagement, reintegration, diversion or re-insertion in other countries. For the purposes of providing a clear overview, we will from here onwards use the term rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

An initial analysis of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes leads to the conclusion that while many countries have implemented rehabilitation programmes, they vary widely as to 1) who is targeted by the programmes (e.g. terrorists, returnees or individuals who are deemed vulnerable to radicalisation; 2) in what phase or setting the programmes are implemented (e.g. pre-prison, in-prison, post-prison); 3) on what basis individuals participate in the programme (voluntarily or mandatory); 4) who is responsible for the implementation of the programme (e.g. prison wardens, social workers, psychologists or religious scholars); and 5) what components make up the programme (e.g. psychological counselling, education, religious counselling).

The majority of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes focuses on a broad category of terrorist (or violent extremist) offenders, thus including a focus on foreign terrorist fighters. Where some countries solely target those extremists who have committed an offense, i.e. Algeria's *Repentance and De-radicalization in Prison* programme that focuses specifically on prisoners convicted of terrorist acts (Ashour 2009); other programmes have a broader focus and aim not only to counter already radicalised individuals but also to prevent radicalisation either in society at large or for specific groups within society that have been deemed vulnerable to radicalisation. The Canadian city of Montreal initiated a prevention- oriented programme, implemented by the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence with the

without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties' (Schmid 2011, 86-87). Foreign Terrorist Fighters is defined as 'an agent who (i) has joined, and operates within the confines of an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organisation; and (4) is unpaid' (Hegghammer 2010/2011, 56-57).

aim to "stop the spreading of extremism, identify individuals that are in a process of radicalization toward violence and contribute to their disengagement" (Bérubé 2015). The programme addresses issues of de-radicalisation and rehabilitation while at the same time being more preventative in nature.

Another element that differs per country is the phase in which violent extremists are targeted. Most programmes focus on the prison context, but the programmes that are more preventative in nature either focus on vulnerable individuals that have not yet committed a crime (pre-prison) or have an all-encompassing approach including both pre- and post-prison individuals. For instance, the UK developed the PREVENT and CHANNEL programme, focusing on individuals that are viewed as vulnerable to radicalization (website gov.uk 2015). Post-prison, countries focus on probation services, or other aftercare services such as assistance in finding employment and housing (Kouwenhoven 2015). The reason that most programmes focus on the prison context seems to be that the prison setting provides a delineated, controlled environment within a clear criminal justice framework.

The programme components of which most programmes consist range from religious interventions to sports activities and job skills training. The component that features most frequently is the mandatory participation of detained or suspected violent extremist offenders in religious discussion or religious lessons provided by the state or state-sanctioned religious leaders. The implementation of these religious interventions is based on the premise that most violent extremists have an incorrect interpretation of religious theology and/or have been misled by leaders in terrorist networks into believing violence is necessary to uphold their religion. As a result, sessions are often aimed at discrediting the ideological justification for extremism and stimulating violent extremists to distance themselves from extremism. This approach is for example used in Yemen, Singapore (website Religious Rehabilitation Group 2016) and Indonesia (Horgan and Braddock 2010). Other examples of programme components are psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy or anger management sessions (Mullins 2010); education, ranging from high school to university diplomas to specific certificates for individual courses; recreational activities such as participation in sports, theatre, arts and music (Boucek 2008, 18); and many programmes include job skills training by offering practical workshops in mechanical skills, tailoring, carpentry or agriculture.

Another common element that often plays a role alongside the content of the programme is financial support. Specifically, a number of countries incorporate some form of stipends for the violent extremist offender (i.e. Indonesia) (Neumann 2010, 53) or provide loans or financial support to the detainees' family (i.e. Saudi Arabia and the Philippines) (Ibid).

Poverty is often perceived as a fertile ground for violent extremism (Sterman 2015), thus – in many countries – include financial support based on the assumption that VEOs turned to extremist networks for additional income or to fight for social justice. Financial aid that is given to the individual as part of rehabilitation programmes is in place to reduce the incentive of re-joining terrorist networks upon release from prison. On the other hand, financial aid that is provided to the families of convicted radicals is intended to prevent family members from becoming financially dependent on terrorist networks or resorting to mass violence to express their frustration with their financial circumstances. In the Indonesian programme, for example, the costs of family members who travel to prison in order to visit the inmate are reimbursed (Sim and Huda Ismail 2016).

Finally, more and more rehabilitation and reintegration programmes include families and community networks in programmes. Aside from focusing on the individual violent extremist offender in de-radicalisation and disengagement programmes, governments often prepares communities to be more receptive to returning detainees and ex-terrorists (Boucek 2008, 4). The idea is to engage communities in the process of reintegrating ex-terrorists and improving social cohesion. An example is the Colombian programme, which focuses on the resettlement of families to remove them from the extremist environment (Horgan and Braddock 2010, 271).

What do countries do differently to reintegrate Foreign Terrorist Fighters ?

As the above shows, there is a wide variety of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders on a global scale (Schuurman and van der Heide 2016). Although these programmes differ across countries, depending on contextual factors, their focus on violent extremism and terrorism is very clear. With the increasing concern about returning FTFs, the next question would be if any programmes specifically designed for this target group, and if so, what are the main differences between programmes for ‘regular’ terrorists and returned FTFs?

The United Nations emphasised the importance of designing and implementing rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign terrorist fighters in UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), which calls for “developing and implementing prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters” (UN Security Council Resolution 2174, 2014). The EU CTC, through the European Commission, made a similar claim, calling for the development of risk assessment tools and rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for these returning FTFs. The question of how to conduct risk assessment lies beyond the scope of this paper, but should nevertheless be an integral part of rehabilitation, as it provides information on individuals’ needs and the risks they pose. The EU CTC emphasises

that programmes should be developed both inside and outside of correctional settings, as programmes *outside* prison walls can be helpful in bridging the gap that has resulted from complications in prosecuting returning FTFs due to difficulties in collecting – and lack of – evidence (Council of the European Union 2016).

Despite this call, there are few programmes that focus specifically on returning FTFs. In an article analysing programmes developed by the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), eighteen of the 30 Member States of GCTF implemented specific rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for FTF – most of which build on existing programmes, whilst others developed new initiatives (Mehra 2016, 20). These programmes vary widely: for instance, a Dutch initiative called EXITs, focuses on returnees that can participate on a voluntary basis, whereas the Danish Aarhus programme includes an exit component that focuses solely on returning FTFs who are not being prosecuted for criminal charges (Ibid). In France, so-called “Centers for Prevention, Integration and Citizenship” were planned to open, focusing on de-radicalisation. The aim was to open twelve centers, of which one would focus specifically on individuals who traveled to conflict zones, but of whom it is unknown they joined a jihadist group (Uhlmann 2016). So far, these centers have faced complications: first, the opening of the centers has been delayed repeatedly, and secondly, the one center that did open has been widely criticised by the French Senate. Criticism focused on a lack of evaluation and preciseness in designing of the mechanisms and programme (McAuley 2017). Since 2012, the German al-Hayat programme includes an assessment of returned FTFs who are put through a process of counseling and reintegration if possible and needed. The programme focuses on ideological and pragmatic elements (such as finding employment) as well as addresses the re-establishment of family relations and potentially finding an alternative network (Lister, 2015). Although the focus lies on returnees, the programme elements differ little to non from VEO programme elements. Finally, Jordan designed a programme specifically for returned FTFs: most returned FTFs are sentenced to a high-security prisons, but for the individuals who pose a lower risk the Community Peace Centre opened in 2015. The center largely focuses on ideological aspects, as government-sanctioned clerics preach anti-violence messages to the participants (Counter Extremism Project 2017).

Despite these initiatives, most rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for VEOs do not seem to have a specific approach for returnees. Moreover, these initiatives appear to largely focus on individuals outside of the criminal justice sector, such as voluntary participants or individuals who are not being – or cannot be prosecuted. So far, inside prison walls, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for VEOs are rarely specifically designed for returning FTFs. Overall, the programme elements appear to barely differ from the elements as

seen in the programmes for 'regular' VEOs.

Furthermore, researchers and international organisations alike note the possibility to implement rehabilitative efforts in different stages of the criminal proceedings, including the pre-trial stage, the trial stage and the post-trial stage. Finally, over the past years attention has increasingly been devoted for providing diversion programmes as an alternative to a prison sentence (Entenmann et. al 2015a; Entenmann et. al 2015b). The main lesson to be drawn from all these attempts is the importance of not reinventing the wheel: the sheer amount of experience and knowledge of rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs can assist in doing the same for a specific target audiences such as returned FTFs or minor FTF (Entenmann et. al 2015b, 22).

What sets juvenile VEOs apart from their 'regular' criminal counterparts or adult terrorists?

The main question in determining how to treat juvenile VEOs is *if* and *how* they are different from either 'regular' juvenile criminal offenders or from adult VEOs. Unfortunately, there is a lack of rigorous research and reliable statistics on juvenile violent extremist offenders or young people who engage in terrorism (RAN 2016). Partially, this is due to general difficulties in the field such as the fact that the population of terrorists is already small in many countries. However, we do know more about juvenile criminal offenders that have been involved in conflict zones as many studies have been carried out analysing the role of recruitment of children, the role of child soldiers and the effects of indoctrination within the larger Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) framework (Human Rights Watch 2015; Stichick Betancourt and Tanveer Khan 2008).

For example, juveniles from conflict zones are, as discussed earlier, not just perceived as perpetrators, but also as victims – meaning that intervention is most likely needed for the trauma these children have experienced (RAN 2016). Trauma can have a wide range of consequences throughout the lives of these children, such as substance abuse, aggression, criminal behaviour and suicide (United Nations 1996). When it comes to the issue of the involvement of youths in terrorism, there is a range of theories as to why they are particularly vulnerable to extremist narratives. These include cognitive aspects such as the identity formation process and youths' vulnerability during this process, the social context of juveniles, including the impact of families or the lack of family ties, as well as the social milieu influencing juveniles. The latter is particularly relevant to the situation of young children and teens who have returned from conflict areas such as Syria and Iraq, where the social environment has provided such a strong and closed off specific group culture that they are essentially socialised into terrorism. IS is known for its instrumentalisation of children,

featuring children dominantly in its media output in roles ranging from soldiers to recruiters and executioners (Winter 2016). According to John Horgan and Mia Bloom, IS strategically lures children into its sphere of influence in subtle ways, 'attracting local children by offering free toys and candy in exchange for simply showing up' (Horgan and Bloom 2015). Minors are groomed, taught to spy on their families and friends and become socialized into IS ranks in different positions. Through being subjected to IS' indoctrination, which is specifically intended to turn them into child soldiers, such children require specific care (Horgan et. al 2016).

At the same time, this is not new, as many youths in conflict areas have been socialised into the violent extremist networks, although these are not always necessarily terrorist networks. Examples include juvenile offenders that have been members of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, youths that have been recruited and trained by Boko Haram in Nigeria and young adults that have joined ranks with violent groups such as gangs in the United States (Arciaga Young and Gonzalez 2013). Children in particular may commit crimes because of their phase of maturity, susceptibility to peer and adult influence, and social circumstances, all of which are likely to be amenable to change (Richards 2011). Also, JVEOs have shown to participate in or attempt to engage in extremist violence for motivations ranging from indoctrination and coercion to criminal opportunism, or religious and political conviction (Global Center and ICCT 2016).

Young terrorists vs adult terrorists

As with adult VEOs, the importance of risk assessment and an individual approach are of vital importance to the rehabilitation and reintegration of JVEOs as well. As a result, in regular juvenile detention centers or facilities, a distinction is commonly made between males and females, violent and nonviolent offenders and classification is often made based on a differentiation of levels of temperament and maturity, as well as social and psychological needs. First of all, the age of the individual can give an indication of the life and role of the individual whilst in the caliphate. As discussed before, government reports generally assume that children join the armed conflict when puberty begins (AIVD 2017, 7-8). This means that young children will have a significantly different experience, although it may still be a violent experience, from teenagers. Compared to adult offenders, juveniles are especially vulnerable to mental, emotional, and physical abuse in the prison context, whether perpetrated by prison staff or incarcerated adults (Garcia Bochenek 2016). These differences in the experiences children had in the caliphate, makes them different from adults: at least of males, it is expected that they participated in training, the armed conflict, or supported this in one way or another (AIVD 2016, 7-8).

Any attempt to design specific interventions for this group needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of youth participation in violence and/or criminal behavior. A study focusing on the characteristics of life trajectories of early onset and adult onset offenders, carried out by Zara and Farrington, found that children and adolescents who – at a young age – struggle with problems of internalization⁵ do not only run a greater risk of engaging in a criminal (potentially violent) career as adults, they also face the prospect of ‘a level of life failure as serious as that of early onset offenders’ (Zara and Farrington 2013, 245). As a consequence, the authors conclude that interventions aimed to prevent this risk from materialising should start as early as possible. They point at the essential role of personal support from parents and family members, which is deemed ‘a crucial aspect of ameliorating individual development and facilitating pro-social adjustment’. However, one of the main characteristics of the self-proclaimed caliphate – the specific, controlled, state-like environment provided by IS – means that the role of the social environment of the individual offenders as a positive, protective factor, does not apply here, as IS members are often desensitised from events in their personal environment, such as friends and families (Van der Heide and Huurman 2016, 18).

Another study by Zhang, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber analysed the relationship between delinquency and attitudes/behaviour from a developmental perspective. Their main conclusion points to the importance of children’s attitudes towards the use of violence and violent behaviour (Zhang, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1997). According to their analysis, youths who have a tolerant attitude toward violence are more likely to be deviant (in other words: likely to engage in criminal (potentially violent) behaviour) than their counterparts who had actually engaged in violence. This is particularly relevant for the issue of young returnees for two reasons. First, in light of their socialisation into the caliphate of IS, it is much more likely that their attitudes are in fact more tolerant or even positive towards the use of violence which, if true, would provide a strong indicator for vulnerability to later (potentially violent extremist) offending. Second, from a more pragmatic perspective, it is often difficult to determine behaviour in hindsight, which provides all the more reason to focus on attitudes when young children and adolescents return from Syria/Iraq.

All in all, despite the lack of specific studies into characteristics and treatment of juvenile violent extremist offenders, the literature on juvenile delinquency in general and research into children engaged in violent groups, gangs and the role of youths in war and conflict zones

⁵ Internalising behaviors refer to a wide range of behaviors in which children and adolescents direct feelings and emotional responses inward. This is perceived as the opposite of externalising behavior, which refers to expressing feelings and emotions into behaviors that are directed outward into delinquent or aggressive behavior. See Loeber, Rolf, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber and Helene Raskin White (1999).

specifically, do provide us with relevant insights for the question of how to deal with JVEOs. The main conclusions are first of all that juvenile offenders should be viewed as both victims as well as potential perpetrators. Second, that the process of identity formation makes juveniles more susceptible to indoctrination from violent (extremist) groups but that susceptibility can at the same time provide a starting point for treatment as well. Third, that the role of the social environment and peer pressure plays a bigger role compared to adult offenders and that in the case of IS – this provides a particular challenge as their social environment often does not provide a protective or positive influence. Fourth and finally, treatment should start with determining the level of internalising behaviours and assessing the attitude of youths towards violence – as these two factors have proven to be strongly connected to increased vulnerabilities for later criminal (potentially violent) careers.

What do countries do now with juvenile VEOs?

The aspects that set juvenile violent extremist offenders apart from both adult terrorists as well as from young, non-extremist delinquents can provide insight and opportunities for their treatment and rehabilitation. Research currently conducted by ICCT in cooperation with the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center and ICCT, forthcoming) is mapping countries' approaches to the rehabilitation of JVEOs and has found that governments have attempted to deal with the issue of juvenile violent extremist offenders in three different ways, namely through (1) treating them as adult terrorist offenders, (2) treating them as regular juvenile criminals, or (3) providing them with specialised treatments.

A small number of countries treat juveniles as adults when it comes to terrorism-related offences: even if dedicated juvenile legislation is applicable, a certain exceptionalism is prevalent when it comes to terrorism. In Mali's capital Bamako, for example, juvenile offenders are held together with adult female offenders in the women's prison due to limited resources and infrastructure (US Department of State 2014). Several countries prosecute juveniles under (adult) terrorism legislation (UNICEF 2011, 86) and can sentence youths to severe punishments, including the death penalty. In other instances, juveniles are held in adult prisons despite the existence of dedicated juvenile facilities. In explicit response to perpetrators becoming younger and younger, several states are also in the process of lowering the age of criminal responsibility, allowing courts to prosecute children as young as 15 (Ibid, 15).

Other countries have taken a different approach and are treating juveniles similarly to other young offenders, prosecuting them in youth courts (Ibid), applying specialised legislation including diversion activities (Ibid, 90) and handing down more lenient punishments or sentences tailored to juveniles such as dedicated youth facilities. In Austria, which houses a

small number of juvenile VEOs, these juveniles are integrated with other juveniles in the *Justizanstalt Gerasdorf* juvenile correctional facility.⁶ At the same time, large numbers of child soldiers in armed conflict, zones, including minors in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, are cared for in concentrated rehabilitation facilities (Global Forum for Counter-Terrorism, forthcoming). Both approaches, treating JVEOs as regular terrorist offenders or as regular juvenile criminals, involve different risks. On the one hand, housing JVEOs together with other juvenile offenders means there is no specialised staff available to deal with the ideological aspect of radicalised youths. Also, it carries the risk that extremist juveniles attempt to recruit and radicalise their peers. Finally, politically speaking the punishment of being sentenced to a juvenile institute for committing terrorist offenses might be perceived as being ‘soft on terrorism’ (BBC 2016). On the other hand, from a human rights perspective, housing JVEOs among adult violent extremist offenders has negative implications as it is generally believed that juveniles require specialised treatment and are particularly amenable to rehabilitative treatment (Simpson 1976). Also, according to a UN report (United Nations 2015) on the mental health of youth, incarcerated juveniles are ‘regularly subject of violence, intimidation, exploitation and inhumane conditions’. And housing JVEOs together with adult VEOs exposes potentially vulnerable JVEOs to negative influence from their environment.

The third option, providing specialised treatment for juvenile VEOs, potentially circumvents the negative implications of the two other policy alternatives. However, as most countries have very few juvenile VEOs (Global Center and ICCT 2016) to deal with, setting up designated programmes or even facilities for this group is both resource intensive and requires expertise that might not yet be available. The first question that needs to be answered by individual governments is what is the number of juvenile cases that warrants a separate approach, and second: how to best combine the insights from other juvenile offender categories (child soldiers, drug addicts) with the existing knowledge on radicalisation and violent extremism.

Conclusion

The approach to dealing with juvenile offenders has undergone considerable changes during the past 20 years, generally as well as for specific juvenile offender groups such as children and

⁶ Currently, 77 individuals are housed at this juvenile institute. As of June 2016, at least two JVEOs have served time at Gerasdorf. One is a 16-year old who has been convicted for his involvement in terrorist acts (the juvenile admitted to travelling to Syria and being a member of ISIL), and the other is a 15-year old self-radicalized individual who admitted to preparing terrorist acts in Vienna. See *Reuters World News*. 2015. “Teenager in Austrian ‘Playstation’ terrorism case gets two years.” 26 May. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-austria-idUSKBN0OB0LK20150526>. See also *The Local*. 2016. “Is Austria underestimating the threat of radicalization?” 29 January. <http://www.thelocal.at/20160129/is-austria-underestimating-the-threat-of-radicalization>.

adolescents that have been involved in violent and terrorist groups. These legal and structural changes often concern the implementation of alternative measures, de-radicalisation or diversion programs and other restorative techniques in the majority of countries dealing with juvenile VEOs. Despite these positive developments, most approaches are still characterised by a focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation, prosecution rather than diversion, and on detention rather than community alternatives.

Based on our analysis of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders and specifically for foreign terrorist fighters, we can conclude that most programmes are to a large extent similar to programmes and treatment for ‘regular’ criminal offenders. Authorities entrusted with the management and rehabilitation of children and youths in correctional settings may at times lose sight of the potential of regular approaches, partially due to the assumptions that come with the “terrorist” label and the political pressure of national security that may place strains on the rehabilitative approach. These practices often respond to public demands on reacting towards juvenile terrorists by more severe sanctioning.

Thus, rather than exceptionalising violent extremists in general and juvenile violent extremists in particular, this article presents approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration derived from already existing initiatives to and considerations on how they might be tailored to address the needs of juveniles convicted of or involved in violent extremism-related crimes. Approaches to promote disengagement from violence and extremism will be more effective if they build on existing structures for crime prevention and rehabilitation.

Overall, the criminal justice framework within which the treatment of juvenile offenders takes place is anchored on their reformatory potential. The judicial system, together with the correctional and probation services and society at large, plays a critical role in the rehabilitation and eventual reintegration of a child in conflict with the law. The effectiveness of rehabilitating and reintegrating juvenile VEOs depends for a large part upon their knowledge of what sets youths involved in terrorism apart from their regular criminal peers or adult offenders, as well as on their collaborative and coordinated efforts throughout the duration of custody, rehabilitation, release, and post-release.

Rehabilitation and reintegration efforts for juvenile VEOs (including those returning from IS-territory), aside from a narrow focus on experienced trauma and criminal offenses committed, need to be based on two underlying assumptions: the importance of age and the importance of attitudes. Notwithstanding the tailored approach that every individual requires, age should inform decision-making and programming. Young children (zero to nine years old) (AIVD 2017, 5) who are born in IS-territory or brought by their parents at a very young age, should

be first and foremost be viewed as victims. For older children, other factors such as training and potential involvement in violent activities are more likely to play a role, demanding any approach that goes beyond the victim-perspective. Additionally, this older group will include adolescents who might have undertaken the journey to IS by themselves and who have deliberately and more rationally chosen to join IS. The younger group requires special attention regarding their internalisation process and professionals need to determine to what extent these children have been socialised into IS-culture and whether they cope with their experiences more internally or externally. Older individuals are most likely to have internalised IS violent culture and to have been involved in violent activities. To direct rehabilitative efforts for them, it is essential to assess their attitude towards violence and to what extent they have accepted IS' norms and behaviors.

As states increasingly confront younger people caught up in violent extremist activity, it is up to them to devise corresponding measures. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, especially where numbers of terrorism convicts in general, and juveniles in particular are low. But rehabilitation is considered to work best when tailored to individual needs and policymakers need to take into account the very distinctive needs of juvenile offenders as a separate class of offenders while respecting all relevant international law and human rights standards in the fight against terrorism. Decisions on managing and rehabilitating juveniles should be informed by the best interest for the child and by individualised assessments.

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