Disarming Youth Combatants: Mitigating Youth Radicalization and Violent Extremism

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Abstract

In the complex of motivating variables that define the push and pull factors behind recruitment and participation in civil conflict, "radicalization"—or "violent extremism"—is not conceived as a very strong motive, as is the case with studies on terrorism. As part of disarming youth combatants,the linkages between reintegration outcomes and possible rerecruitment into radical and extremist violence must be better understood to mitigate such risks. In our analysis, the policies guiding reintegration of child soldiers and youth should be better attuned to the relationship between recruitment motivations and reintegration outcomes, and must be approached from a political lens rather than a purely technical one. The risk of radicalization and involvement in violent extremism is ultimately a structural challenge, which needs to address root causes of recruitment rather than trying to find a solution through a band-aid approach of stopgap reintegration assistance.

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Introduction

The micro-level empirical approach to civil war seeks to better understand the dynamics of recruitment and participation of youth in armed groups.[1] In this literature, as shown in Figure 1, the recruitment of adult and child combatants is often based on a combination of reasons. These can be categorized as a compendium of "push" and "pull" factors, ranging

from environment, structural violence, coercion, poverty, education and employment, family and friends, politics and ideology, to culture and tradition. Culturally, being a soldier may be traditionally coveted, and joining the military a much desired career. In some instances, youth may volunteer to avenge the death of a close family member or to defend their community. Children and adults may also join armed groups to bring back food or other material goods to support their families. Violence and the symbolic power of the gun can become a source of authority over parents and elders, reconfiguring the need for obedience, compliance, and respect that for generations has been inculcated into youth to perpetuate a gerontocratic hierarchy. Nonetheless, in this complex of motivating variables "radicalization"—or "violent extremism"—is not conceived as a very strong motive for youth recruitment, as is the case with studies on terrorism.

Within the context of violent extremism, Islamic radicalization in Europe, the threat of terrorism, and changing demographic trends in European cities due to a steady flow of immigrants have been at the center of academic and policy attention in recent years.[2] Increasingly, there have been efforts at interpreting the Koran to generate a tailored genealogy of radicalization. These have imparted a specific Islamic flavor to political violence, especially among youth. Right-wing radicalism in Norway, which was witnessed in the gruesome shooting of teenagers at the political camp of the ruling party, is a chilling testament to the variants of radicalism existing in the West. Hence, Islamic radicalism, while it has been at the center of much political and policy interest, may not be the only source of radicalized violence that threatens Western society.

Figure 1: Participation Pathways in Civil Conflict
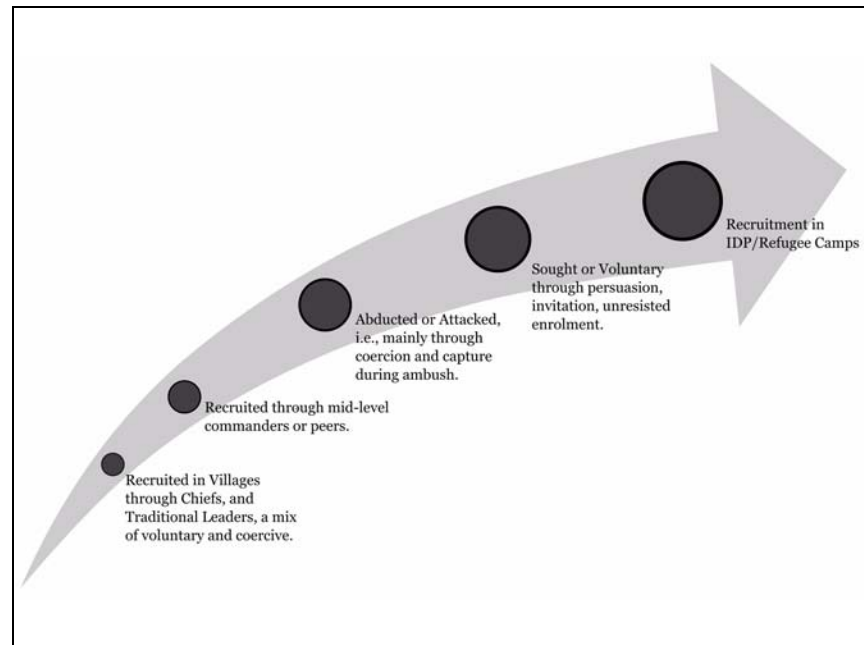
In Southeast Asia, the 2009 suicide bombings in Jakarta by two Indonesian youths, Dani Dwi Permana and Nana Ikhwana Maulana, fall into the broader mold of terrorist recruitment and radicalization by organized outfits such as *Darul Islam* and *Jemaah Islamiyah* in the region. Separatist groups, such as the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM), the *Organisasi Pembebasan Papua* (OPM), and the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* (MILF) also use religious appeals to motivate participation. The role of charismatic and influential leadership in recruiting youth is also critical.[3]

The U.S. National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project, *Mapping the Global Future*, has reported a strong incidence of youth bulges in Arab states and growing radicalization of this demographic group.[4] This has also been an increasing trend among Muslim diaspora communities in the United States.[5] Low levels of education as well as stunted access to socioeconomic improvement have exacerbated this phenomenon in fragile polities such as Pakistan. The majority of radicalized youth in such countries are motivated to join violent organizations due to feelings of alienation from larger society, and as a function of socio-economic deprivation.[6]

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Radical tendencies are closely identified with the idea of extremism, which in turn is aimed at unprecedented social overhaul. Given the skills that youth combatants have in the security sector, the ex-combatants can be important recruits for transnational terrorist organizations. Hence disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) policy needs to address this vulnerability, particularly in the context of regional instability and the interconnectedness of modern conflicts. The phenomenon of recidivism has been well-documented in the South Asian and West African regions and may hold true for the Middle East in its current turmoil. Civilian unrest in response to years of authoritarian regimes has unleashed a new mode of social protest, which has important implications for DDR practice. Therefore, this paper undertakes a conceptual scoping of interrelationships between disarming child soldiers and rehabilitating youth engaged in radical protest or violent extremism.

Our main argument here is that current DDR approaches are oblivious to the linkage between reintegration outcomes and re-recruitment into violent extremism. Although there is much effort to break chains of command, regional security architecture in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan is complex. The borders are porous, and DDR programs pay mere lip service to the overwhelming challenge of security.

Push and Pull Factors in Recruitment of Youth into Conflict

From a micro-economics lens, material recruitment incentives offered by rebellious organizations for youth are relatively weak. Youth often require less money and do not receive a big share of the looted items, and this is due to their dependence on senior commanders for protection, patronage, and support. Their affiliational bonding with the group and its leadership flows essentially from feelings of protection, security, and non-pecuniary rewards, such as honor and duty, revenge, a sense of purpose, or protection from violence.[7] Hence, armed groups with few or limited resources forcibly recruit young adolescents because they offer the optimal combination of effectiveness and ease of retention.[8] Some of the underlying variables of child soldiering which lend greater nuance to grasping the scope and extent of the problem pertain to the nature of conflicts (high or low intensity, cross-border or internal), the patterns and nature of recruitment (seeking food, security, or employment; seeking revenge; being encouraged by family or community; or forced abduction), as well as the experiences of the children (being involved in active fighting, sexual exploitation, their role being valorized, or their experience featuring abuse).[9] In fact, children serving as a new pool of military labor have

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raised issues within the domain of labor economics—in particular, how involuntary military service provided by abducted children impacts the labor market.[10]

There also exists a need to disaggregate between direct experiences of participation and the over-arching risks to which children in armed conflict zones are exposed. Strang et al. allude to the presence of a mixture of *discrete risks*, including attack and displacement, and *chronic risks*, such as poverty and lack of access to regular schooling and health care.[11] In order to mitigate their impacts, Kostelny offers a risk-accumulation model to structure the challenge facing children in conflict and post-conflict situations.[12] The model includes emotional, social, spiritual, and physical impacts on children and youth, while levels of both risk and the impact of conflict are ordered along three significant points, namely the family, community, and society.

At the level of family, children witness the loss of loved ones, separation from family units, or a lack of care on account of the exigencies of war zones. At the level of community, abduction and coercive recruitment in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda, among other cases, have established a trend where children have been captured and forced to attack their neighbors and commit atrocities against their own kith and kin, disrupting social relations, breeding mistrust, and creating enormous problems for the eventual return to the community. At the societal level, agency factors become important. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, for instance, the civil conflicts were in part a product of youth marginalization, patrimonialism, and power monopolization in the hands of a few "big men." Social inequality, injustice, and lack of social mobility resulted from this exclusionism and fueled dissent.[13]

Radicalization

Radicalization is a key theme in terrorism discourses and is well documented in recent literature on youth and politics.[14] Radicalization has been approached as a psycho-social process of gradual progress from context, to thought, and finally to action. Hence, it requires micro (individual) and macro (societal/cultural) examination of context-specific variables to explain causation.[15] Concepts of radicalism and terrorism are often conflated; in our understanding, the term *radicalization* refers to the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs. Ideological advocacy for racial or religious supremacy and opposition to the egalitarian principles of democracy mark radical thought and action. These processes are closely related to participation or action pathways,

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namely the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions. Some of the push-and-pull factors identified as central to youth recruitment in civil conflict are also relevant to engagement in violent extremism.

In the case of child soldiers, joining an armed group as an act of agency and volition is underplayed in contemporary popular accounts of child recruitment. However, joining either the rebel group or the government forces in a contested territory can become the only route to survival, offering protection from torture, abuse, and politically instigated killings. In other cases, family and community itself can be important agents by encouraging enrollment as part of military culture, which may be embedded in local concepts of community defense. In many communities, adolescent youth play a critical role in communal defense, one that is expected as an essential and natural part of their transition into adulthood. In a few instances, joining a faction could aid in family reunification, especially in a countryside characterized by roaming and raiding "soldier men." Arming oneself with a weapon improves the chances of successful attempts to locate and rescue estranged family. Additionally, controlling the deployment of violence assists in movement and provides access to public services when official facilities have ceased. Invoking a community approach can identify risk factors to child recruitment. While these triggers are built into the structure of conflicts, it is also important to address the resilience and coping mechanisms that youth are supposed to learn with age that provide important capacities to avoid recruitment.

The role of the family and community is often a critical factor in the normative development of youth and their involvement in extremism. Recruitment into violent extremism may involve radicalization and subsequent recruitment. Some debate exists among contemporary scholars, however, about the nature and extent of terrorist recruitment, at least as it relates to militant jihad. Established patterns of recruitment have not been reported for organizations like al-Qaida. Voluntary enlistment, at times mediated through kin relationships or immediate family, is the key mode of participation for "militants." Traditional recruitment patterns, such as conscription or dedicated military service, do not seem to be the norm in such organizations. Islamist militants seek new supporters, activists, and members that they engage in active efforts; this pattern influences others to adopt their point of view.[16]

Exposure to conflict, coupled with the lack of a strong family or community, can be key factors for children to participate in violence. This is often the case when combatants experienced maltreatment of factions directly or indirectly, or have lost family members in a protracted conflict. These

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issues of grief and grievances can cumulatively encourage, or enhance, the propensity on the part of youth to join an armed group. Lack of access to socio-economic opportunities, especially being in a situation of chronic poverty, can make involvement in extremism a way out of social marginality. In certain circumstances, poverty-induced marginality may be reinforced by a lure of ideology, especially when recruiters harp on perceptions and experiences of injustice. This has been the case in several conflicts, such as Colombia, Nepal, and in India's Maoist affected states.

Direct and indirect benefits deriving from participation are an important issue in the recruitment of combatants, particularly in environments where conflict has a strong characteristic of greed and clientelism. In the first instance, it might not seem to be too relevant for the involvement in extremism, but a "martyr" who fought with a group such as Hezbollah can bring many kudos and direct benefits to the family. This sense of social status and contribution to an important cause in conflicts where self-sacrifice to a nationalist or religious cause can merit respect, or even divinity, can also influence the decision of youth and their family towards participation in radical violence.

Most of the literature on radicalization into violent extremist ideologies (particularly those that support terrorism) is conceptual, rather than empirical.[17] While the exact sequence of these changes is debatable, different pathways and mechanisms operate for different people. A more nuanced understanding of how this process operates, both between and within groups, will enable us to develop more informed policies and practices to mitigate and prevent the propagation of violent extremism.

There are many possible theoretical-analytic frameworks that might be applied to the radicalization process. Crossett and Spitaletta identify sixteen theories that have been proposed to explain the causal chain leading to radicalization.[18] Prominent among these are social-movement theory, social psychology, and conversion theory. These operate at both the macro and micro levels. Yet there is little investigation into the dimension of how negative reintegration outcomes for former child soldiers may encourage their radicalization and subsequent recruitment into violent extremism. We explore this theme further.

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Reintegration Outcomes and the Problem of Radicalization or Re-recruitment into Violent Extremism

Apart from the recruitment pathways and motivations discussed above, the successes and failures in the reintegration of former combatants and child soldiers also play a significant role in their possible radicalization and participation in violent extremism. Group socialization can be a powerful mechanism for changing the identities of young people, and thus transforming children into soldiers. This has important implications for post-conflict civilian life, especially with respect to the challenges of regaining lost childhoods, family, loved ones, and norms of social behavior. In long conflicts, such as those in Guatemala, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, members who join as children and demobilize as adults suffer from long-term in-group socialization. This socialization has important consequences for post-war reintegration outcomes because it impinges on some key post-war behavioral indicators with respect to mental-health-related disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disability, and reproductive atrophy. Apart from medical problems, the loss of education, a lack of employable skills, and the destruction of a stable family life are all important negative fallouts from a life spent in an armed group.

Becoming a soldier marks a transition away from the normal and accepted; hence, returning to a prior set of rules can be a significant challenge. Traditional interventions, involving ritualistic cleansing and sacrifice in societies with strong communitarian visions of death, illness, and healing can help to create a socially acceptable return. Traditional cleansing rituals, such as the organic interventions witnessed in Mozambique can be critical for the onset of reintegration processes. They are meant to spiritually realign well-being with the social world and discard identities and habits imbibed in the fighters' world.

What are the options for re-socializing children from their soldier identity? Present approaches to reintegration seem to overlook the importance of process and do not emphasize the social elements of reintegration. A return to the norms and values of pre-conflict society can undermine efforts to engender greater acceptability. Reintegrating combatants experience an inversion of values, in which killing, amputation, and other forms of horrific violence are no longer desirable. What had become accepted forms of behavior during war are considered reprehensible in peace-time, which undermines the sense of identity and courage that youth had created as fighters. There are "good" and "bad" rebels, in

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some respects. Distrust and fear of child soldiers are common in civilian communities, even years after war ends. It is difficult to discard rebel-like behavior and to reorient oneself to the reality, poverty, or incapacity of civilian living.

At the same time, child soldiers remain in some respect victims of their past. Violence is an entrenched reality of their lives, and it is the most destructive element since reliance on violence to secure what in a free society can be secured institutionally or rightfully, remains a key challenge in the identity transformation process. In some contexts, organic approaches, especially traditional cleansing ceremonies, have helped repair relationships with their families and communities in order to realign their well-being with spiritual beliefs of death and rebirth. Such ritualistic rebirth and cleansing eases return and enhances community trust in its own youth, who are perceived as spiritually polluted through exposure to violence and death during war-time. This element of successful social reintegration and re-acceptance by their families and communities needs to be emphasized as a preventive mechanism for re-recruitment into violent extremism.

At a more technical level, with respect to DDR efforts, child soldiers have traditionally been excluded from DDR programs and reintegration support in particular. Efforts at stopgap programs have targeted these excluded youth by giving them priority in family reunification, counseling, basic economic assistance in the form of short vocational training programs, and provision for shelter, food, and tools. Community-based reintegration (CBR) strategies attempted in the context of child soldier reintegration seem better poised to tackle the need for balance in targeting and mitigating animosities stemming from exclusive focus on any particular caseload.

The preventive capacity of communities is central to discouraging re-recruitment into violent extremism. The criticism of CBR approaches as relegating responsibility for reintegration to impoverished and incapacitated communities is underlined; however, the positives of this strategy lie in ensuring community-located follow-up mechanisms and more effective use of donor and local resources. If communities are provided adequate resources and get support from the state and central government, and if they are able to identify, gauge and prioritize needs locally, then they will be able to respond to those needs more effectively. It is vital that credence is paid to building this capacity. Children benefit from returning to an environment that encourages them to lead a normal life, to return to

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education, and witness stability. The primary challenge here is positively engaging a rich pool of human resources for development, rather than re-marginalizing child soldiers.

The angle of power and agency in youth participation, and ways in which post-conflict reintegration strategies impact elements of individual action and trajectories of empowerment, is a topic for further investigation. Social navigation can be understood as motion within a fluid space, and it requires individual agency in deciding on how to navigate the dangers and the possibilities, as well as an ability to locate and creatively traverse a difficult social space. Social navigation and post-conflict power are an important yet little understood dimension in the reintegration trajectories of child soldiers. At the same time, the implications of DDR and reintegration outcomes on radicalization and involvement in violent extremism need to be mulled in greater depth.

In post-conflict societies, child soldiers are susceptible to disempowerment, marginalization, and a return to erstwhile structures of traditional leadership, control, and domination. How do youth negotiate this sudden change in status? The loss of education, a lack of employment, and the pejorative label of child soldier makes successful reintegration a difficult challenge. At the same time, where then does reintegration support figure into the process? And more importantly, what can it do for youth returning to their dilapidated communities? Support can be directed towards individual child soldiers themselves, or it can help those who seek to develop infrastructure by allocating funds to schools for the benefit of children in the community as a whole. One of the lessons drawn from recent reintegration experiences in Nepal and Sudan is that instead of providing comprehensive reintegration packages for individual child soldiers, it is important to locate that support in the family and community, thus creating and enabling an empowered environment for the reintegration of returning child soldiers.

In light of the complicated matrix which informs reintegration success, youths' re-engagement into violence in the post-war period can be motivated by a combination of factors. These may range from a certain loss of agency, victimization, and revenge attacks to issues of physical and economic insecurity. Grievances or a feeling of exclusion, i.e., lack of access to education, lack of employment, trauma, and political and social marginalization, are important motivations for recruitment and also explain re-recruitment triggers. In the absence of physical security, former soldiers who continue to feel isolated and unintegrated resort to violence in an attempt to solve their problems.[19] With few avenues for social advancement in post-conflict contexts plagued by gerontocratic and cor-

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rupt societies, war often becomes a plausible route to empowerment, especially for marginalized groups such as male youth.[20] This was the case in Algeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.[21] When in the aftermath of peace processes young demobilized soldiers found themselves reintegrating into poverty, or into a similar situation of political, economic, and social marginalization as experienced in the pre-war period, many returned to combat as mercenaries in regional conflicts.[22] Also, in several conflicts like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda, child soldiers brutalized their own communities, at times under the orders of superiors, with the view of burning their bridges with family and the home environment. Others were directed to raid their own villages, loot food, mutilate people, or even kill their own relatives.

The instrumental and technical emphasis of DDR remains focused on numbers, caseloads, targets, partners, trauma, protection, and rehabilitation. These only superficially address the underlying cause of conflicts and incompletely contribute to reintegration success. DDR approaches remain mired in instrumentalism; the means and end results are instrumental and are geared towards keeping a certain caseload perceived as a "security threat" busy and engaged to prevent conflict relapse. Besides, there are significant negative impacts of DDR programs for child soldiers. They can result in labeling, stigma, distrust, and animosity at an intergroup level within rural communities.

A critical focus of DDR policy should be towards engaging youth in leadership structures to enable continued engagement of young people in socio-political ventures and positive peace building. This aspect can help mitigate potential radicalization or re-recruitment. Successful socio-economic reintegration can help weaken command and control structures, given that former commanders can be potential recruiters for violent extremist activities. In countries where DDR programs have been successful, new social relationships forged through training and schooling have encouraged youth to think strategically and opt for civilian livelihoods instead of re-engaging in violence. This underlines the need for addressing the push and pull factors which motivate recruitment in the first place. The persistence of inequalities, grievances, and a return to poverty creates a disappointment with conflict participation and a sense of loss, which might encourage susceptibility to radical ideologies.

This overview of the correlation between reintegration outcomes and re-recruitment directs towards the following recommendations. First of all, the main policy focus on preventing re-recruitment must be a combination of comprehensive reintegration benefits rooted in community-based support structures, effective border monitoring, and the creation of politi-

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cal and social leadership opportunities for youth, thereby undermining their possible exclusion, and thus re-marginalization. Second, it is important to monitor sites of re-recruitment, such as ex-combatant communities or settlements, which have higher ex-combatant populations. These locations are a common feature of many post-conflict countries, where familiarity and war-time social networks persist and dictate resettlement preferences. Similarly, camps for displaced populations are also potent sites for re-recruitment, and thus need to be monitored effectively. The ultimate goal is to return displaced people and reunite them with their families and home communities. Finally, the presence of radical groups or regional terror networks can also provide the contextual possibilities for re-recruitment, and these need to be undermined by political and development actors.

Conclusion

Those faced with the task of reintegration often confront the ultimate question of "reintegration into what," as this process exposes the most significant assumption made by DDR programs, which is the existence of a "home" and "community." This is particularly significant for young combatants and child soldiers because their normative years were spent within the structures of an armed group. The idea of going back "home" is often not more than an illusion. However, it is through this illusion that many young combatants are expected to go through the major identity transformation process from combatant to re-integrated civilian in a post-conflict environment. Consequently, behind the disguise of reintegration, many young people with violent pasts are left to their own devices to rebuild a new life. Some of them indeed do build a new life, but some struggle and fail. Considering that the way DDR of youth and child soldiers takes place in highly damaged, polarized, and fragile socio-economic and political environments of war-torn societies, those who fail in finding a place for themselves in the post-conflict society are left at the mercy of gangs, criminal networks, and radical groups for re-recruitment.

Former youth combatants tend to be a major legacy of conflicts, left behind as a further threat to the security of society. Both for micro-insecurity, in terms of their involvement in crime and violence at the local level, and macro-insecurity, in terms of similar involvement in the international arena, the failures in reintegration can lead to recruitment into radical groups. However, to understand this relationship better it is important to fully consider the "pull and push" factors that were discussed at the beginning of this paper. The re-recruitment of former child soldiers would rely on similar push and pull factors, but the agency of "former

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combatant" here requires particular attention. This is because at the re-recruitment stage, the former combatant is somebody who has experienced violence as an instigator, and this experience is valuable to radical groups. However, as argued within the push and pull factors framework, the agency of former combatant would become a risk for security if there are fertile conditions and interests for their recruitment. This involves the role of intermediaries, conflict entrepreneurs, and organizers of violence. Nevertheless, in conceptualizing the relationship between the presence of radical groups and former combatants who are not fully reintegrated into post-conflict society, it is important to construct it as a cumulative interaction rather than a causal one.

Rather than considering the failure of reintegration programs as the main cause of re-recruitment into radicalization, it would be much more effective to consider how failings in reintegration would feed into the existing push and pull factors of a particular society. In the event of recruitment into a radical group, the outcome of reintegration programs and existing push and pull factors feed into each other. For example, in post-conflict Liberia, thousands of former child soldiers roam the streets of Monrovia, homeless, unemployed, and frustrated. Although some of them are involved in petty crime, they are not yet considered a security threat for radicalization at the national and international levels. This is because there is no radical group or organization at the local or regional level actively engaged in recruitment. However, this is not true in other contexts, such as Mindanao in the Philippines, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and possibly now in the Middle East and North Africa region in relation to the impact of the recent "Arab Spring." Furthermore, it is important to note that the successful reintegration of child soldiers is not adequate to prevent them from being radicalized in the future. Past grievances can be a lingering yet significant factor in joining an extremist group.

Therefore, in order to reduce the likeliness of re-recruitment by radical groups, it is necessary to consider three fundamental principles. First, the reintegration of child soldiers and youth should be seen as part and parcel of their families and communities, and consequently, address one of the major push and pull factors that play a role in such recruitment. Second, the issue of reintegration should be seen through a political lens rather than a purely technical one. The power dynamics of finding a social and political role for former combatants in post-conflict environments is if not more, at least as important as the opportunities of employment and education. Finally, the risk of radicalization and involvement in violent extremism is ultimately a structural challenge, and its main causes should be sought in the bigger picture of macro-level economics, politics, and international relations. In other words, rather than trying to find a solu-

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tion to the manifestation of a phenomenon through a band-aid approach and seeing war-affected youth from a purely security perspective, the approach should start with questioning and addressing the macro-level structural dynamics.

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