Recovery, Rehabilitation & Reintegration of the "Lost" Children Living and Serving Under the Islamic State

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.

Hundreds of thousands of children around the world have been seduced and forced into being child soldiers and cadres in the service of armed and violent groups. Many have been successfully treated using a combination of individual, family and community interventions that relied on combinations of expressive, cognitive and behavioral therapies as well as play, song, art and dance mixed in with culturally indigenous cleansing and healing rituals. Is there a possibility of the same for the children of ISIS—the Iraqi and Syrian boys and girls seduced and forced into slavery and violence; raped; beaten and tricked into serving the brutal non-Islamic State?

We are in a prison just outside of Suliamania trying to find out. The first boy we talk to, sixteen-year-old Nabil, is brought into the interrogation room in an orange jumpsuit reminiscent of Guantanamo Bay. His eyes and face are covered in a black mask and his hands shackled in metal cuffs. When the prison guard uncovers his eyes, I explain our purpose and ensure he's speaking freely. Then in response to gentle questions, Nabil begins to open up to tell us how he happened to join ISIS.

"There were two mullahs in the mosque. When the Islamic State came to our village, the older guys in the mosque started convincing kids to join. They started talking about money and cars. They told us, 'This is a good thing to do. You are going to be really comfortable.'"

The mullah himself drove Nabil to the neighboring village where he underwent ISIS shariah and weapons training and gave his bayat (pledge of allegiance) to the most nefarious terrorist group of our day. "I spent a month in shariah training," Nabil explains referring to ISIS's practice of indoctrinating all their new cadres into Islamic law as interpreted by ISIS. He denies that kids had to kill a prisoner upon graduation as we've heard from those who took their training in Syrian camps.[1] Although he does recall, "A guy my age killed four of our relatives. He was from Mosul."

The middle child of a family of seven kids, Nabil keenly missed his father who had travelled out of ISIS territory to try to get his pay as a policeman. Salaries were no longer being paid in ISIS territory. "There was no way to get paid so he went to Kirkuk to collect his salary, but he couldn't get back. We had no money."

"I was away from my father. They played with my mind," Nabil explains, his voice fills with bitterness recalling how he got sucked into serving the Islamic State. Nabil's mother and older brother fought with him, ultimately kicking him out of the house when he told them he was going to join. Unfortunately this move to protect him simply

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[1] Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC.; Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (December 2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 9*(6), 95-118.

[2] Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC.; Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (December 2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. *Perspectives on*

propelled Nabil into the home of the mullah who eventually literally drove him into the arms of ISIS, delivering him by car to their training camp.

"They trained us on weapons, shariah, verses of the Prophet, women—what they are allowed to do and not. They focused on that women need to dress like this and told us, 'If not, we might hurt her—but we are going to hurt her family members more. A married guy who cheats on his wife, we stone him to death. An unmarried man who is caught in an affair, we flog him.'" Nabil recites the horrific list of ISIS's rules and punishments while puffing on a thin cigarette handed to him by his prison handler, smiling jauntily when he admits that he smoked even while inside ISIS—when no one was looking.

"I was terrified in the beginning," Nabil admits. I ask if he liked his shariah trainer. Syrian cadres reported that their ISIS shariah trainers were very charismatic and knowledgeable, brought in from the Emirates, Jordan and Saudi, often describing them as shining and filled with a religious charisma that made them able to easily persuade their future cadres into suicide missions.[2] Not so in Iraq. "Till the time he got killed he was a monster; till he got killed no one liked him."

Nabil trained on the AK 47 and was assigned to the infantry. He remembers, "In the beginning the food was good." Nabil was sixteen when he joined, but there were six or seven kids as young as fourteen who trained with him in the camp.

Nabil spent four months serving ISIS, in which he took part in three battles against the Pershmerga. "There were three lines," he recalls of those battles. "I never went to the first line, the older, more experienced fighters went first." When asked for more details, he admits that the first line, just as we heard in Syria, were suicide soldiers, wearing vests to detonate if they were about to be captured—fighting to the death.[3] "Yes, they always got killed. The front lines carried guns and went in on foot and they wore suicide vests. If he doesn't get killed, he will detonate himself."

Nabil is a clever boy. Once in prison, still horribly missing his father, Nabil accused his father of being a member of ISIS and thereby tricked the Kurdish security officials into bringing him in for interrogation—a jubilant event for Nabil who joyfully reunited with his innocent, former policeman father. "I cannot live without my Dad. It's been two

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[2] Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC.; Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (December 2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 9*(6), 95-118.

[3] Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC.; Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (December 2015). Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 9*(6), 95-118.

years since I saw him," the boy admits sheepishly—a big, irrepressible grin plastered across his face. The Kurds released Nabil's father when they realized the trick and now his Kurdish prison handler gently ribs Nabil about it. I watch the good rapport with this child who doesn't appear afraid of the prison handler at all—rapport necessary for him to begin rehabilitating here, even inside the prison, something the Kurds tell me they want to attempt with kids like Nabil.

It's March of 2017 and I am in Iraq with our International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) research director[4] in response to a request by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi to advise on how to deal with children who lived and served under ISIS. There are 300,000 children, many finally being liberated, who have been taught under the brutal ISIS curriculum, learning topics about who and how to behead, while others have actually served as ISIS cadres, forced to take the lives of others in the most ruthless ways. Tough questions are posed in the Prime Minister's conference about if such children can be recovered, rehabilitated and reintegrated into society, or is this a lost generation that either needs to be captured or killed? Some say they should be punished; others that they need to be isolated so they don't contaminate the rest.

When I ask Nabil about his future possibilities of reintegration—if his parents can forgive him for serving ISIS, Nabil replies, "A father will not hold anything against his son no matter what." His smile is big as he tells me this confidently, but his face clouds over and becomes very serious when I ask about his mother. "My mother will forgive," he assures, but seems less sure. His brother and mother kicked him out of the family home when he told them his plans to join ISIS. But later Nabil helped his family to escape out of ISIS territory into the refugee camp in Kirkuk. "When I last saw her—when I looked at her—I don't think she holds anything against me," Nabil states. "I saw her in the morning before I was arrested," he explains of their time together in the refugee camp in Kirkuk.

Nabil got paid $100 a month in ISIS, money he spent recklessly, like any young boy, "I spent it on myself. I bought a motorcycle." His boyish adventures however were short-lived and quickly disillusioned by the brutality of the group. "I wanted to leave when I started to see the killings," Nabil admits. "I knew they were doing wrong things," he explains, referring to the executions of those punished for minor infractions of ISIS laws, although there is not time today for him to share his memories of all he saw.

Nabil begin to look for ways to escape. "I was always thinking of a way to take my family and cross back into Kirkuk," he recalls, although his first attempt to escape was on his own. "The first time I ran away, I got captured by ISIS. They whipped me 35 times and told me I had to go back to my post. 'Do your duties,' they warned.

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[4] Thanks to ICSVE Research Director Ardian Shajkovci for accompanying me in these research interviews in Iraq and elsewhere.

Nabil was lucky—others we've heard about who were caught trying to escape were beheaded on the spot. "I had a friend with me [in ISIS]," Nabil recalls. "He knew the roads of the mountains. My friend didn't know that I wanted to run away. He told me the route, about the road that had no IEDs."

For his second attempt to escape Nabil went home to gather his brother, sister, mother and some other close relatives. "I came home and talked to my family telling them, 'I want to take you to Kirkuk.' I talked to them and then went back to my duties. I knew the timing to cross. The second time we made it."

I turn the interview to the possibilities of his future, if he's to be released. "I want to see my mom first thing," Nabil answers, wistfully. "She's in Kirkuk. That's my only wish in the world. I don't care if I die. That's the only thing I want."

Strong words for a young kid. When asked if he can back to the family home, he explains, "I have to live in Kirkuk with them [my family]. I have nowhere else to go. If I leave from here [Kirkuk area], I know I will get killed for sure. This is the fate of anyone who works with them."

"Nabil is terrified, afraid of everyone," his prison handler explains. Indeed there are many who want to revenge on former ISIS cadres and ISIS also kills those who have defected—if they can. Among the other forty-four defectors ICSVE staff have interviewed thus far we've heard too many stories of defectors being caught and beheaded on the spot.

"I know you've gone missing. Our people in Kirkuk are going to kill you," the mullah said over the phone to Nabil when he arrived in the refugee camp. "If you are not going to work for us—if you are not going to be a sleeper cell in Kirkuk, our people will kill you," he threatened the boy.

"As soon as I got in the refugee camp. Mullah Omar was the one calling," Nabil explains dully. Constant terror has that effect—a need to dull the senses, go "dissociative" and feel nothing but hopeless depression. Dulling ones senses can provide a brief refuge at least from a too painful life.

When I ask Nabil if he told his parents about the mullah telephoning him, Nabil shakes his head no and his eyes widen as he explains, "Because my father was a policeman, I was scared for him." He continues monotonously again, "I don't know, only Allah can protect me. I must die."

Nabil's already got the sense of a foreshortened future, that trauma survivors that kids and adults often feel after surviving a trauma they can't get over. Nabil has the posttraumatic sense of being damned from the bright future with which he started his childhood.

I ask if the government can provide protection for him as he nods despondently, but then negates his nod by saying, "If I get released from here [prison], another unit will take me and kill me. They won't be like the Persmerga. I'm afraid of anyone who has lost someone. The Spiecher [military] Base lost 2000 soldiers…It can be anyone with a desire for revenge," he says referring to the ISIS massacre of Shia soldiers at the captured military base in Tikrit. Nabil admits having crossed into Kirkuk because, "I knew the Kurds are more easy going. I knew for sure I'm going to get captured, but in Shia areas, I'll get killed right away."

What can we do for this boy? He should be in school, but he can't go home—ISIS still controls the territory he's from. If he's released, he'll go to a refugee camp where there are some studies offered, but not much, and everyone surrounding him is traumatized and angry at ISIS. The security forces acknowledge that there are ISIS recruiters and cadres in the camp. We have evidence that in Syrian and Turkish camps kids get recruited into ISIS right in the camps.[5] It won't be safe for him. His family may forgive him, but family members of those who were raped, kidnapped and killed won't be so forgiving.

And what about his release? Surely those who hold him will want kids like him to help them rat out the ISIS guys in the camp. He can be useful as an informant—if he can be trusted.

It's all too much for a young kid. Psychologically, he's terrified. Perhaps guilty for what he's taken part in. He's sure his life will end badly, and yearns badly for his parents' love, protection, acceptance and shelter. Nabil is a lost boy and needs help. If he manages to reunite with his parents, they can love and forgive him, but can they protect him from the wider community's stigma and punishment?

The government may be able to offer him some limited protection but may insist that he pays for it by turning informant as together they route out the scourge that poisoned his life—but that too involves dangers and possible additional stigma in the end.

And release may also go another way. Can an ISIS recruiter still manipulate him? Inside the prison there's an older ISIS emir—Abu Islam—that prison officials tell me is capable of talking any of the others into the glorious wonders of taking a "martyrdom" mission. As a result, the prison guards keep him isolated from the others. Suicide could be a way out for Nabil—instant forgiveness if he buys the lies of the ISIS "martyrdom" myth,

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[5] Crozier, R. (May 11, 2016). Why young Syrians are joining ISIS. *Newsweek*. http://www.newsweek.com/religion-not-main-motivator-young-syrians-isis-458653 Retrieved from http://www.newsweek.com/religion-not-main-motivator-young-syrians-isis-458653 and Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (2016). *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*: Advances Press, LLC.; Speckhard, A., & Yayla, A. S. (December 2015).

release from constant terror, and a way to strike out—perhaps at someone that a recruiter can convince him is the reason for his lost and stolen childhood? Palestinians told me taking a suicide mission wasn't that hard when you have to dull your senses to endure the traumas you've lived through—when you feel that you are already dead. Nabil is showing some of those features.

No one wants it to end that way. But as long as political grievances leading to Islamic State's rise remain in place, as long as security and justice are not delivered to everyone in Iraq regardless of religion and sect, and as long as there's no safe way to return home or some kind of amnesty offered—at least to kids who were tricked into ISIS ranks, like Nabil was—the Iraqi authorities will either have to keep them locked up or release them back into society while holding eyes shut tight. In that scenario they'll be hoping for the best, knowing it's not likely to turn out well.

Today, the Iraqi Prime Minister wants to make a plan for kids who lived and served under ISIS—and he's right to want it. But it's got to start soon and it's got to be good—involving schooling, amnesty, and strong psychosocial support for teachers, parents and communities to accept these kids back into society. It will need to involve careful and caring treatment and redirection for the kids themselves as well as for their families and communities so they can be saved from all they've learned and trained into and to also avoid their becoming the next iteration of something like ISIS, in a world gone mad.

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. is Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University in the School of Medicine and Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). She is the author of *Talking to Terrorists*, *Bride of ISIS* and coauthor of *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate; Undercover Jihadi*; and *Warrior Princess*. Dr. Speckhard has interviewed nearly 500 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including Gaza, West Bank, Chechnya, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and many countries in Europe. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought after counter-terrorism experts and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA and FBI and CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. Here publications are found here: https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhard Website: http://www.icsve.org

Reference for this article: Speckhard, Anne (March 29, 2017) **Recovery, Rehabilitation &Reintegration of the "Lost" Children Living and Serving Under the Islamic State** ICSVE Brief Reports http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/recovery-rehabilitation-reintegration-of-the-lost-children-living-and-serving-under-the-islamic-state/