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Introduction

Children and youth are an integral segment of society that binds it together and determines the future of that society. This segment constitutes one third of the world's population, which is approximately 1.8 billion people (UNFPA, 2014). According to the United Nations, a majority of this 1.8 billion youth reside in developing countries, with a sufficient number of them living in the 48 least developed states. It is the thoughts and behaviour of this dynamic and vibrant group which ultimately decides on the flow of civilisation. It is due to this importance that adults and the older generation have an increased responsibility to protect and guide these young people in the correct path, so that they are able to be an asset to society and their countries.

Defined by the United Nations as those between the ages of 15 and 24, youth are a category that is vulnerable and easily influenced by thoughts and behaviours (United Nations, 1981). They are susceptible to radical ideas due to their innocence and their urge to be part of a cause. Occasionally, even well-educated young people are motivated to join causes that appeal to them, as they want to have a sense of belonging and to try and create an identity for themselves. It is also important to remember that youth are targeted on both sides of terrorist activities. While some are being targeted for recruitment purposes, others are being victimised as soft civilian targets to instil fear among societies.

Dynamics of Youth

Youth seek meaning and purpose in their lives, therefore this is one of the main reasons as to why they engage in violent extremism. Religious and other forms of extremism gives an output and provides solutions to the youth who seek meaning and a purpose in their lives. The extremists pitch ideas to the youth to showcase that they can seek meaning in their lives through their religion. Youth also tilt towards religious extremism such as Jihad and other forms of violent extremism as a means of creating an identity for themselves. This is especially the case with those youth joining the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS/L). Some of the youth joining extremist groups are known to do so to quell their individual wants or needs. They seek membership in an extremist group seeking a feeling of belonging, to escape into a new identity, for adventure or in some cases, for the money. Foreign fighters from approximately 80 countries, including the United Kingdom and France join ISIS which is also known as the Islamic State in seek of an identity, meaning or even for fun. As per Stern and Berger, the ISIS was rationalising as to why the youth should join them (2015). And they started to promote "a sense of inclusion, belonging and purpose in its demented utopia" to realise their plans to establish a caliphate in mid-2014 (Stern and Berger, 2015).

Extremist groups – especially those based on Islam - pitch ideas to youth who are not able to culturally identify themselves and state that violent extremism and Jihad is the way to discover yourself and serve the religion as well as to bringing about change in the world. Instilling change in the world through religion has been the main reason why many youth joined groups such as Jamaa Islamiya and continue to join violent extremist groups like the ISIS. There are also a variety of groups functioning in Britain and other western countries that fund and promote radicalisation. They promote Sharia Law and an interpretation of their religion which serves their needs. They even encourage activism and demonstrations. According to an interview conducted by the Human Rights Watch in a village in Raqqa, Raed aged 17 stated, "When ISIS came to my town… I liked what they are wearing, they were like one herd. They had a lot of weapons. So I spoke to them, and decided to go to their training camp in Kafr Hamra in Aleppo" (Human Rights Watch, 2014). He was sixteen years old at the time he started attending the camp. This example portrays that young people want to identify themselves

and be part of a group. And it can even be for simple reasons such as wearing a uniform and being part of a common identity.

Most often, violent extremist groups prey on socio-economic and political challenges affecting young people such as religious differences, exclusion, unemployment and poverty to recruit them into violent activities. Children are sometimes forcefully recruited whereas in other instances, they are recruited through their own will usually for revenge purposes. It is understood that empathy is the antidote to human cruelty. According to Simon Baron-Cohen, empathy consists of two stages, ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling; and the second, involves responding to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion (2012). However, empathy can sometimes be weakened, such as when a person is too often frightened, too often victimised or too involved in perpetrating violence. Frequent exposure is one way of reducing a person's capacity to feel. And that is exactly what extremist groups do to reduce these recruit's empathy. These youth are therefore exposed to difficult situations to toughen them in order to face hardships. They are also exposed to drugs and sometimes even forced to kill their loved ones as a sign of strength. They are given weapons training and exposed to violence from a young age in order to weaken their feelings. Youth and children thus become extremely dehumanised that they are able to play with severed heads and walk about streets where dismembered bodies lie carelessly on the sidewalks.

Sometimes the belief that poverty and ignorance or the lack of education leads to violent extremism is a misconception. In majority of the situations at present, it is the well-educated, well-informed, middle-class youth that actually become members of these extremist groups. It has been reported that in the present age it is the children who do not have problems that are targeted the most by these groups and organisations who ultimately join them. They are exposed to propaganda videos released by these extremist groups and hear stories about the injustice and the suffering people go through and as a result want to help out or become a part of the solution. They believe or are sometimes made to believe that state oppression, restricted civil liberties, lack of freedom, educational and employment opportunities are the reasons for the turmoil in these countries. Therefore they are convinced that this deprivation needs to end and join extremist movements that project these reasons as the cause for their struggles. For example in a variety of interviews Tawfiq Hamid a former member of Jamaa Islameia explained the reasons that drew him and his friends – such as the likes of Dr. Ayman Al-Zawaherri who is the current leader of Al-Qaeda - to join this extremist group in Egypt (Made in England, 2012). Now this Dr. Hamid had obtained his medical degree in Internal Medicine from Cairo University at the time he joined Jamaa Islameia. This illustrates the calibre of people who are encouraged to join violent extremist causes can be understood.

Children are the last to understand injustice and young people are the last to accept injustice. Extremist groups take advantage of these qualities in children and the youth to recruit them into their causes. Young people want to change the world, but the way they will choose to do so will not be determined by how they engage with the world. They will also be shaped by the way the media and the organisation's propaganda mechanisms portray perceptions to them. In this regard, organisations such as the ISIS and even in the past the Khmer Rouge have targeted children and youth to create "total organisations", which results in creating an entirely new society which believes in the ideals and values they propagate (Stern and Berger, 2015).

Young people like to create their own narratives. Some of them who are joining the fight and the cause of the ISIS are doing so because they are attracted to the cause of the Caliphate, to live under an Islamic regime, under the Sharia Law. They want to live there and raise their children under Islamic traditions and values, devoid of western influence. And to this end, foreigners are encouraged to bring their whole families to Iraq and Syria to "live under the shade of the caliphate" (Stern and Berger, 2015).

Children and youth between the ages 7- 24 are targeted by violent extremist groups. They are recruited as either soldiers or agents of violence in conflict situations such as in Pakistan, Yemen, Palestine, Central Africa, Libya and Kenya (Zaide, 2015). They are targeted in their homes, schools and universities (Zaide, 2015). According to a study by the Soufan Group, a typical jihadi foreign fighter is a male between 18 to 29 years old, although there are many exceptions, with some being well over 30. And it is not uncommon to see fighters who are between the ages 15 to 17 (2014).

Extremist groups do not only target the young males. They also appeal to the young women to become part of this cause. Just like the men, the women too are sometimes voluntarily drawn towards the causes portrayed so deeply by these groups. Some girls and women have come to the forefront to actively partake in the activities presented by these groups whereas others are less active physically. Some of these girls have taken on a very active role on online platforms to spread the message of these organisations as well as to recruit more young people. In the ISIS' case, many of the most vocal and visible supports online were found to be women. And the most notable amongst them was a young woman who referred to herself as "al Khansa'a" online. Al Khansa'a had been active on al Qaeda-linked forums well before ISIS's rise. Among members of the forum community, she was an early adopter of social media, opening a Twitter account under the handle @al_khansaa22 in September 2012, as well as establishing a presence on Facebook and other channels. At first, she was heavily engaged in the heated battles that fired up between top jihadist forum members, but later transitioned into a new role, i.e. to lead an online "brigade" that shared her name and was devoted to recruiting women to join the ISIS (Stern and Berger, 2015). Examples such as this showcase that even though young girls such as al Khansa'a are not fighting on the ground, they play a crucial and perhaps we can even say a very significant role towards extremist groups. It is not only the ISIS who are engaged in this manner. In the recent past the world witnessed Boko Haram taking 200 young school girls hostage. And this problem is frequently seen in many countries such as the Cameroon. Some of these incidents are not publicised and are kept under the radar.

Even though youth are ambitious and want to take part in these violent extremist causes, some are not able to make the journey to the areas of combat. And these youth who have not been able to participate abroad due to travel restrictions or other personal circumstances, have taken to participating through acts of violence at home. This threat took a variety of forms. In some cases, individuals living in the West acted on their own initiative. In others, extremist operatives guided their actions, either remotely over social media or in person. These youth thus target populations such as media and tourists in Paris, Tunisia, Sweden and Brussels (Zaide, 2015). Or even engage in random acts of violence such as in Nice and Munich.

This is further accentuated by calls by these extremist groups to supporters around the world to rise up and endorse their allegiance. An example would be a speech given by ISIS' chief spokesperson Abu Muhammad al Adnani on September 21, 2014, wherein he called on supporters to unite and respond to Western-led airstrikes by carrying out attacks against any citizen of a country that belonged to the coalition against ISIS. This is the sort of hatred and violence these extremist groups are propagating and encouraging their young followers to partake in. Their words are directed at emotions.

If any country or government is to turn this tide, then they need to empower youth so that they feel that they are strong, that they can be a hero, and that they are needed instead of saying they are uninformed, they are weak, they are poor, they need the others (Jobbins, 2016). Extremist groups tend to ensure youth feel powerful in comparison to governments who tell youth that they are beneficiaries and are dependent on us. Extremist groups talk to the psychology of the youth in wanting to 'be' something, as society and culture usually restrict the participation of youth in things they feel can make a change. These violent groups tell children that they can be martyrs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it needs to be recognised that youth are a key to ending violent extremism. Engaging them is a necessity in this day and age. Empowering them by reshaping educational systems to encourage skills development is an important component for any country. It is also equally important to ensure that their psychological development too is focused upon. As a means to curtail violent extremism, countries need to ensure their problems and difficulties are addressed. It is important to identify the local specifications and identify their requirements and needs. Further, even youth from marginalised groups in countries such as Turkey, Syria and Iraq have been forcefully recruited into the group. It is estimated that 6 million youth living in fragile and conflict regions with around 75 million youth are unemployed (Zaide, 2015).

It is equally important to understand that youth need to be recognised and appreciated. They want to feel like they are able to make a change. Not engaging the youth leads to them being recruited into violent groups, as explained earlier, these groups make use of this innate nature of the youth. An engagement of the whole community, especially of isolated villages, and building relationships based on trust are the way forward. We need to build a sense of belonging.

Further, effort must be taken to showcase that poverty does not create religious extremism but the opposite, that it religious extremism causes poverty, death and misery. Poverty results as an outcome of terrorism as there is a breakdown in society, there is no investment, no tourists will travel to the area, a general sense of chaos prevails as a result and that community loses out. So the belief that poverty leads to terrorism can be negated.

Education plays a pivotal role in this regard as youth can be taught, moral values, empathy, human rights etc. Education should also encourage critical thinking that will eradicate stereotyping and other problems (Zaide, 2015). It should also provide the youth with the relevant soft skills that will enable them to lead a life, feeling empowered. They should also be able to partake in political activities that will make them feel included in their societies.

Finally, it needs to be understood as to how extremist groups have successfully employed soft power such as words, images, values and beliefs to co-opt their followers to take the path they believe in contrast to coercing them to do so.

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