

# **ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST FAMILIES**

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*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

## **KEY EVENTS**

On September 8, 2022, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted the Defence and Security Advisory Network (DSAN) workshop in which Dr. Joana Cook, Senior Project Manager at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) and Editor-in-Chief of the ICCT Journal, presented on *Assessing the Implications for Children in Violent Extremist Families*. The presentation was followed by a moderated question-and-answer period in which the audience was able to deepen their understanding of the topic. The discussion centered around understanding the context of children who are affiliated with violent extremist (VE) groups so that practitioners can better support them and address their specific needs.

## **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

Dr. Cook highlighted the importance of understanding the context of children who are part of VE families. In addition, she discussed some of the aspects that practitioners should consider when developing strategies to help children from VE families, as well as some of the geopolitical considerations to keep in mind to better help children that are trapped in refugee camps.

### **Question & Answer Period**

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Cook emphasized the importance of not stigmatizing children or women about their affiliations because they often lack any agency over their decisions. Dr. Cook also touched up on the importance of planning for the long term for countries to be able to meet these children's needs.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Dr. Cook began the presentation by drawing attention to the increasing number of children who are exposed to violent extremism and listed two main trends: children traveling to conflict zones and children who are already born there. Dr. Cook highlighted that both trends have increased after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) established the Caliphate since one of their key mandates is to have families who will become the next generation of fighters.

Dr. Cook stated that there are currently 55,000 persons in the al-Hol refugee camp located in northern Syria for people who have been displaced from the Islamic State of Iraq. Currently, there are refugees from 60 different countries and 64% of them are children. Dr. Cook argued that it is important to recognize that most of the children who are affiliated to extremist groups have no choice; therefore, practitioners should recognize the broader context and the situations these children are exposed to, such as extreme violence, trauma, and lack of education.

Dr. Cook then talked about the PREPARE project she is currently working on and explained that this project aims to understand the unique aspects of children in VE families, as well as their main risk and resiliency factors. Dr. Cook explained that social workers, psychologists, health care workers, and educators must have a deep understanding of the children's unique circumstances to develop proper strategies and help them effectively.

One of the early findings in Dr. Cook's research was that these children face a lot of challenges, which overlap with those of other groups like gangs and cults. However, there are also unique considerations to them that should be kept in mind, such as the fear of being stigmatized and having particular developmental concerns like disruptions in their education.

Finally, Dr. Cook remarked how important it is not to see these children through a "threat lens" or assume that they would automatically adopt their parents' violent extremist views, as this is not always the case. Dr. Cook concluded her presentation by highlighting the importance of contemplating the dire possibilities for all the children that are trapped in camps and have no citizenship or legal rights if countries continue to refuse their repatriation.

### Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Cook drew attention towards the importance of ensuring that children are repatriated back home, which should

be followed by a particular assessment to understand the needs of each child, while always maintaining their information confidential to avoid discriminatory behaviours against them.

Additionally, Dr. Cook commented that the measures adopted by many governments like the UK, which strip citizenship from people that are part of extremist groups, is not an effective approach. Dr. Cook pointed out that it leaves women and children in vulnerable situations, and not necessarily deters people from joining VE groups. In many cases, women and children do not have agency over their affiliation; for instance, many women are trafficked or forced into marriage as young as 15 years old.

Dr. Cook concluded by stating the importance of not only repatriating children to their home countries but to ensure that their needs are covered. It is necessary to plan for the long term as these children might show signs of trauma later in their lives.

## **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

- Since ISIS established the caliphate, there has been an increasing number of children who are exposed to violent extremism.
- The two main trends for the increase of children exposed to violent extremism are children traveling to conflict zones and children who are already born there.
- Most of the children who are affiliated to extremist groups, do not have a choice; therefore, it is imperative not to see them through a "threat lens".
- Children from VE groups face a lot of challenges that overlap with those of children that are part of gangs and cults.
- To provide better support, practitioners should recognize the broader context of children in VE groups and the situations they are exposed to such as extreme violence, trauma, and lack of education.

### **Question & Answer Period**

- Stripping people of their citizenship because they are part of VE groups leaves women and children in vulnerable situations and is not always an effective measure to deter people from joining VE groups.
- The repatriation of children should be followed by a particular assessment to understand their needs, while also maintaining their information confidential to avoid discriminatory behaviours against them.
- Children from VE groups might develop signs of trauma later in their lives.



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