Policy Brief

Education as a way out of IS: Deradicalisation in Mosul

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With the liberation of Mosul fast becoming a reality, attention is turning to post-IS dynamics. Without sufficient deradicalisation policies, including within the education system, the narrative of the Islamic State will lie dormant or transform, creating the potential for another extremist group to emerge.

The Mosul offensive is making swift progress, with some pronouncing this the beginning of the end of the Islamic State (IS). However, the territorial defeat of IS does not guarantee its ideological defeat. The transition to post-IS governance must recognise the impact that their control since 2014 has had on the population, particularly in the sphere of education. This brief argues that although the education system has been harnessed as a key component of IS' influence, it can also be employed in the defeat of the group: an example of the dual 'constructive' and 'destructive' 'faces of education'. Building upon a number of initiatives developed worldwide, the brief identifies key policy steps designed to pave a way forward for Mosul.

The Destructive Face: Education under Islamic State

IS used the education system to consolidate their control in a way that has been compared to Nazi Germany. They excluded subjects such as history, art, geography, literature and music from the curriculum and instead taught the skills necessary to be effective members of the self-styled Caliphate – whether to partake in the bureaucracy, as mothers, or as fully-fledged soldiers. English textbooks for 11 year olds found in Mosul, for example, included exercises to learn to tell the time featuring clocks attached to dynamite, whilst Arabic grammar books for 7-8 year olds included references to 'bomb' and 'martyr'. The IS monopoly over education in Mosul even extended to higher education: the University of Mosul was reopened as the Islamic University, closing law, political science, archaeology, physical education, philosophy, and tourism departments. Violence was thus legitimised in the lives of these young people, both implicitly through the IS regime and explicitly through being taught IS' version of piety.

Being exposed to the level of violence that IS practices can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder - a condition which renders it highly difficult to function in society. In particular, IS may have had a direct impact on the

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formation of children's beliefs and values, especially for those that were recruited as soldiers. As one IS fighter boasted 'the right doctrine has been implanted in these children. All of them love to fight for the sake of building the Islamic State and for the sake of God'. Despite claims of senior Sunni cleric Khalid Al-Mulla that they 'have been brainwashed', this is not irreversible as moral agency in young people is, arguably, not fixed and can therefore be developed. Policies that address this issue need to be executed to ensure that the next generation is able to create a new narrative moving forward. The education system is in a unique position to serve this function due to its overarching role in society.

The constructive face: Paving the way forward

Educational reform: An opportunity has been created for educational reform in Mosul. Although Iraq was once championed for education in the region, this reputation was declining even before IS' control. This requires separate examination, but could comprise a two-tier system in the short-term to cater for those who have studied under IS' education system and those that did not receive an education under IS, until all students can be integrated into a unified system. Other practical issues to address include the production and distribution of textbooks which accord with the national curriculum, as well as the statelessness of children born under IS preventing school enrolment. To an extent, educational reform – along with other improvements in contextual factors arising from the liberation and subsequent reconstruction of Mosul – will aid deradicalisation indirectly. This will happen by providing the socioeconomic and political conditions necessary to prevent recruitment to terrorist organisations, particularly if the education system is clearly oriented towards employment, as in the Pakistan programme.

Educational investment: The education system needs investment, including in personnel. Several teachers and civil servants were reportedly executed for not accepting IS' changes to the curriculum and therefore moderate influences need to be reinstated. Monitoring procedures also ought to be introduced in Mosul, as in Saudi Arabia, to ensure that teachers do not advocate 'extremist' positions. This process could be run and executed by qualified, vetted, and trained local people due to their understanding of cleavages between groups in the country, with the potential for international supervision if necessary.

Discussion of Islam: A religious element requires inclusion in deradicalisation policies in education. Although the role of Islam within groups such as IS is contested, IS used Islam as a justification for its actions and this interpretation of the religion must therefore be addressed. This may include engaging religious figures in the policies discussed, particularly within the proposed mentoring scheme, although vetting procedures should be implemented by an independent body. However, this policy must be tailored to the context and take account of the minorities that live in Mosul, rather than imposing a state-sanctioned version of religion. Therefore, in the classroom environment, focus should instead be placed on ethical debates and shared values to allow for inclusivity. If Islam is taught as a subject within the classroom, Islamic values such as tolerance of other religions, justice etc. could be emphasised, as in Algeria.

Classroom activities: Students should be given the opportunity to challenge the beliefs that they have been transferred within a supportive environment. It is vital that initiatives are designed in an age appropriate manner, both in terms of content and format.

This could include workshops and platforms for discussion (as implemented in Bangladesh); activities such as games, exercises, role-play (as in Denmark); lectures in schools and universities (as in Saudi Arabia); the distribution of comics in schools with a counter-extremist message (as in Jordan); or online initiatives such as those showcased by Counter-Narrative Toolkit which compiles a range of campaigns worldwide aimed at tackling extremism.

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These programmes should be as interactive as possible to allow students to engage with the topic fully and question the information transmitted. Appropriate actors must be identified to participate, with potential involvement of civil society actors to strengthen effectiveness. Whilst the Northern Ireland Prison to Peace programme involves ex-militants and victims' stories are incorporated by the Alliance for Peaceful Indonesia, it may not be advisable to include these groups at this stage in Mosul to avoid the creation of further tension and emotional distress, although these initiatives may be worth considering in the long-term.

Mentoring schemes: One-to-one support will also be required for selected young people. For students with particularly entrenched beliefs – a feature that is likely to be more prevalent in particular age groups – class-wide initiatives may be insufficient. Therefore, mentoring schemes could be instated to allow students to debate their ideas in a safe setting. These figures need to be fully trained 'credible interlocutors' whom students can respect. In addition, counselling and psychological support is recommended for certain individuals, as in Pakistan's innovative Sabaoon centre for juvenile former militants, as well in countries such as Saudi Arabia with prisoners. There is also a need for staff training in schools and universities to ensure that they are able to refer students in need to these programmes, heeding the lessons of cases such as the UK in which this has led to a climate of suspicion.

Conclusion: Proceeding with care

Policies to include deradicalisation within the curriculum should be treated with caution. Education is an important arena for free thought and it is essential not to impede this. The 'deradicalisation' label itself is controversial, particularly as the term 'radical' is disputed, and therefore the way that these policies are presented has important implications for their perception and reception. Programmes should be developed alongside the young people in Mosul with expert consultation, acknowledging the differing impacts that age and gender may have had on student experience. Monitoring and evaluation structures ought to be implemented to assess the programme's impact on an ongoing basis, particularly as evaluation of similar programmes is limited. In addition, these initiatives must be part of a broader strategy as beliefs alone do not cause terrorist activity. It must also be stressed that although this brief is written for the dynamics of Mosul, deradicalisation programmes are required throughout Iraq. Despite these reservations, deradicalisation policies in education are much needed in Mosul, considering the unique circumstances, to prevent the re-emergence of a similar group in the next generation, a security threat which could have serious repercussions.