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# TOWARDS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: Challenging Extremist Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-To-Youth Oral Storytelling In Iraq

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Challenging Extremist Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-To-Youth Oral Storytelling In Iraq

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## TOWARDS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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## TOWARDS PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Fadia Thabet

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**Abbreviations**

AQAP	Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula
CAAC	Children Affected by Armed Conflict
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
IYLEP	Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
MRM	Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
RP	Reflective Practice
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



### **Abstract**

It is necessary to draw on different strategies rather than military methods in order to challenge and delegitimize ISIS extremist narratives in Iraq. This study proposes the hypothesis that oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers plays a key role in changing youths' perspectives and contributes to preventing their peers from joining ISIS. The research was executed through a quasi-experimental design and comparison of data through a pre and post test during a one-week timeframe. The study examines oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers as a counter-strategy to expose ISIS recruitment propaganda and false narratives. I used a qualitative research method and participatory action research approach with four Iraqi participants (n=4) aged 16-18 years. Data was collected through virtual interviews. The findings of this study indicate the transformative power of oral storytelling on participants' perspectives and attitudes and the impact of spoken words on combating ISIS false narratives. It enabled the participants to humanize and sympathize with former child soldiers. Furthermore, the data provided by the participants identified the reasons behind their lack of exposure to former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers' stories as socioeconomic status and sociocultural characteristics. Accordingly, the data offered ways that oral storytelling, as a post-conflict initiative, can serve as a powerful prevention tool in amplifying former Iraqi ISIS child soldier stories and spreading mass-awareness through broadcasting these stories on TV, radio, and inviting them to speak in their local communities.

*Keywords: ISIS, Extremists, Child Soldiers, Recruitment, Oral Storytelling, Narrative, Youth, Iraq*

## Introduction

When we hear the word extremism often we think of the “Global War on Terrorism” (Casebeer & Russell, 2005, p. 1) that has been used by media outlets to describe the Middle East. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, the Bush administration declared a Global War on Terrorism in collaboration with NATO and non-NATO nations to destroy Al-Qaeda and other militant extremist organizations. The term extremism carries vivid imagery for many people in the West. For example, Americans think of September 11th, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Al-Qaeda in Yemen, and recently Boko Haram in Nigeria. Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) is one of those jihadist organizations in Iraq and Syria that is considered to be a threat to the West since they declared the Islamic State in 2014. ISIS not only indoctrinates children to their ideology, but they also prepare them to be future fighters. Furthermore, ISIS uses children in social media and shows them in indoctrination camps. One example is a viral photo of children wearing black hats with the writing لا إله إلا الله (there is no god but Allah) on it and carrying an ISIS black flag with the writing as الشهادة (There is no god but Allah, Mohammad is the messenger of Allah). These words are known as the testimony and are a declaration of faith for Muslims around the world. According to a report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017), in 2015 there were 274 verified cases of child soldiers with Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) In Syria. Between June and September 2015, more than 1,000 children were abducted and recruited by Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) from Mosul in Iraq. The recruitment and use of children is not new; children have been recruited by armed groups for a long time, but in the past decade child recruitment by extremist groups has increased (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2017).

Children who have been recruited by extremist groups such as ISIS are victims of violence at many levels. Some joined extremist groups to escape poverty or to protect their families and communities. Other children were abducted and forced to act as spies to gather information from their communities and some were also forced to cook, clean, move equipment, secure checkpoints, and to engage in frontline combat whenever they were fully trained.

My learning journey started in 2012 when I started working with former child soldiers after a small group called Ansar Alsharia, part of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which is an extremist group located in Yemen, took control of the South Yemen province of Abyan in 2011. When I began working, the whole area was controlled by Ansar Alsharia. We were the first and only organization in Yemen who ran a program that worked with former child soldiers. We started as a low-profile team to establish a foundation for the project. It was to investigate and gather up-to-date evidence on the Six Grave Violations committed against children in conflict. The evidence identified all parties, non-state actors, and armed groups to be added to the Security Council's "list of shame." The project aimed to protect children from harm in conflict and for those who were harmed to have access to medical and psychological support. In addition, my project conducted trainings, workshops, radio campaigns to raise awareness about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and UN Children Affected by Armed Conflict (CAAC) Resolution 1612. During my tenure as a Child Protection Officer in Yemen, I created the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) currently used with government officials and local and international nonprofit organizations against extremist groups in Yemen. My project, which lasted for almost five years, focused on former child soldiers who had been kidnapped or recruited. It provided them psychosocial support, medical support, and rehabilitation programs.

My passion for working with former child soldiers perfectly dovetails with pursuing a master's degree in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation, and has moved me to do research on the same topic. My experience in the past focused on how we can provide support to those children after they were harmed emotionally and physically, but we were rarely able to focus on preventative mechanisms. Due to my previous work with UN agencies and international nonprofit organizations, I kept all my work confidential for the safety of children. No one besides my team and I heard those stories or utilized them to educate and prevent their peers from joining extremist groups. Throughout the on-campus phase at SIT Graduate Institute, I was exposed to storytelling as part of community healing and as a prevention tool in peacebuilding. Upon completing my on-campus phase in the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to work with Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP) in Vermont. Storytelling was very powerful among

Iraqi participants. It focused on building relationships and it allowed them to humanize one another, and gave everyone an opportunity to feel connected, heard, and seen for the first time from their peers. Thus, looking back to the endless violence in the Middle East and the use of child soldiers, my research idea crystallized. I hypothesized that a storytelling approach might be effective as a preventative act/initiative for children. It could stop them from joining extremist groups and undo ISIS extremist narratives.

Exploring the ideological narratives has been enlightening. AQAP in Yemen focused on establishing an insurgency and plan for militant activities in areas where they gained control and benefited. Alternatively, ISIS vision was much bigger. Their narratives centered on bringing back Muslims' lands, dignity, and restoring the Caliphate to its original form. From my personal experiences, ISIS overarching narratives in Iraq used to recruit child soldiers is different from AQAP narratives in Yemen. ISIS goal was to enlist children not only to be fighters then but to be future fighters and to play prominent role for the Islamic State, (Horgan et. al., 2017, 651), which is different than in Yemen where children were recruited for a certain period then let go after they completed their mission. Primarily, ISIS exploited Islamic history in order to engage people for the purpose of restoring the Islamic Caliphate (Reed & Dowling, 2015; Glazzard, 2016).

Extremist groups like ISIS use structured narratives as their communication strategy to motivate their followers to join them in what ISIS fighters call "fighting the battle." While the group has many core ideological narratives that helped them to spread and accomplish their agenda based on their interpretation of the Quran, they also rely on promises of salaries, health insurance, and monetary death benefits to children and their families. Therefore, understanding how these groups make their extremism narratives engaging and accessible is essential to dismantling their messages. One way to do this is through incorporating an oral storytelling approach from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers. This approach can be used as a preventative tool in challenging ISIS extremist narratives.

### **Purpose of Study**

This research will explore the role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist narratives among young people living in Iraq. My research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories

from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to their same-age peers will undermine the saliency of current extremist recruitment narratives. This study will examine the effect of oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers on participants' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about practical extremists' narratives in post-conflict areas. For this research, oral storytelling is an educational tool for Iraqi society members and former ISIS child soldiers to be able to understand their stories and narratives through presenting information that challenge and expose extremists' narratives. Extremist groups make vast promises to the young people who they are trying to recruit: riches, valor, and glory. Child soldiers hear these narratives and are persuaded to join. After they leave the battlefield, their stories are not heard and they are stigmatized by their communities and fear persecution. Therefore, they rarely speak up about their experiences. Hearing their stories will provide a competing narrative to extremist recruitment narratives. When former child soldiers tell their stories, they expose the false narratives and broken promises of extremist groups.

What	How	Who
Challenging extremists' recruitment narratives	Challenging the practical extremist narratives by telling compelling stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to unfold false narratives	Civil society organizations and groups

### Research Questions

- What impact does presenting youth-to-youth oral storytelling have on challenging ISIS recruitment narratives and ideological narratives?
  - What are some core ideological and practical extremist narratives and how does ISIS use them to recruit child soldiers?
  - How can oral storytelling prevent extremist narratives and provide compelling stories?

### Literature Review

This review of literature aims to present what organizations, scholars, and experts have examined about their understanding of the ISIS extremist ideological core narrative elements in Iraq, which was used as their constructive rhetoric to spread worldwide and connect these narratives with their acts of violence.

This review provides a comprehensive analysis of the process by which children are recruited by extremist groups, in particularly children of ISIS. In addition, this review presents the impact of oral storytelling as a non-violent approach to challenge extremist narratives. In this research, I highlighted prominent themes from the literature that I studied. The themes included in this research are ideological narratives, practical narratives, and oral storytelling.

In the field of academia, it is very hard to find an effective theoretical framework that explains preventative approaches to violent extremism that have proven their effectiveness. Most counter narrative approaches are based on assumption instead of theory. Glazzard (2016) explains that, “counter-narrative is largely the product of government policy-makers and civil society practitioners, rather than academics, so it is hardly surprising that it lacks a fully articulated theory” (p. 3). Meanwhile, the rise of ISIS attacks gained the attention of the militaries of Western governments, civil society organizations and experts, and they have begun to use other strategies rather than military defense to prevent the spread of violent extremism and terrorism (Glazzard, 2016).

The United States and British governments’ intelligence branches take extremist narratives very seriously. Efforts to counteract extremist narratives remain active; however, their primary strategy is to send soldiers to fight ISIS fighters on the ground with the intention of stopping its spread. This has accomplished nothing except killing ISIS fighters without confronting the Jihadi’s ideology. As former British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced in 2015, “[w]e need to build up grassroots Muslim responses which challenge the Jihadi narrative with simple competing and clear messages which are equally forthright and scripturally based” (Glazzard, 2016, p. 2).

The U.S. also invested in this strategy through encouraging former extremists to step forward and use their voices to tell their painful experiences inside ISIS. President Obama, in the summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), explained the core of ISIS narrative and its relationship between extremist narratives and their acts of violence and hatred: “The narrative becomes the foundation upon which terrorist groups build their ideology and by which they try to justify their violence” (Obama, 2015). Therefore,

identifying some of these narratives and their interpretation of Islam would contribute to preventing children from joining ISIS.

### **Ideological Narratives**

Preventing extremist groups' actions must counter the ideology through understanding the interpretation of Islam and the use of violence to justify the restoration of Muslim prosperity. Thus, to understand ISIS (Daesh, داعش) and their fight, we must understand how ISIS fighters built their interpretation of the historical events that connect to their struggle to inspire and engage their followers.

### **Who is ISIS (Daesh, داعش)**

ISIS journey begins a year and a half after the U.S.-led invasion in Iraq in 2003, when rebellion and chaos provided a fertile ground for the group to emerge. Gerges (2017) describes ISIS as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Washam or Levant) as having more than thirty thousand Sunni combatants who took leadership on the global Jihadist movements and took control of territories in Iraq and Syria to start the Caliphate era (p. 1). He adds that ISIS declared a new Caliphate in Syria and Iraq on 29 June, 2014 when Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi appeared for the first time during Friday prayers in a mosque in Iraq. He announced that he was bringing back the Caliphate after 90 years of absence and was appointing himself as Caliph for 1.6 billion Muslims around the World. Heing (2017) explains the Caliphate as having political and religious authority over all Muslims around the world. ISIS was started in Iraq by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi who announced their obligation to Al-Qaeda after the U.S invasion in 2003. In 2006, U.S airstrikes killed Al-Zarqawi, then Ayyub Al-Masri took over and changed the name of the group to Islamic State in Iraq and appointed Omer Al-Baghdadi leader for the group (p. 16). When the U.S killed both leaders by an airstrike in 2010, Al-Baghdadi appointed himself as leader. After the war erupted in Syria, Al-Baghdadi announced ISIS as an organization inside Iraq and Syria. Although Muslims around the world rejected the establishment of the Caliphate and ISIS practices and interpretation of Islam, ISIS gained support and pledges of allegiance worldwide and expanded in Africa and Asia even though they were losing fighters in Syria and Iraq. Gerges (2017) further describes that ISIS relied mainly on foreign fighters, particularly doctors, engineers, and native English speakers whose language skills they utilize in the

recruitment process from the West, to come to the Caliphate land and help to build the Islamic State and bring back Muslim prosperity. ISIS also rewarded those foreign fighters who brought their children with them, where they can be indoctrinated in ISIS schools and camps to become future fighters (p. 228)

Gerges (2017) states that ISIS is a result of political and economic failure in the Arab world that causes destruction, hunger, an identity battle between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Salafi/Wahhabi Islam congregation within the Hanbali Sunni tradition, and denial of basic human needs. The only way to delegitimize ISIS is to dispute the conflict and build better governments in countries like Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq (p. 261).

### **Caliphate**

The core of ISIS ideology is that Muslims have been in an ongoing war with the West for centuries (Reed & Dowling, 2015). The group has stated that their struggles start with the crusade period and Western colonization, for example, in Muslim countries of the Ottoman empire where the British and French divided Al-sham and Mesopotamian lands into what is today known as Syria and Iraq. The Sykes-Picot as ISIS fighters called it, an agreement between French and British colonization that divided Muslims' lands, drew a border between Iraq and Syria after the end of the Ottoman Empire in the region. ISIS ideology relies on historical events such as the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the beginning of Caliphate God's Kingdom on earth (Khilafah), and the overthrow of the last Ottoman empire era in 1924; all of these events center around the struggle of others ruling Islamic lands. Although Osama Ben Laden did not anticipate seeing the Caliphate in his lifetime, he affirmed that all Muslims should keep in their heart "the goal of establishing the Khalifah [Caliphate]" because this has "occupied the hearts of Mujahidin since the revival of jihad this century" (Reed & Dowling, 2015, p. 88). Hedges (2015) defines Caliphate this way: "the Caliphate had existed since Islam's earliest days, and most Muslims recognize four of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, who followed him as leaders of the Muslim community, referred to as the 'Rightly Guided Caliphs', representing a golden age" (p. 2).

After the death of Prophet Muhammad, who did not appoint a successor after him, choosing the next Caliph would mean a successor or deputy to the global community of the Muslims nation. Disagreements



between who Muslims consider the successor have caused conflict and separation between the Shia and Sunni.

### **Us vs Them**

ISIS narratives build on the struggle Muslims go through around the world and the injustice they face from the West. The group preached to their followers that, “Muslims are under attack and must fight to defend themselves, that the West is an implacable enemy of Islam” (Glazzard, 2016, p. 2). This has been used to exploit and recruit people to their cause. The Jihadi’s ideology feeds on anger, fear, violence, the idea of salvation, and what they describe as, “US versus THEM” in order to achieve their own interpretation of Islamic objectives. Muslims around the world hear extremist stories. ISIS creates elaborate tales about the need for resistance and continuous struggle against the enemy and claims victories for these tales through executing deadly attacks in Western countries. The heart of their narrative is that the West is the enemy and Muslims are in an ongoing-crisis. This aligns with decades of social psychology research on in-group/out-group dynamics in social identity theory. In-groups, individuals who identify themselves based on their race, religion or gender (ISIS and Sunni Muslims), give significance and a feeling of belonging to members. Out-groups are categories of people the in-group does not identify with (The West). Once ISIS recruitment propaganda has sorted people into in-groups and out-groups, they can justify discrimination and violence against out-groups. In-group ISIS calls for a Muslim nation and to expand the crisis that linked historical events to present. They also call for a solution within in-groups to restore the Caliphate (Reed & Dowling, 2015).

### **Faridah**

A similar narrative was founded by Al-Qaeda and its founder Osama Ben Laden in 1988, when he established the Islamic State through inspiring his followers to use violence and confrontation tactics as a form of Jihad. Faridah (فريديه) is a duty on all Muslims “all Muslims to take up arms in defense of Islam, Muslims, and Muslims lands” (Zehr, 2017, p. 80). Faridah is a personal commitment to his/her religion.

## **Jihad**

Jihad means struggle or effort to improve the quality of life in society (Streusand, 1997).

Jihadism has evolved from al-Qaeda's interpretation until today. In the Quran (the main Muslim religious text), everyone has a responsibility and role in Jihad. The duty is based on each Muslim's ability to contribute to Jihad and be part of it; no matter the amount of contribution whether small or big, no one is exempt from it and nothing can fulfill it. Zehr (2017) simply explains when a person turns to Jihad in three cases. These duties can be applied anywhere:

1. When Muslims are in actual frontlines - physically engaging in a fight against each other, it is considered prohibited by religion to run away from the duty.
2. When apostates "as an opposed to non-Muslims" (Zehr, 2017, p. 82) invade your country.
3. When Imams (Muslim religious leaders) call other Muslims to engage in the fight.

Therefore, Muslims respond to the Jihad as part of being true Muslims (p. 84).

He also argues that Osama Bin Laden's conceptualization of Jihad can be induced everywhere, while alternatively ISIS sought to control territory to have a legitimized government where they could implement Islamic law.

## **True Muslims**

Furlow & Goodall (2011) state that ISIS fighters' main goal is to restore the Caliphate in order to bring back Muslims' dignity and lands where its governorate by Muslims and Islam is the only superior religion because Muslims are still suffering from the West's dismantling of the Caliphate (p. 218). Similarly, Zehr (2017) emphasizes the calling for re-establishing the Caliphate era by ISIS to live under the Islamic state and Sharia after Muslims were drifted and distracted. Thus, the call for Jihad and violence is every Muslim's duty, otherwise you are not a true Muslim. "They carry nothing from Islam but their names, even though they pray and fast and claim...to be Muslim" (Zehr, 2017, p. 82).

Furlow & Goodall (2011) use the term "fixing" where they explain that extremists hold a similar vision to AQAP that they live in a world where there is something wrong and that they must correct it. Bringing back the proper Islamic State is part of their main ideology (p. 218). In addition, Zehr (2017) says

that extremists believe Islam is the right vision that will bring betterment to the world and using violence to bring back the Islamic State is justified because it is God's words (p. 88).

ISIS narratives use the Islamic accomplishments era for pulling children and young men to join them in building and bringing back successful ages to all Muslims. This strengthens their narrative through connecting current crises and events to their struggles and providing evidence to justify the need to return the Caliphate era. As an example, ISIS announced the start of using their own currency, "Gold Dinar and Silver Dirhams" (Reed & Dowling, 2015) and freed themselves from using the USD in 2008 when the financial crisis impacted Western countries and the banking system pushed towards the edge of collapse.

## **Practical Narratives**

### **Why Children**

The use of child soldiers is nothing new: children have been recruited by state or non-state armed groups for a long time. Children are recruited for many purposes other than engaging in hostilities, they can be used as cooks, spies, messengers, or fighters on the frontlines in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and South Sudan. "Children are participating as active combatants in over 75 percent of the world's armed conflicts" (Singer, 2001, p. 1). Some of those children were under the age of 10 when they were abducted and forced to join and were ordered to carry a gun that was taller than them (Human Rights Watch, 2002). For many children, joining an armed group was the only way to live and secure an income for their families. For example, in Cambodia in the 1980s, children were sent to the front line so they could provide protection and food for their families and, in Liberia in 1990, children carried a gun because they wanted to survive four years of conflict (UNICEF, 1997).

In the past decade, child recruitment by extremist groups has increased due to the violent escalation in the Middle East. According to the Children Affected by Armed Conflict (CAAC) annual report, child recruitment increased five times in Yemen due to intensifying conflict that resulted in lack of services and displacement (2015). In Iraq, more than 1,000 children were reportedly abducted by ISIS between the ages of 7 and 15 in 2015. With this being said, not all children were coerced; some joined extremist groups

voluntarily because they lived in extreme poverty or they experienced injustice or marginalization (UNODC, 2017).

According to the UN, the number of child soldiers has doubled in less than a year in the Middle East and North Africa (CAAC, 2015). Conflict causes changes in social and economic status and an increase in extreme poverty. This results in an increase in the possibility of children being recruited - particularly children who were separated from their parents or caregivers because of death, destruction, and displacement. Graça Machel highlighted in her statement that poverty is considered one of the push factors that forced children to be recruited. “[T]he children most likely to become soldiers are those from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds” (Machel, 1996, p. 19). Singer (2010) agrees that children who are born and grow up in a war with a lack of basic human needs such as access to schools, health care, food, and water, are likely to be targeted for recruitment. On the other hand, children who are educated and lived a better life are less likely to be recruited or even targeted. “[I]n all conflicts, children from wealthier and more educated families are at less risk” of forced recruitment as they are either left “undisturbed” or “released if their parents can buy them out” or are “sent out of the country to avoid the possibility of forced conscription” (Machel, 1996, p. 12).

Case studies indicate that children are easy to control, because of the following reasons:

1. Their lack of ability to distinguish what’s wrong and right;
2. Their adherence to their commanders’ orders;
3. And they are easily administered and manipulated (Amnesty, 2003)

Children are cheap to maintain and easy to move around (Singer, 2010).

The desire for revenge was also a motivation for joining extremist groups. Children who witnessed the killing of their fathers and uncles was the key driver for them to join extremist groups. A young Filipino said, “I joined the movement to avenge my father’s death in the hands of the military. When I was seven years old, I saw the military take away my defenseless father from our house” (UNICEF, 2003, p. 28).

Killing as a form of revenge was rationalized as retribution. For example, in Yemen, the Civil War erupted in 2015 and ongoing fighting for four years resulted in children joining the rebels; their participation was

catalyzed by the killing of their families and beloved ones by air strikes. Joining extremist groups is a form of power. Children who lived in extreme poverty and do not have access to education held guns to give them a source of authority and protection for their families because they could not get this protection anywhere else (UNICEF, 2003).

Families play a mixed factor in children's decisions to join extremist groups. For example, as a push factor, children join extremist groups to escape an abusive parent and for a safer environment. On the other hand, as a pull factor, other children join extremist groups to be with their fathers, uncles, and siblings (Wessells, 2002). Clearly, families and relatives have an impact on children's involvement in extremist groups. All these reasons for children joining extremist groups are part of the push and pull factors that contribute to children's decisions to join the fight.

### **Children of ISIS**

Heing (2017) explains that when it comes to children of ISIS, they are treated and trained like adults in terms of where they are positioned in ranks. Similarly, Horgan et, al. (2017) adds that children joined ISIS while they are under the age of 15. As the conflict continues, they are tomorrow's fighters. Some of children do not participate in the fight immediately. ISIS trained and prepared them to take part in the future. ISIS showed them in their propaganda where children received intense military trainings in ISIS camps, which widely spread in the social media (p. 651). Furthermore, ISIS focused on recruiting toddlers more than any other terrorist group so they could start to indoctrinate them as an age early and instead of abducting them as other terrorist groups, and made them believe that ISIS tactics and their act of violence is normal (pp 23-28)

Heing (2017) calls children of ISIS "Cubs of Caliphate" who ISIS recruited from a young age by showing them acts of violence through witnessing beheading and videos of suicide attacks (p. 7). Heing (2017) further explains that ISIS motivates children who joined them by showing up or religion class and giving them prizes. During the classes in ISIS training camps, children stand in front of the camera for a video or picture while they are holding a gun or carrying an ISIS black flag; this is published later in social media (p. 8). ISIS strategy is to make violence look like an act of normalcy by emphasizing on children daily attitudes and practice through games and smart apps that encourage violence in them and create

competition. Olidort (2016) describes the time when ISIS took over. He stated that they destroyed school curriculum and replaced it with a radical curriculum that taught many subjects such as mathematics, history, and language in addition to religious text books and physical preparedness class, where they started the indoctrination process. In a mathematics textbook there was a question stating, “If the Islamic State has 275,220 heroes in a battle and the unbelievers have 356,230, who has more soldiers?” (p. 8). ISIS rhetoric curriculum includes illustrations of images like tanks, rifles, and physical training activities (p. 18). In a history textbook, children will take tests where they have to explain the meaning of the word “apostasy,” which is the disbelief in God (Allah) or worship of other gods. Death by beheading is the punishment for defection from faith (p. 22).



\*ISIS history textbook

Heing (2017) adds at age 10 children will join intense physical training camps where they would be treated like adults and would be assigned to adult type tasks (p. 8). ISIS is different than other terrorist organizations when it relates to child soldiers. For example, they are often recognized by their trademark: when they recruit children, they do not hide it. “ISIS is showing us exactly how it’s done” (Horgan et, al., 2017, p. 651).

## Non-violence approach

### Narrative Vs Story

For many people, stories and narratives are the same. Halverson et al. (2011) defines narrative as a “system of stories” (p. 2). It is not one story but it is multiple stories that are connected to each other in an organized way. They add that narratives build on systemic pieces of stories and contribute to resolving a conflict based on the listeners’ desire, goals, and path. Halverson et al. (2011) explain that a story is a

situation that describes where, when, and how an event happened. “A story is a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical ideological purposes” (p. 13). They add, stories can be added, changed, and removed to any narratives based on audiences and the purpose of the narrative. On the other hand, Casebeer and Russell (2005), argue there is no definition for a story, and the notion of a story is like the notion of a game and it has no list to be necessary and no specific conditions for what is to be a game but that does not mean the concept of the game is useless (p. 5).

However, Casebeer and Russell agreed on the theory of story in Freytag Triangle. In 19<sup>th</sup> century a German writer Gustav Freytag describes that narratives have a start, audiences and conflict to resolve to reach an end. Thus, to reach an end you need a group of people or a person to accomplish the goal. Similarly, Fisher (1984) argued that narratives are essential to human way of communication (p. 7). Moreover, Casebeer and Russell (year) agreed that stories can impact and inspire people to call for action and resolve the problem that presented itself in the narrative. ISIS narratives rely on resiliency and they call for actions as part of their communication strategies to follow the prophet Muhammad’s journey and his prophecy. These types of narratives are called “Master Narratives” (Halverson et al., 2011). Shaikh and Payne (2014) presented different types of narrative: master narratives, local narratives, and personal narratives. A personal narrative is a personal story of an individual’s life day to day, which is a part of a local narrative belonging to a specific group who shares a similar background, characteristics, and life. Both personal and local narratives develop to be master narratives. Additionally, Shaikh and Payne add, in order to make the narrative impactful, it needs to connect emotionally to the person and her/his beliefs to make the narrative last longer. (pp. 3-6)

### **Oral Storytelling**

Storytelling is a universal tool we use everyday. We live for stories every day in movies, shows, newspapers, poems, books, and even commercials. We use storytelling to spread knowledge from one generation to the next, to memorably convey information, and so on. Stories are a catalyst of emotions; they are simple yet powerful enough to bring people to tears or laughter. Oral storytelling is accessible to everyone; mics or stages are not needed to transform an audience. Senehi (2002) states that “storytelling is

potentially available to everyone because everyone is able to tell a story and no equipment is required” (p. 44). Furthermore, Senehi (2002) highlights that telling a story doesn't require a certain level of education, college degree, or capability to create one-to-one connection in a simple way (p. 44). For this research, oral storytelling techniques that I am applying are based on constructive storytelling where individuals use their critical thinking to inquire about their surroundings, their values, and their beliefs to build a collective social shift (Senehi, 2002, p. 53). Oral storytelling is an educational tool for Iraqis' society members and former child soldiers; it could help them to understand and learn from their stories by presenting information that could challenge/prevent extremists' narratives. Thus, oral storytelling creates a collaborative environment for Iraqis' society members and initiates a platform for open conversations and dialogues (Senehi, 2002, p. 45). Galtung (2002) explains that oral storytelling encompasses a living experience that will provide an opportunity for the voiceless to use their voice and share their stories (Galtung, 2002). Similarly, Senehi (2002) agrees that storytelling is a direct interpersonal interaction and can generate and sustain person-to-person relationships in immediate and dynamic ways and generate feeling of closeness, community and security (p. 44). For Senehi, storytelling is a methodology for both apprehending and presenting knowledge. Frank (1995) asserts that through stories, people form themselves in the aftermath of life-altering experiences. Stories repair emotional and physical damages. Similar to Charon (2001), who also agrees that narratives give people who hurt power and control (p. 181). Cole (2010) acknowledges the complex relationship between narrative, power, and ideology and how people can use narratives to undermine legitimized power. In addition, Cole (2010) mentions the power of narrative in creating connections and expressing feelings (p. 652). Harter (2005) finds that “Narrative practices, including who is entitled to tell a story and when it can be told, reflect and establish power relations in a wide range of domestic and community institutions” (p. 192).

Extremists are very good at utilizing clear, compelling narratives based on their personal interpretation of the Quran. Storytelling may play a critical role in displaying different narratives, opening ways of communication, and boosting involvement in community engagement, but it might not reduce youth from joining extremism (Shaikh & Payne, 2014).



In summation, the literature on CVE suggests that challenging extremists and their narratives requires a range of responses including government work, military response, joint efforts from communities and civil societies to provide alternative compelling stories, and working with former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers' stories to expose what it looks like to be inside those groups and their untruth and lies.

## Research Design and Methodology

### Research Methodology

This research design relied only on qualitative methods to collect data. It was a quasi-experimental design consisting of pre and post intervention to measure changes in participants' perspectives and attitudes. The study employed narrative and consumer theories and is underpinned by a participatory action research framework. Campbell & Stanley (1963) define quasi-experimental design as the "opposite of a true experiment where the main components to the study are a random group assigned to the experiment (p. 34)." They add that experimental design is a process of comparison, of recording the difference, of contrast, or of knowledge. Additionally, they also emphasize any use of quasi-experimental design for educational research where knowledge or processes involve the proposing of a hypothesis that can be accepted or rejected (p. 35). On the other hand, they also explain the use of the word "prove" or "confirm" in any experimental results as inappropriate connotation for the validity of the design; instead, the results "probe" but not "prove" (p. 35). Therefore, I have no claim that this quasi-experiment will achieve or prove its objectives. For this research, the intervention was carried out with a selected group (not random) aged between 16-18 years old from Iraq who I, as a researcher, worked closely with through a leadership exchange program in the U.S. They are the main stakeholders for this study. Quasi-experimental design is subjected to questioning its validity because of the lack of a comparable baseline. Therefore, pre (X) and post (Y) intervention design was carefully laid out and implemented to have a baseline measurement, which assists in demonstrating a link between pre and post intervention and determining outcomes in a time series analysis (one week) to observe any changes in participants' knowledge & attitudes.

As a researcher, I incorporated the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework as another theoretical perspective. PAR guided this research to address a problem or to engage in social change, and encourage action through lived experiences that seek full collaboration by all participants' "systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change". In PAR, Knowledge is a living and it's day to day experiences by creating practical outcomes (Gillis & Jackson, 2002, p.5). Thus, PAR is used for this research to tackle ISIS child recruitment in Iraq and call for change through grassroots efforts. PAR is considered to be one option in qualitative data methods that relies on documenting and

analyzing patterns from the/an individual's view point. The purpose of qualitative methodology is to describe and understand, rather than to predict and control (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Gilbert (2001) states that qualitative research seeks to unearth the world through someone's eyes. "It helps to uncover the world through another's eyes" (Gilbert, 2001). Reason & Bradbury (2001) describe an action research approach as working towards practical outcomes and creating new forms of understanding. This practical knowledge increases the well-being of the communities through action and reflection. Thus, the only way to conduct the PAR is to involve the stakeholders in questioning and sensemaking (pp. 4-7). In addition, participants are active contributors to the research and participate in all phases of the research processes (Chandler & Torbet, 2003; Kelly, 2005). Applying the PAR can reshape knowledge for participants and researchers by creating a greater awareness for/of individuals. Consequently, Iraqi youth were the main stakeholders for this action research, where their participation, inputs, and knowledge are rooted in the outcomes of this research.

The research relied on the experimental design approach through applying narrative/storytelling as the third theoretical perspectives that contributed to the research design. This is a narrative approach when it relies on written words, spoken words, or visual images. Therefore, I used the narrative theory that Bal and Van Boheemen (2009) state that telling a story is considered a cultural artifact and it is one of many other narrative forms such as narrative text, images, and events, which are known as narratology (p. 3). For many of the narrative theories proposed, a narrative has many forms, and yet they all concurred that a story is one of the narratives forms. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) describes a story as an abstraction of text equivalent to its discourse, and consists of what we read or hear, and is spoken or written discourse as it is told (p. 4). In addition, Woodside (2010) explains the narrative processing and highlights it as the connection between the listener and the viewer "story's core message to the listener/viewer". Narrative processing creates or enhances self-brand connections which is known as the consumer theory "people generally interpret the meaning of their experiences by fitting their interpretations of experiences into a story" (p. 532). He adds that telling a compelling a story can help convince someone, for example, to buy something and why he/she needs to buy it. Convincing is difficult and it needs a creativity and conventional rhetoric, especially if the

story tells vivid images that have power and enable the listeners to harness it. “In a story, you do not only weave a lot of information into the telling but you also arouse your listener’s emotions and energy” (Woodside, 2010, p. 534). In my research, I focused on creating a vivid connection among participants and storyteller that would help the participants to understand and be exposed for the first time to former Iraqi ISIS child soldier stories and help to pursue audience understanding.

The intervention design is laid out in the following steps in a one-week time frame:

**Step 1.** The researcher asked each participant to write or tell a narrative about child soldiers that they knew, heard of in their communities, or read in the media (pre-intervention) that was guided by the following questions:

1. What do you know about child soldiers?
2. What picture comes to mind?
3. What is your personal opinion about former child soldiers?

**Step 2.** After that, the researcher read one open-sourced narrative about child soldiers (the intervention, Ibrahim’s story) that focused on ISIS recruiting propaganda in Iraq. Below are the two narratives from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers and their personal stories about what happened to them, reasons why they joined ISIS, and the truth of what happened to them inside ISIS (see Appendix H).

**Step 3.** The researcher followed up with participants and conducted one-on-one structured interviews. All interviews were approximately one hour in length and focused on the narratives they provided before hearing child soldiers’ stories and how those narratives changed as a result of hearing child soldiers’ stories (post- intervention). This was used to measure their attitudinal change towards child soldiers and was guided by the following questions:

1. How did you feel after reading the stories?
2. How does it resonate with you?
3. Have you been exposed to child soldiers’ stories before?
4. Did your narratives change after you read the stories? What has changed?
5. Why don’t you hear more often similar stories about child recruitment form the Middle East?

6. Why do youth need to hear similar stories?
7. Can stories play any role in challenging extremist narratives? How?

### **Participants Sampling and Recruitment**

World Learning Inc., an international nonprofit organization based in Brattleboro, Vermont, focuses on international development, education, and exchange programs that help people find their voices, connect with their communities, strengthen the institutions that form the backbone of a democratic society, and build relationships across cultures. Iraqi Young Leader Exchange Program (IYLEP) is one of their global youth exchange programs funded by the U.S. embassy in Iraq, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the United States Department of State, and the U.S.-based World Learning Inc. The program focuses on bringing Iraqi youth who represent different demographics like race (Arabs/Kurds) and religion (Muslims/Christians) to prompt mutual understanding and community engagement among them. It focuses on building and developing leadership skills, and fostering understanding relationships between different ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, it helps the emergence of Iraqi youth leaders to tackle critical global issues like poverty, conflict, and inequality. In the summer of 2018, I worked as a Youth Facilitator with IYLEP. I designed, led, and co-facilitated workshops and dialogues with Iraqi youth groups. Peacebuilding and community resilience were the themes for IYLEP 2018. Storytelling was an engagement tool that played a major role to bridging their differences and helped them recover from witnessing ISIS taking control of large cities and killing religious minority groups. As a result, the participants in this study have already been prepared through those workshops, activities, and training sessions to think about issues that face their communities and their peers. Participants in the IYLEP program self-selected because they have a drive to wrestle with heavy issues and tackle important topics. In addition, the participants for this research were selected based on their experiences in IYLEP dialogue sessions where participants shared personal stories. Stories that were shared for the first time created a connection and helped to amplify their voices and for those reasons they became key contributors to my research. During my time facilitating dialogue sessions through my Reflective Practice (RP) phase with IYLEP, I found storytelling was a force for change and I encouraged some of the participants to share their stories that helped others to listen actively and take

actions when they are in small groups. The small number allowed the participants to feel safe and less anxious to seek understanding and support, to change an image, and to build person-to-person connection. I reached out and recruited four (n=4) Iraqi participants (male and female) between the ages of 16-18 to be a part of this study. I will refer to them as participants (W, M, J, and Z.).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Based on the nature and the need of the research, having in-depth conversations with participants about their views on former child soldiers was necessary. Although there are many ways to collect data, only a qualitative data approach was considered for this research. According to O'Leary (2004), "Collecting credible data is a tough task, and it is worth remembering that one method of data collection is not inherently better than another" (p. 150). Kvale (1996) explains the importance of conducting interviews, as "interviewing is a way to collect data as well as to gain knowledge from individuals" (p. 14).

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of School for International Training and from an organization letter of support from World Learning Inc. The structured interviews were conducted via video chat one-on-one because the participants are in Iraq. Interview occurred between the end of January and the end of February 2019. Audio and video recordings were necessary for transcript and data analysis. I gave the participants basic information about the topic and the purpose of the interview. In addition, I provided where, when, and how the interview would take place. Most importantly, after receiving a detailed explanation of the study, all research participants provided electronic written forms for the following: minor consent form, parental permission form in English and in Arabic (which is the participants' and their parents' native language), and participant-informed consent forms. These forms were sent and obtained electronically prior to the interviews.

### **Data Collection Instrument**

Structured interviews were the main instrument for this study. Corbetta (2003, p. 269) states structured interviews are "interviews in which all respondents are asked the same questions with the same wording and in the same sequence." Moreover, structured interviews helped me as a researcher to have control over the topic and the format, which assisted with the analysis and coding. A clear interview guide

with the list of the questions and topics that I wanted to cover during the interview was sent to the participants beforehand. Although the interviews were conducted virtually, I was able to conduct virtual face to face interviews, which assisted me to have access to participants' points of views. According to Reinhartz (1992), "interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words, rather than the words of the researcher" (p. 19).

## **Ethics**

### **Confidentiality**

I assured the participants that the participation and information in this study would be protected and would be treated anonymously. This includes the right to privacy and the right to have private information remain confidential throughout the whole research process. Data obtained, such as interviews, audio records, forms, researcher notes, communication, and analysis, were protected and maintained anonymous.

### **Informed Consent**

After being informed of the research and the purpose of the study, participants made their own decisions about whether they wanted to participate in the research. This was done through the informed consent so each participant was accurately informed of the purpose, methods, risks, benefits to the research, and made a voluntary decision about whether to participate. In addition, parental consent forms were sent in English and Arabic (the participants' and their parents' native language). I also made it clear that participants can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason.

### **Positionality**

My research aims to explore the ISIS ideological narratives and practical recruitment narratives for children. Something I found very similar to my experience in the field is the practical narrative and the push and pull factors identified by practitioners in the field. Those factors include: socio-economic backgrounds, lack of education, revenge, and following family members or friends. Studying and analyzing ISIS ideological narratives has been an informative journey about scholars' and practitioners' perspectives in the field. However, based on my personal experience with former child soldiers in Yemen, it was very hard to conduct this study without acknowledging that I hold a bias. I believe former child soldiers are victims, not

criminals. Many scholars, UN agencies and practitioners in the field support that claim. In 2014, the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children Affected by Armed Conflict and UNICEF launched a campaign with hashtag #childrennotsoldiers. This aimed to raise awareness globally about how child soldiers should not be used in conflict. Derluyn et al (2015 ) argued in the BMC International Health & Human Rights report that criminalizing child soldiers, who acted based on the role they were assigned, needs to be reconsidered, and that restorative justices practices should be established in order to change how communities and legal systems perceive them:

We argue that the victim–perpetrator dichotomy in relation to child soldiers needs to be revisited, and that this can only be done successfully through a truly interdisciplinary approach. Key to this interdisciplinary dialogue is the growing awareness within all three disciplines, but admittedly only marginally within children’s rights law, that only by moving beyond the binary distinction between victim- and perpetrator-hood, the complexity of childhood soldiering can be grasped. In transitional justice, the concept of role reversal has been instructive, and in psychosocial studies, emphasis has been put on the ‘agency’ of (former) child soldiers, whereby child soldiers sometimes account on how joining the armed force or group was (partially) out of their own free will. Hence, child soldiers’ perpetrator-hood is not only part of the way child soldiers are perceived in the communities they return to, but equally of the way they see themselves. These findings plea for more contextualized approaches, including a greater participation of child soldiers, the elaboration of accountability mechanisms beyond criminal responsibility, and an intimate connection between individual, social and societal healing by paying more attention to reconciliation. (p. 1)

Regardless of my bias, I was aware that I entered this research knowing that I am a student of peacebuilding and conflict transformation and a practitioner who is analyzing ISIS ideological narratives for the first time and is eager to learn from the literature reviews. I placed my values and personal opinion aside to learn from the research participants who were impacted directly by ISIS.



### **Data Management and Analysis**

My research relied on narrative theory (Woodside, 2010). This is where knowledge and attitude are subject to change. Data analysis focused on the language used by research participants' to uncover underlying meaning and knowledge-generation patterns. I used the application Temi as a tool for data transcription. After the research, interviews were transcribed and organized into computer files. The data triangulation phase involved combinations of manual and computer software Nvivo to extract keywords and phrases from each interview pre and post intervention which helped to generate themes. After reading each interview transcript, I highlighted sections and keywords that were relevant to the research interview questions. Following the coding, I classified the data by identifying major themes that answered my research questions.

### **Credibility of Findings**

This research relied on the experimental design approach where I incorporated pre-post intervention in time series. I ensured and honored the participants' opinions, inputs in responding to the interview questions and the choices of their words to present and measure the findings for this study. Thus, the data triangulation phase involved combinations of manual and computer software for pre-intervention interviews and post-intervention interviews that overlapped among all the thematic codes. Also, to support the validity of the study findings, a member-checking technique was utilized in which the findings and conclusion were shared with the participants to eliminate any errors or misinterpretation of their meanings. Therefore, all the findings reflected the participants' perspectives in this study. Additionally, for validity and reliability of this research, the parental consent form was translated into Arabic, the mother language for participants and their parents.

### **Limitations**

As I mentioned above, the research data was built upon only qualitative research methods. I began with a research assumption and the use of theoretical frameworks to ask individuals and generate knowledge about the topic. Virtual one-on-one interviews were conducted (known as VoIP--Voice over Internet Protocol) through applications such as Skype and Facetime. The Skype voice and video application is a

software that helped me as a researcher to communicate with the participants based in Iraq and mitigated the geographic distance. The interviews were supported by email, where I sent out an electronic recruitment letter that contained an introduction of the interviewer and the process of the interview. After being sent the consent forms and interview questions guide were sent back by all the participants. Technical problems were a challenge for this study. I asked the participants to install Skype so I could conduct structured interviews as face-to-face as possible. This was difficult for some of the participants who did not have a Skype ID. I had to allocate time and accommodate a nine-hour time zone difference between the U.S and Iraq to ensure access to the software link and that was successfully installed on their smartphones or personal laptops. Besides this, another technical problem was power outages because of the conflict that has devastated the infrastructure across the country. Thus, I had to reschedule some of the interviews. However, there were many benefits to online interviews such as reduced travel and venue costs, and the ability to have access to populations who are hard to reach to conduct in-person interviews. Overall, while there were many benefits, I found that online interviews has some limitations, such as the absence of visual cues and expressions that are attached to the body: “the interviewer does not see the interviewee, so body language etc. cannot be used as a source of extra information” (Opdenakker, 2006, p. 4.). Although I conducted the interviews using video/voice to avoid missing nonverbal cues and their physical environment, I missed body cues such as rubbing the hands or fingers and that affected the interviews and data collection. According to Hesse-Biber and Griffin (2013), all gestures count and they can bring certain richness to qualitative data (p. 56).

## Findings

I conducted this research to answer the following questions: What impact does presenting youth-to-youth oral storytelling have on challenging ISIS recruitment and ideological narratives? What are some core ideological and particular extremist narratives and how does ISIS use it to recruit child soldiers? How can oral storytelling challenge these extremist narratives? By conducting interviews with my participants and analyzing the data within the conceptual framework, which incorporates aspects of experimental design and narrative and consumer theories, I found that oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers can be very beneficial in preventing other youth from joining extremist groups and challenging extremist groups recruitment narratives. To describe how I arrived at these conclusions, I will provide a breakdown of major themes relevant to the research literature reviews that emerged from each pre and post-intervention. In each phase, the findings are presented in pre-intervention themes, such as participants' interpretations and knowledge, personal opinions and vivid description. In post-intervention findings, the themes present were based on establishing a comparison that occurred after the intervention in participants' perspectives, attitudes, and personal opinions. In addition, the analysis pinpoints the reasons behind participants' lack of exposure to similar stories in Iraq or the Middle East. The data generated by participants suggested the steps that need to be taken by civil society organizations, government officials, and UN agencies about the future of storytelling practices as a preventive tool for child recruitment in Iraq. All findings represent the aggregated opinions of the participants involved in this study. I have left direct quotes from the participants as-is.

### Pre-Intervention Themes

#### Participants' Interpretations and Knowledge

During phase one, I asked the participants three questions that helped me extract their personal interpretations and knowledge of former child soldiers. The four participants who I will refer to as participants W, M, J, and Z expressed familiarity with the topic through listening and reading from media outlets - particularly western media. They shared their personal narratives about their knowledge of how children are being recruited. For participant M, he said "in the media it's written that they are forced, so not a

lot of them are do it because they want to, most of them are forced to. I've heard like some extremist group would go to their houses usually they will controlling area and then they would go into the houses and then they would tie up the families, the parents, and then they would told the kids that they think are suited to either join the group or they would kill the families and the kids. So the kid will never have that choice and they should accept” (Participant M, 2019). He added that he came across the topic from mainly western media because of his lack of trust and political affiliation for some of the Middle Eastern outlets. He said, “I haven't heard about it here because I don't usually listen to the Middle Eastern news and networks because I don't really trust them that much. They usually are related to a political party. But for the Western media, I usually try to research when I see a topic, I research different kind of networks to make sure that I get the real story” (Participant M, 2019).

For participant J, his understanding about the topic was based on legal aspects, which he summarized his understanding “they're outlawed pretty much throughout the world, around the world except in some developing countries.” He also added that they child soldiers are used by terrorist and extremist groups because they cost less and are easy to maintain. He explained “militias and arm insurgent use as a way to punish other people and as a way to get people to fight for them for cheap because usually if you are going to hire mercenaries for your insurgent group or anything, it's going to cost you a lot of money but child soldiers usually tend to be a lot cheaper. So it's actually quite easy for them to recruit child soldiers because they can also be brainwashed way easier than a fully developed male and it's a tragedy really that there are still child soldiers around the world” (Participant J, 2019). Similarly, participant Z explained his insights about the topic and others in his generation by describing the impact of social media on incentivizing children to join extremist groups as a main tool for recruitment. He added that his peers are apathetic about living and are manipulated easily: “as far as I know, they have been attracted by mainly social media, those are the main way to attract them, they misled by the worst recruiters that they will be saved and they will live a happier life and in our generation there is very high tendency to not care about life to death” (Participant Z, 2019).

### **Personal Opinions**

The significant commonality shared by participants' relationship to child soldiers is that children are victims and innocents that were forced, abducted, and threatened. Participant Z said, "they are lied to and misled and told false things to be convinced to do what they're asked to do, no child wishes to die or to get kill naturally whether either force them or manipulated them enough to make them think like that" (2019). However, participant M had a different opinion about Westerners who join ISIS. He explained his personal opinion about children who join extremist groups voluntarily. He said that "there are those who are forced to join like I said at the beginning, and I feel bad for them, their cities were taken by extremist groups. For example ISIS took a bunch of cities In Iraq and the people couldn't do anything. If you revolt, nothing would happen, you would just be killed. That's it. You had to wait for reinforcement until then you had to join them and I feel sorry for those people, but then again, there are people that would go and join them and then the most recent story about is the girl from Britain, at age of 15, she joined ISIS and now her citizenship is revoked and I don't feel sorry for her because my honest opinion about hers, she deserves what happened to her" (Participant M, 2019). He emphasized that children who were forced and had no choice should be protected "in my opinion they should be safe and that's the only thing that should happen". All four participants used emotional words to describe their personal opinions. For example, participant M stated "I feel very bad for them because that's their only option. That's the only thing they can do, I don't blame them for joining them because I'm saying it's very wrong, but that's what they are doing for survival" (Participant M, 2019).

### **Child Soldier Images (Vivid Description)**

One of the interview questions was: what image comes to your mind when I say 'child soldier'? I was curious to extract a vivid illustration from the participants about not only their knowledge and perspectives but to connect their emotional understanding by their actions. For participant M, he described the image of "a kid in the living room and his parents are tight up and there's extremist person pointing the gun at him and saying that you either have to join us or not" (Participant M, 2019).

Participant J used sympathy, which I considered a compassionate word to describe the image in his mind. Then he elaborated more: “When I think of the visual image in my mind is a developed war torn country where militants are fighting for control” ( Participant J, 2019).

Similarly, participant W described the image in her mind as “nine years old is carrying a gun on his shoulder bigger than him, leaving his house and looking back towered his younger siblings” (Participant W, 2019). For participant Z, “a suicide bomber” was the only two words that he used to describe the image in his mind.

### **Post-Intervention Themes**

#### **Changes in Attitude and Knowledge**

After applying the intervention on each of the participants through reading them a story of a former Iraqi ISIS child soldier, the participants were engaged in such an activity for the first time and were impacted intellectually and emotionally. Participant M expressed his sympathy to the struggles which of former Iraqi ISIS child soldier had to go through as a child: “his city was taken and he was the eldest and he has to take care of the family. I thought of you can understand where he's coming from, he is trying to help his family.” In contrast, participant M used his critical thinking skills to question former Iraqi ISIS child soldier actions and beliefs, “but then it escalated to the point where he said, he wanted to be a suicide bomber because he kind of started to believe in their cause and no, he has seen all the tortures he's seen what happened to people and then he starts believing in their cause. You can't feel sorry for these kinds of people you can feel sorry for the people that will go and suicide bomber. Like okay, you have this family you want to take care of, but what about the people that you're going to kill them that don't you feel sorry for them as well?” (2019) He elaborated more by questioning the child’s behaviors, moral foundation, and sense of right and wrong: “You're a kid but we learned from a young age that killing is wrong and then you want to protect your family, but then again, you want to be a suicide bomber to kill other people. Well, those other people have families as well. Right. So, yeah. I couldn't feel sorry for him after that” (Participant M, 2019).

Participant J struggled to describe his feelings: “Sad isn't even enough to describe it, it it's terrifying, honestly, because these children just like me and just like you when you were a child, we had dreams. They

had dreams, they have passions, they have talents, they want it to be something in life.” He stated how shocking it was to hear former Iraqi ISIS child soldier story and realized that it happened in his community “especially seeing that this takes place my own country, the country that I so wish to see succeed, it just breaks my heart honestly. Especially considering that these are innocent children being radicalized” (Participant J, 2019). To Participant Z, the story of former Iraqi ISIS child soldier assured his awareness and personal feelings about similar stories, “I already told you they tried to manipulate them and believing such things and, maybe if they wouldn't believe in it, at least they'll do it forced because they have to, they need money, they need for their families to live, so they will join them just so that the families continue to live.” He also stated that ISIS practices don't reflect real Islam and expressed his frustration and fears from what could be worse than ISIS “it's traumatizing knowing that they use the name of religion to justify everything because we both know that isn't the real Islam. I'm not even a Muslim, but I know that's not the real Islam because I have many Muslim friends that I consider very, very dear to my heart and I personally don't differentiate that between them and my local Christian friends at all. I believe that we're all one and we should all coexist.” He added “it's a shame and outrageous that the international community did not do enough to stop this is that they knew that this was going on” (Participant J, 2019).

He expanded by explaining some of the effects that impacted his generation through their childhood development: “As kids in Iraq, video games may have actually influenced these kids' minds. Let's say for example, these kids grew up playing video games and not just video games, they are playing with toy pistol and toy guns and all that and then they come in and see ISIS are storming into their town and taking over. They have big guns and they have trucks full of people. They maybe looking at them, they'd be like WOW cool I want to be like that.” Reading the former Iraqi ISIS child soldier story to the participants created an empathic connection that allowed them momentarily to be in the situation of a former Iraqi ISIS child soldier and opened the opportunity for personal connection. “I keep thinking about the possibility that child, the one who was child soldier, he could have been me. It could have been me” (Participant J, 2019).

### **Personal Opinions**

I asked the participants if their personal opinions changed after reading a former Iraqi ISIS child soldier narrative. Participants overall had similar opinions in the pre and post intervention where they expressed empathy for the former Iraqi ISIS child soldier. Participant J stated his opinion by saying “the keyword in this is children, they don't have fully developed brains to think properly. They made mistakes.” Additionally, M and J mentioned how this affected their communities by separating their capacity of understanding and recognizing their own feelings for those children who were forced and for those who joined ISIS voluntarily from foreign countries:

a lot of kids from Western countries, coming over joining ISIS and fighting for ISIS and being used as propaganda tools by them and now as we saw, there was a wide scale story on the news about this this British girl who wants to come back to Britain after joining ISIS and ISIS got defeated. I personally, and I'm sorry if my opinion offends people, but I have no remorse for people like her. Thousands of people of my community of other communities of my friends and my friends relatives who were fighter soldiers in the army and got killed by ISIS because of them, because of people like her who glorified this idea of Caliphate who wanted an adventure because of her ridiculous adventure. Thousands of people died and thousands are still more in captivity. So no, personally, I have no remorse for these kinds of people. I have no remorse (Participant J, 2019).

### **A Lack of Exposure**

Another commonality shared among all the participants was that they heard and felt a compelling story about a former Iraqi ISIS child soldier for the first time. Hearing this story helped them humanize and establish a real face to the story. I find this very important to mention considering their previous knowledge about child soldiers in Africa. Referencing back to the narrative theory where narrative processing creates or enhances self-brand connections between the listener and the viewer (Woodside, 2010), each of my participants reflected on their knowledge. Thus, they discovered that they read or heard many stories, not personal narratives, that reflected their communities. Each of my participants discussed the reasons that contributed to lack of exposure about similar stories in their communities. For example, M explained the



role of socioeconomic factors that affected his society and Middle Eastern sociocultural characteristics that guide community members behaviors, which played a major role and led to lack of exposure:

the Middle East is a complex place, you have the middle class and people live normally a part of the country and then you have the other parts of the country where it's just taken over by extremist group of people are taken hostage or becoming child soldiers and here is the thing, the problem is people saying that the child soldiers aren't a lot in the Middle East and they think just because as a small cities taken, only a small part of child soldiers are taken. They don't know what that just because a part of the country is living like normally and peacefully, that doesn't mean the other part is living normally peacefully. There are a lot of child soldiers out there and I feel some being killed before telling their stories or they just are too ashamed to tell their stories. You know growing up of age of thinking that, you know what I once was an ISIS, I've done this and murdered this, maybe the society will not take me back. So I should not tell my story and I will keep the secret with me forever so that people don't know about me. But in Africa it's kind of different. Everyone is living like that. Like you have a country and I can see 90% of the country are living like that. So people, when they get forced, they know that they're not only one, they know that there are other people that are forced and they know the society will take them back and that's why they talk about it more. So that's what I think is the problem (Participant M, 2019).

Participants J echoed this, describing the burden of Middle East culture that influenced people's norms and beliefs: “We have in the Middle East called honor and this really affects the family's honor, they usually want to keep their reputation very clean and they don't want something to come take their family's reputation.” He added that the personal safety conditions that could affect child soldiers’ families in the future: “These children or the people who recruited them are pretty much told them to keep quiet for safety and security for the families” (Participants J, 2019).

### **The Future of Transformational Storytelling**

The interview questions were not only to test a hypothesis but also were aimed at finding out steps that needed to be taken to hear stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers in participants’ communities and

why they needed to hear them. Participant J shared the reasons of why they need to hear similar stories in his communities where other children can benefit from hearing personal narratives and can prevent them from joining a terrorist group. He stated “it reduces every single, every possibility that these kids are going to want to go and join ISIS or other extremist groups. This is on the voluntary side, the involuntary side where let's say they wouldn't want to go and join them, but let's say that ISIS does invade their town and they have to. They would know about the risks of being a child soldier. They will know I guess you could say it's not as cool as they thought it was.” He also reiterated the role that storytelling can play in challenging extremist narratives through hearing former Iraqi ISIS child soldier stories using their own words that will change people’s opinions and can assist in building communities through showing sympathy to those children. He suggested these stories need to be broadcast on TV and radio channels where everyone can listen to them “because once again, once these stories get out, people's opinions change. People here are very, very attached to the news because the news, the only thing that really keeps them up to date with what's going on at their country. So let's see if these stories were actually published on TV. If children like Ibrahim were invited on TV platforms to come and have an interview with them, is it really changed people's views. They become more sympathetic, but in the right way.”

Participant Z explained the impact of similar stories on his peers and community where listening to a story of former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers can generate a connection between them and the listener and help to humanize. “Storytelling is beneficial. We know the main things but knowing specify person will humanize the person and the whole case. A story of a specific person like Ibrahim and telling their story, we all know general themes of those stories but specifying the story and giving someone's name where make you feel is one of us. Definitely will help” (Participant Z, 2019). Similarly, participant M asserted that telling a former Iraqi ISIS child soldier’s story will inspire others to tell their stories and change perspectives of those who think that child soldiers joined terrorist groups voluntarily instead of coercively. He added that telling stories has the power to not only changing people's perspectives but could enable communities to take them back:

in this country, for example, Iraq, there are a lot of young children becoming child soldiers. Then maybe one story will encourage another story, another story encourage another story. So this will

make everyone admit and tell their own stories so that it shows that the people are forced to do it. They didn't do it on their own. they didn't do it because they wanted to, they are forced to do it because some people here don't feel sorry for them. I think that once you joined them that's it. You're part of them and you have done wrong and that's it. You can never change it. But with this story, you can see that at the beginning at least you could see that he was forced to and he had to do it and he thought this was the right thing for survival for his family. So if we hear more stories about like this, maybe the society will start taking comeback (Participant M, 2019).

He explained that storytelling can prevent other children from joining terrorist groups, which will help expose their ideological lies they used as tactics to brainwash children. He mentioned “stories are important. For example, I heard a story about what ISIS does to suicide bomber. They would give them keys to put it around their necks and then they say “this is the key heaven and if died in the suicide bomb, you will go to go to heaven. You see these ideas are wrong and using these like stories when people speak up about what really happened and what their psychology methods they use on the people, then this will help stop it in the future” (Participant M, 2019). He also emphasized the role of the government in establishing community-based programs that will encourage the community to return former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers. He said “the government should take measures and showed and the society will accept them back because the government is like the parents of the society and as the government accepts you back then your parents would accept you back then the whole country would accept you back” (Participant M, 2019)

This study, which was based on a quasi-experimental design which allowed for comparisons through pre and post intervention based on oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldier, will serve as counter strategy and will challenge extremist narratives to expose their lies and might contribute in preventing other youth from joining ISIS. During pre-intervention, there was a large amount of evidence that showed participants had prior knowledge of child soldiers. However, it showed a lack of exposure for child soldier stories in their own communities. In post-intervention, the data showed participants' behaviors and attitudes changed a was shocking extent after hearing former Iraqi ISIS child soldier story: “I didn't know that happened to them” (Participant J, 2019).

Analyzing these responses through the narrative and consumer theories revealed that reading former Iraqi ISIS child soldier stories to the participants in post-intervention did not change their personal opinions but it was able to determine the direct effects of the narrative on the participants' attitudes and knowledge towards former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers. The findings disclosed that participants were influenced by oral storytelling when they reflected on their experiences. For example participant J stated “these children just like me and just like you when you were a child, we had dreams. They had dreams, they have passions, they have they have talents, they want it to be something in life” (Participant J, 2019).

The story that was told to the participants included places and names in which participants felt related to them and it created a personal bond between them and the former Iraqi ISIS child soldier. Telling the story allowed participants to have a sense of their lives and gave them an opportunity to think about what and why it happened. Telling former Iraqi ISIS child soldier story helped the participants to understand the world through his eyes. It helped them compare their experiences to the experienced of former Iraqi ISIS child soldier's story. According to the quasi-experimental design for this study, it did not disapprove or confirm that oral storytelling from an former Iraqi ISIS child soldier will challenge extremist narratives. However, I can conclude clearly that the intervention provided a platform for those stories to be heard and challenged ISIS recruitment narratives in Iraq for the first time. Furthermore, reading a narrative to the participants enabled them to practice their sensemaking and for their surroundings and contributed to changing their attitude. The design not only assisted me to measure the effectiveness of oral storytelling on the participants but also highlighted the reasons for the absences of oral storytelling practices in their societies and showed the necessity of implementing similar interventions.

It was evident from the interviews that spoken word holds a lot of power for the participants. “We all know general themes of those stories but specifying the story and giving someone's name where make you feel is one of us but knowing specify person will humanize the person and the whole case. A story of a specific person like Ibrahim and telling their story, definitely will help humanize them” (Participant Z, 2019). Based on the findings, evidence showed participants had knowledge about the topic of child soldiers in Africa and Latin America. However, there have been no efforts made in hearing similar stories to

Ibrahim's in Iraq. It also provided an analysis of why and what efforts should be done to ensure shedding light on those stories. The findings of this study demonstrated that telling stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers will play a critical role in reducing and preventing their peers from joining ISIS, as it undermined ISIS recruitment narratives and their fake Caliphate where they used falsehoods to gain supporters.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Every research project has limitations. One of this study's limitations was sample size of the. Although I had a small sample size it doesn't preclude anyone from testing the hypothesis on larger groups. Hackshaw explained the necessity to mentions the need for further studies on large groups hypothesis data creation in the research "It is often better to test a new research hypothesis in a small number of subjects first. This avoids spending too many resources, e.g. subjects, time and financial costs, on finding an association between a factor and a disorder when there really is no effect. However, if an association is found it is important to make it clear in the conclusions that it was from a hypothesis-generating study and a larger confirmatory study is needed." (Hackshaw, 2008, p. 1141).

Another limitation that I encountered during this study was the location. I conducted all interviews virtually because I was based in the United States and participants are based in Iraq. I used Skype to limit missing physical cues (which I included in detail in the methodology section). I probably missed some nonverbal cues when the participants showed discomfort during the interviews. Therefore, I would highly recommend considering the location of this study where participants and researcher will be at the same place.

Interview scheduling impacted this study significantly, Iraq is nine hours ahead from United States, and therefore I had to conduct some of the interviews around 4AM and some others after midnight. Additionally, January and February was the timeframe allocated for this study but it was in middle of term exams for all the participants who are in their senior year in high school. It was very challenging to schedule interviews and find a time that balanced their studies and other commitments. There were times that we rescheduled the interviews 3 times to fit with participants' schedules and classes.

Another challenge was the gender balance in this study. While I designed the research proposal to interview two females and two males, during the process of participant recruitment, I managed to get three males and one female. This served the research findings significantly since most of the ISIS child recruitment were mainly boys. Therefore, for further research, I would recommend conducting interviews and recruit a majority of boys with which would increase the chances of gaining a deeper understanding and

broader perspectives about the topic and how it affected them directly. This being said, I believe that gender and sex is important in decision-making and gender balance in any research is a strength, particularly in the field of peacebuilding and community-building. Thus, I would recommend including girls during the recruitment process but the main sample focus on boys.

Lastly, the intervention design for this research was experimental. Ideally the participants would hear a former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers telling their story, instead I as a researcher had to use my voice and read the story. While the narrative itself was very compelling and impactful on interviewee, I believe it could have gained a deeper influence if it was read in a child's voice. Accordingly, for further research I would recommend the use of a child's voice which would engage the participants emotionally and build more a profound connection.

### **Conclusion**

This study began with one main question: what impact does youth-to-youth oral storytelling have on challenging ISIS recruitment narratives and ideological narratives? The goal of this study was to examine different approaches in challenging ISIS narratives, rather than military methods, in order to delegitimize ISIS ideological extremist narratives. To answer the research question, I compared a pre-post test based on oral storytelling from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers. This was done to serve as a counter-strategy to extremist narratives in order to expose ISIS false narratives, which might contribute in preventing other youth from joining ISIS. With little previous scholarly research about successful, proven effective approaches in preventing violent extremist narratives, this research sought to measure the influence of compelling stories as a non-violent approach in challenging ISIS extremist narratives. The findings of this study indicate the transformative power of oral storytelling on participants' perspectives and attitudes. The story that was told by former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers contributed to exposing ISIS untrue narratives as an alternative approach to undermine ISIS ideological messages. The study examined the impact of spoken words on combating ISIS falsehoods. It enabled the participants to humanize and sympathize with child soldiers'. Furthermore, the data provided by the participants identified the reasons behind their lack of exposure to former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers' stories, such as socioeconomic status and sociocultural characteristics which affect the local communities and their perceptions around child soldiers. Accordingly, the data offered ways that oral storytelling, as an initiative in post-conflict, can serve as a powerful prevention strategy in amplifying former Iraqi ISIS child soldier stories and spreading mass-awareness through broadcasting these stories on TV, radio and inviting them to speak in their local communities. The data also suggested that government and community-based programs can contribute and facilitate child soldier reintegration processes in which create a space their stories to be heard and welcomed in their communities.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

#### Electronic Recruitment Letter

Good afternoon,

My name is Fadia Thabet, a Yemeni national and a student at SIT Graduate Institute, Vermont campus pursuing MA Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation.

As requirement for the completion of MA Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation at SIT Graduate Institute, I need to complete my capstone by conducting an interesting research relevant to my degree producing 30-50 pages document. The research will explore the role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives

I intend to hold virtual one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 4 participants who attended Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP) for two weeks in Brattleboro, Vermont in summer 2018.

I will be very appreciative if you voluntarily participate in this research. Please email me at [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu) or call me at (612) 814- 7394

Thanks for your cooperation.

Best

Fadia Thabet

MA Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

SIT Graduate Institute, Vermont Campus.

**Appendix B: Participant Informed Consent Form****School for International Training**

@ World Learning

**Participant Informed Consent Form**

**Title of the Study:** Challenging Extremist' Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-to-Youth Oral Storytelling in Iraq

**Name:** Fadia Thabet . I am a student at SIT Graduate Institute. Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation Program .

I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decided to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy of this form. If you are under 18, your parent or guardian must sign this form and you must sign an assent form.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives.

**Study Procedures**

Your participation will consist of responding to one-on-one call interview. In order to ensure accurate representations of your responses, All interviews will be audio-recorded. One-on-one call interview will require approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts**

I believe that participants' participation in IYLEP prepared and gave participants a unique quality to be leaders and active citizens and seek changes in their communities. IYLEP prop them to tackle challenges and issues that impact them and their peers directly. Participants in the IYLEP program self-selected that program because they have a drive to wrestle with weighty issues and tackle important topics. In IYLEP, participants voluntarily completed projects on topics such as child homelessness, sexual assault, and child poverty, food scarcity, and cancer. There is no penalties if you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During the one-on-one call interview you have the right not to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time.

**Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society**

There are no specific, anticipated benefits to participants in this study. However, participation in this study might encourage the storytelling practices in your communities and the role of storytelling as an educational and analytic tool as learning skills.

**Confidentiality**

Any identifiable information obtained about this study will remain confidential. Your name will not be used but I may mention your gender and race. Only I will have access to the complete data obtained during one-on-one call interviews. All audio recordings and electronic communication will be stored on my personal computer which is locked by password.

If you agree to be quoted in our final analysis and presentation, only gender and race will be provided.

**Participation And Withdrawal**

Participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study

“I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.”

Participant’s signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent for audio recording, typed notes to be taken by Interviewer during Interview/Focus Group**

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to...

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to...

**Consent for Future Use of Data**

I may wish to use data collected in interviews and/or surveys for future academic analysis beyond this specific paper. As with this current paper, anonymity for all research participants will be maintained in future academic usage.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to usage of my anonymized interview and/or survey in future academic work of the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to usage of my anonymized interview and/or survey in future academic work of the researcher.

**RESEARCHER’S CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu) or my advisor at [bruce.dayton@sit.edu](mailto:bruce.dayton@sit.edu)

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by an SIT Study Abroad Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training  
Institutional Review Board  
1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676  
Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA  
irb@sit.edu  
802-258-3132



**Appendix C: Parental Permission Form for Child's Research Participation**

**Title of the study:** Challenging Extremist' Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-to-Youth Oral Storytelling in Iraq

**Name:** Fadia Thabet

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study, what we will ask your child to do, and the way we would like to use information about your child if you choose to allow your child to be in the study.

**Why are you doing this study?**

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study about role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives

**What will my child be asked to do if my child is in this study?**

Your child will be asked to (write or tell) a narrative about child soldiers that he/she knew, heard in their communities, or read in the media. After that, the researcher will read 1-2 open-sourced stories about child soldiers that focus on extremist recruiting propaganda. After that, the research will follow up with participants and conduct one-on-one open-ended interviews lasting between 45 minutes to one hour which will focus on their narratives they provide before hearing child soldiers' stories and how that narratives change of resulting hearing child soldiers' stories.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts to my child?**

Your child's participation in this study does not involve any physical risk. However, there are risks around emotional triggering. Your child may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions. your child can tell the interviewer at any time if he/she wants to take a break or stop the interview. If your child is uncomfortable, they are free to not answer or skip to any question at any time during the interview.

**What are the possible benefits for my child or others?**

This study may not benefit your child directly. However, it is designed to learn more about the extent of hypothesis impact of youth-to-youth oral storytelling will prevent children from joining extremist groups.

**How will you protect the information you collect about my child, and how will that information be shared?**

The audio records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All files will be kept using password protected files. Only I, the researcher, will have access to any recordings or transcripts of your child's responses and they will be destroyed after research is completed in May 2019. Your name will not be used but I may mention your gender and race. If you agree to be quoted in our final analysis and presentation, only gender and race will be provided. If you and/or your child provide me with an email address, I will share my final results with you when they are available.

**Financial Information**

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you or your child. Your child will not be paid for participating in this study.

**What are my child's rights as a research participant?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may withdraw from this study at any time -- you and your child will not be penalized in any way or lose any sort of benefits for deciding to stop participation.

If your child decides to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask if the information already collected can be used or not.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?**

If you or your child have any questions, you may contact the researcher at

Name: Fadia Thabet, Email: [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu) , phone number: (612) 814-7394

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the following office at the School for International Training:

School for International Training Institutional Review Board 1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676

Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA

[irb@sit.edu](mailto:irb@sit.edu)

802-258-3132

**Consent to Quote from Interview**

I may wish to quote from the interview with your child either in the presentations or articles resulting from this work. [If a pseudonym will be used, include this statement

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to... \_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to... Consent to Audio-Record Interview

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to... \_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to...

---

Parent/Legal Guardian's Name (printed) and Signature

Date

---

Name of Person Obtaining Parental Permission

Date

## Appendix D: Parental Permission Form for Child's Research Participation Arabic Version

### نموذج إذن الوالدين لمشاركة أطفالهم في الأبحاث

عنوان الدراسة: منع سرديات التطرف العنيف من خلال رواية القصص الشفوية للشباب في العراق  
الاسم: فادية ثابت

يُطلب من طفلك المشاركة في دراسة بحثية. يحتوي هذا النموذج على معلومات مهمة حول سبب إجراء هذه الدراسة ، وما سنطلب من طفلك القيام به ، والطريقة التي نرغب فيها في استخدام معلومات حول طفلك إذا اخترت السماح لطفلك بالدخول إلى الدراسة.

لماذا تفعلين هذه الدراسة؟

يُطلب من طفلك المشاركة في دراسة بحثية حول دور رواية القصص عن طريق الشباب إلى الشباب في منع سرد التطرف العنيف في العراق. الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو فهم مدى تأثير فرضية رواية القصص من الشباب إلى الشباب على منع الأطفال من الانضمام إلى الجماعات المتطرفة.

ماذا سيطلب من طفلي أن يفعل إذا كان طفلي في هذه الدراسة؟

سيطلب من طفلك المشاركة في ما هو دور تأثير رواية القصص التي مروا بها خلال خمس جلسات حوارية في برنامج تبادل القادة الشباب العراقي (IYLEP) لمدة أسبوعين في براتلبورو ، فيرمونت. سوف تستغرق المشاركة حوالي 45 دقيقة إلى ساعة واحدة. أرغب في تسجيل صوتي لطفلك أثناء قيامه بإجراء مقابلة هاتفية واحدة عبر الإنترنت / المكالمات للتأكد من أننا نتذكر جميع المعلومات بدقة. سأحتفظ بهذه التسجيلات الصوتية في مجلد في حاسوبي الشخصي محمي بكلمة مرور وسوف يستخدمها الباحث فقط. سوف أقوم بتسجيل طفلك فقط إذا تم إعطائي الإذن

ما هي المخاطر أو المضايقات المحتملة لطفلي؟

مشاركة طفلك في هذه الدراسة لا تنطوي على أي مخاطر جسدية. ومع ذلك ، هناك مخاطر حول التحفيز العاطفي ومشاركة القصص الشخصية أو الاتصالات المباشرة / غير المباشرة بالموضوع. قد يشعر طفلك بالعاطفة أو الانزعاج عند الإجابة على بعض الأسئلة. يمكن لطفلك أن يخبر المحاور في أي وقت إذا كان يريد أخذ استراحة أو إيقاف المقابلة. إذا كان طفلك غير مرتاح ، فهو لديه الحرية والخيار في عدم الإجابة أو التخطي لأي سؤال في أي وقت أثناء المقابلة أو مناقشة مجموعة التركيز. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، سوف أقوم بالتنسيق مع الموجهين العراقيين للتعليم العالمي لمتابعة وإعداد نظام الدعم لأي ضغوط عاطفية قد يواجهها المشاركون. خلال برامج الشباب ، يحتوي كل برنامج على 1-2 من الموجهين العراقيين الكبار الذين شاركوا مع المشاركين من المراحل الأولى مثل الإعداد والتوجيه. وقد طور الموجهون علاقات وثيقة مع المشاركين وهم لا يزالون على اتصال دائم بهم لدعم ومتابعة تنفيذ المشروع النهائي في العراق.

ما هي الفوائد المحتملة لطفلي أو غيره؟

هذه الدراسة قد لا تفيد طفلك مباشرة. ومع ذلك ، فقد تم تصميمه لمعرفة المزيد عن مدى تأثير فرضية رواية القصص عن طريق الشباب إلى الشباب الذي يمكن ان يمنع الأطفال من الانضمام إلى الجماعات المتطرفة في المستقبل.

كيف ستقوم بحماية المعلومات التي تجمعها عن طفلي ، وكيف ستتم مشاركة هذه المعلومات؟

سيتم الاحتفاظ بالسجلات الصوتية لهذه الدراسة بسرية تامة. سيتم الاحتفاظ بجميع الملفات باستخدام ملفات محمية بكلمة مرور. لن يتمكن سوى الباحث من الوصول إلى أي تسجيلات أو نصوص لردود طفلك وسيتم التخلص منها بعد اكتمال البحث في مايو 2019. لن يتم استخدام اسم طفلك ولكن يمكنني ذكر جنس و عرق طفلك. إذا وافقت على أن يتم اقتباس طفلك في تحليلنا النهائي والعرض التقديمي ، فسيتم تقديم الجنس والعرق فقط. إذا زودتني أنت و / أو طفلك بعنوان بريد إلكتروني ، فسوف أطلعك على نتائج النهائية عندما تكون متوفرة.

؟المعلومات المالية

لن تشمل المشاركة في هذه الدراسة أي تكلفة عليك أو لطفلك. لن يتم دفع راتب لطفلك للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة.

ما حقوق طفلي كمشارك في الأبحاث؟

المشاركة في هذه الدراسة طوعية. يحق لطفلك الانسحاب من هذه الدراسة في أي وقت - لن تكون هناك أي عواقب لك أو لطفلك بأي شكل من الأشكال أو تخسر أي نوع من المزايا عند اتخاذك قرار وقف المشاركة.

إذا قرر طفلك الانسحاب من هذه الدراسة ، فسوف يسأل الباحث ما إذا كانت المعلومات التي تم جمعها يمكن استخدامها أم لا.

من الذي يمكنني الاتصال به إذا كانت لدي أسئلة أو مخاوف بشأن هذه الدراسة البحثية؟

إذا كان لديك أو لطفلك أي أسئلة ، يمكنك الاتصال بالباحث في

الاسم: فادية ثابت ، بريد إلكتروني: [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu) ، رقم الهاتف: ٧٣٩٤-٨١٤-٦١٢

إذا كان لديك أي أسئلة حول حقوق طفلك كمشارك في هذا البحث ، يمكنك الاتصال بالمكتب التالي في مدرسة التدريب الدولية:

School for International Training Institutional Review Board 1 Kipling Road  
P.O Box 676  
Brattleboro، VT 05302-0676 USA  
irb@sit.edu  
802-258-3132

توافق على اقتباس من مقابلة  
قد أود أن أقتبس من المقابلة مع طفلك إما في العروض أو المقالات الناتجة عن هذا العمل.  
(أولي) أوافق على ... (الأولي) لا أوافق على ... الموافقة على مقابلة التسجيل السمعي  
بداية واحدة مما يلي للإشارة إلى اختيارك:  
(أولي) أوافق على ... (الأولي) أنا لا أوافق على ...

وتاريخ التوقيع

اسم ولي الأمر / الوصي القانوني (مطبوع)

تاريخ

اسم الشخص الحاصل على الإذن الوالدي

## **Appendix E: Minor Consent Form**

**Title of the Study:** Challenging Extremist' Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-to-Youth Oral Storytelling in Iraq

**Name:** Fadia Thabet

I am doing a study about role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives.

### **Why have you been asked to be part of this study?**

I would like you to participate in a research study role that oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to complete one-on-one call interview. Participation should take about 45 minutes-1 hour.

### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts for you?**

There are risk around emotional triggering. Your participation in IYLEP prepared and gave you a unique quality to be leaders and active citizens and seek changes in their communities. IYLEP prop you to tackle challenges and issues that impact you and your peers directly. Your parents know about the study and have agreed that you can participate if you want to.

### **Are the benefits to being in this study?**

This study may not benefit you directly. However, participation in this study might encourage the storytelling practices in their communities and the role of storytelling as an educational and analytic tool as learning skills.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only I, the researcher, will have access to any audio recordings and electronic communication transcripts of your responses and they will be destroyed after research is completed in May 2019.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher or anybody else. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

### **Who will see the information collected about you?**

When I am finished with this study I will write a report about what I learned and will present my findings. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study but I may mention your gender and race.

Please feel free to contact me or my advisor if you have any questions about the study.

I understand what I will be asked to do in this study. I understand that I can stop participating at any time.

I want to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Minor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Consent to Quote from Interview**

I may wish to quote from the interview with you either in the presentations or in articles resulting from this work. No name will be used to protect your identity.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I agree to usage of quotes from this interview.

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I do not agree to usage of quotes from this interview.

### **Consent to Audio-Record Interview**

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I agree to be audio-recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I do not agree to audio-recorded.

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu) or my advisor at [bruce.dayton@sit.edu](mailto:bruce.dayton@sit.edu)

**Appendix F: Letter Request for Organization's Support (To World Learning Inc)**

Dec 1, 2018

Name: Ms. Fadia Thabet

School: School for International Training

Major: Master of Arts in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Class: Programs in Intercultural Management (PIM) 76.2

Address: 1 Kipling Road, P.O. Box 13B, Brattleboro, Vermont 05301

Dear Ms. Longman, Program Officer, Global Exchange World Learning

I am currently a student at SIT Graduate Institute based in Vermont. I successfully completed the Reflective Practice (Practicum) phase, working with World Learning as a Youth Facilitator for the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Programs (IYLEP) 2 and 4, and I am currently working on my capstone research paper in order to graduate in May 2019.

I am researching the impact of youth-to-youth oral storytelling plays in challenging extremist recruitment narratives in Iraq. The research will explore the hypothesis that presenting personal stories from former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers to same-age peers will expose the falsity of current extremist recruitment narratives. My research focuses on the impact of oral storytelling as an analytic tool to unpack and combat recruitment narratives extremist by telling their communities the untold stories of how they were recruited and physically and psychologically harmed.

The study will be carried out in a Quasi Experimental Design with 4 participants. I will ask participants to (write or tell) a narrative about child soldiers that participants knew, heard in their communities, or read in the media. After that, the researcher will read 1-2 open-sourced stories about child soldiers that focus on extremist recruiting propaganda. After that, I will follow up with participants and conduct one-on-one open-ended interviews lasting between 45 minutes to one hour which will focus on their narratives they provide before hearing child soldiers' stories and how that narratives change of resulting hearing child soldiers' stories. I will reach out with a consent form to receive permission from participants' parents to participate in this study.

I believe that participants' participation in IYLEP prepared and gave them a unique quality to be leaders and active citizens and seek changes in their communities. IYLEP prop them to tackle challenges and issues that impact them and their peers directly. This study will include no more risk than the average adult consuming current news. Participants in the IYLEP program self-selected that program because they have a drive to wrestle with weighty issues and tackle important topics Your approval to conduct this study would be greatly appreciated. For further questions, please contact me at [fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu](mailto:fadia.thabet@mail.sit.edu).

Thank you very much!

Fadia Thabet

Master's Candidate in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Noted by:

**Pro. Bruce Dayton**

**Appendix G: Organization's Letter of Support****World Learning Letter of Support**

Cari Hlousek Graves, Director, Youth Development Team, Global Exchange  
Youth Program, World Learning  
1015 15th St NW #750,  
Washington, DC 20005

Dear IRB Board of SIT Graduate Institute:

World Learning has no objection to Fadia Thabet's Capstone research proposal. Her project entitled, "Challenging Extremist Recruitment Narratives Through Youth-to-Youth Oral Storytelling in Iraq", envisions outreach to alumni of the Iraq Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP). World Learning supports Ms. Thabet's stated objectives of understanding the role of person-to-person storytelling in combatting violent extremism among youth, a goal which tracks closely with World Learning's own mission and values.

World Learning does not have the authority to grant or deny Ms. Thabet permission to contact, or work with, IYLEP program alumni. It is our understanding that she does not intend to utilize World Learning resources or the organization's direct support to conduct her research, however we hope that her research contributes to the understanding of this important topic and appreciate the opportunity to learn from her findings.

Sincerely,

*Cari Hlousek Graves*

Cari Hlousek Graves  
Director, Youth Development Team  
World Learning  
Cari.Graves@worldlearning.org



## Appendix H: Interview Guide Questions

The research relies on virtual one-on-one semi-structured interviews given the fact that the participants are in Iraq.

### Step 1:

The researcher will ask participants to (write or tell) a narrative about their current understanding of child soldiers that participants knew, heard in their communities, or read in the media. (15 min) Up to you, if you want to record it with me or write it down and send it guided with the following questions:

1. What do you know about child soldiers?
2. What picture comes to mind?
3. What is your personal opinion about former child soldiers?

### Step 2:

The researcher will tell a story/narrative from open-sourced about former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers' to the participants.

### Step 3:

Then, the researcher will conduct a one-one follow-up interview with semi structured questions such as:

4. How did you feel after reading the stories?
5. How does it resonate with you?
6. Have you been exposed to child soldiers' stories before?
7. Did your narratives change after you read the stories? What has changed?
8. Why don't you hear more often similar stories about child recruitment from the Middle East?
9. Why do youth need to hear similar stories?
10. Can stories play any role in challenging extremist narratives? How?

## General information

- 1) Gender
  - Male..... Female.....
- 2) Race
  - Arab..... Kurdish.....
- 3) Religion
  - Muslim..... Christian .....

## Appendix I: Former Iraqi ISIS Child Soldier Narrative

The narratives that I read for the participants focused on former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers and their personal stories about what happened to them, reasons why they joined ISIS and the horrific truth of what happened to them inside ISIS. The following narratives are former Iraqi ISIS child soldiers' voices from open-sources on the internet..

### Narrative 1:

My name is Ibrahim and I am from Iraq. When I was in school, I used to love math and I dreamed of being an aeronautical engineer. My father was killed by a sniper in 2012. I was the elder son of three children and I had to help my mother. I am an ex-ISIS fighter who is now in Turkey. I was 13 when ISIS took down my town. When they took over my town, ISIS started to recite verses from the Quran, speeches from Mohammed. They said they were the real Islamic State and would fulfill all the obligations of Islam. They came to us and said, "You will be martyrs and you will earn paradise and virgins and they will also they told us come to join us and we will take care of your family financially."

I started as an informer and then graduated to weapons training in one of ISIS camps. When I worked as an informer, I had to report about people who smoked, and gave them information of people who didn't go to mosque. They forced me to follow the women who didn't wear the right clothes and bring them in from the street. Sometimes, they brought captive soldiers and they told us, if you want to kill any of these prisoners, you are allowed to kill them. They forced me and other children to watch beheadings. Even if they cut the head of a father, they made the child watch. They told me the way to paradise was through them and I was controlled by them completely.

I really wanted to become a suicide bomber, and I put my name on the list. But then I saw what happened to the people that came before me. No one took care of their families. So, I took my name off the list. I saw a lot of things in the in prison. I have seen how they tortured people in a cruel way, no limits to the torture. Also, if someone can't fast during Ramadan, they would lock them up for the whole Ramadan. Then, when they let them out, they pour honey on them and leave them outside for the wasps.

### Narrative 2:

My name is Muatesm. I was 16 when ISIS recruited me. I used to work in hospitals to help ISIS fighters who were injured in the battle. Before that I used to work as an informer then I graduated to weapons training in ISIS camps. It took 14 days from ISIS to recruit me where they promised me they will help me and my family financially. After ISIS claimed responsibility of a France attack, I was very angry when the French government responded with airstrikes on ISIS days and nights. I couldn't sleep. I was very angry because lots of innocent civilians died.

ISIS detained me and other children in an apartment for several days without food or any other services. I escaped from ISIS after I saw one of the ISIS fighters attacked and beat a woman in the street. Then I realized that everything they said to support their ideology is wrong and doesn't reflect on Islam and how we practice it.