



C R T G

Generational Warfare in the Sahel: The Khilafa Cubs and the Dynamics of Violent Insurgency within the Islamic State Province

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ABOUT CRTG WORKING GROUP

The CRTG Working Group is the world's first organization dedicated to addressing the involvement of children with terrorism and violent extremism. We help understand the nature of child involvement with terrorist and violent extremist actors, support prevention and mitigation efforts.

The CRTG Working Group recognizes that child exploitation in terrorism is an evolutionary outcome of terrorist tactics and strategy and one of the core elements enabling the long-term survival of terrorist organizations, spreading violent ideology, and fueling conflict. We acknowledge that addressing the complex and evolving nature of the terrorist threat, requires our own adaptation and therefore, we are intentionally forward-looking in our understanding of children's role - as a factor that can exacerbate existing challenges, but also one that can, when effective intervention measures are implemented and sustained, provide new solutions to current threats that we confront and help prevent new ones from materializing.

Through a multi-tiered approach, the CRTG Working Group provides unique insights and cross-cutting analysis into this area, helps shape policies that accommodate both child protection and security concerns through direct, personal advocacy, and works to address context-specific needs, facilitating meaningful and sustainable solutions.

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C R T G

Contents

I.	Introduction	1
II.	Evolution and Dynamics of the Islamic State in the Sahel Region: From Origins to the Emergence of ISS-P	2
III.	Conflict Dynamics and Ideological Rivalry: Al-Qaeda Affiliates and the Islamic State in the Sahel Region	4
IV.	The Sahel Unification: Tamkeen, Takfirism, and Territorial Pursuits by ISS-P	5
V.	Fear, Violence, and Strategy: Understanding ISS-P's Operations in the Sahel	7
VI.	Children as Pillars in ISS-P's Strategic Continuity and Expansion	8
VII.	ISS-P Youth: Recruitment Strategies and Trends	9
VIII.	Sahelian Context and Child Recruitment in ISS-P: Dissecting the Interconnected Ideological, Economic, and Social Drivers	10
IX.	Markaz, Child Indoctrination and Propaganda Strategies	13
X.	Beyond Combat: Multi-dimensional Roles of Children in ISS-P	15
XI.	Children as Victims: Unveiling Systemic Abuses within ISS-P Ranks	17
XII.	Conclusion	18

I. Introduction

The prevailing political and security tumult currently besetting the Sahel region affords an opportunity for the Islamic State to extend its operational reach and territorial dominion. Over recent weeks, numerous soldiers in Niger have lost their lives due to ambushes and assaults orchestrated by the Islamic State in the Sahel region.¹ The group has also carried out fatal assaults on civilian populations, leading to hundreds of casualties across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali in recent years and forcibly displacing a total of 89,200 individuals within the timeframe spanning from March 2022 to May 2023.² Over recent months, the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISS) province has notably fortified its grasp upon an expansive corridor that stretches from the eastern reaches of the Tahoua region in Niger to the western expanse of the Liptako-Gourma region at the tri-border area between Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The ISS appears to be an essential governing force on a territory encompassing a plethora of small towns and rural hinterlands within the Tillabéri region of Niger, as well as the Ménaka and Gao regions of Mali. Disturbingly, local accounts attest to the necessity for civilians to, in one manner or another, acquiesce to the demands of the Islamic State to secure their survival. For the past decade, Africa has stood as a region of paramount strategic import for the Islamic State, both during and in the aftermath of the tenure of its initial leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.³ The Islamic State (IS) has consistently funneled financial and technical support towards a multitude of affiliated groups dispersed throughout the African continent, encompassing territories in East, Central, and West Africa.⁴ Terrorist and violent extremist groups' threats across the continent are escalating. Affiliates linked to the Islamic State have gradually transformed into independent provinces (wilayas) that emulate their parent organization's methods and governance models, with particular emphasis on their recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers.

While the origins of the Islamic State in the Sahel-Province (ISS-P) are reasonably well-documented, there exists a notable gap in the understanding of its governing structure, leadership evolution, and prospective expansion strategies. This study endeavors to delve into the operational methods of ISS-P and dissect its ideological framework for action involving children. Additionally, this investigation highlights the interconnection between ISS-P and the Islamic State in the West Africa Province (ISWAP), a jihadist entity entrenched in northeast Nigeria and southeast Niger, renowned for its significant military capabilities and administrative prowess.⁵

¹ France 24. "Dozens of soldiers killed in Niger by suspected terrorists." October 3, 2023. Accessed October 26, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20231003-dozens-of-soldiers-killed-in-niger-by-suspected-jihadists>.

² Monteau, Flore. "Mali: À Ménaka, la Vie Sous la Pression de l'État Islamique." *Jeune Afrique*, April 15, 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/7436245/politique/mali-a-menaka-la-vie-sous-la-pression-de-letat-islamique>.

³ Nasr, Wassim. "How Africa Has Become the Epicentre of Jihadist Activity." *Orient XXI*, April 4, 2023.

⁴ Bagheri, Saeed, and Alison Bisset. "International Legal Issues Arising from Repatriation of the Children of Islamic State." *Journal of Conflict and Security Law*, Volume 27, Issue 3, Winter 2022, Pages 363–385. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/krac013>.

⁵ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa." *Province Report 273 / Africa*, May 16, 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

This study was conducted between March to October 2023 and involved a comprehensive approach. It draws on extensive desk-based research as well as semi-structured interviews with twelve subject matter experts, humanitarians, and law enforcement officers, including nationals from Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria. The interviews were undertaken virtually and in person with the author on the condition of anonymity.

Additionally, during the same period, indirect interviews were conducted with seventeen former child members of ISS, recruiters, foot soldiers, commanders, judges, al-Qaeda fighters, and local political representatives. The interviews were facilitated through local intermediaries, conducted willingly in local languages, and translated into English while striving to maintain the authenticity of the interviewees' expressions. To ensure the safety and anonymity of those involved, the identities of interviewees remain confidential due to concerns about potential reprisals from the Islamic State, local security forces, and to safeguard the security of local contacts who aided in arranging these interviews.

This research also incorporates an extensive analysis of propaganda materials, including videos, audio, and written messages disseminated by ISS and ISWAP featuring children. These materials serve recruitment, indoctrination, and operational purposes for these jihadist organizations and offer insight into the perceptions of children's roles that ISS wishes to broadcast and diffuse as well as to inform the design and development of strategies and interventions.

II. Evolution and Dynamics of the Islamic State in the Sahel Region: From Origins to the Emergence of ISS-P

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), now Islamic State in the Sahel-Province (ISS-P), is a spinoff from al-Mourabitoun, an al-Qaeda-affiliated organization headed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar. ISS-P⁶ has been responsible for a series of deadly attacks against both local and foreign military forces, such as the Tongo-Tongo incident in October 2017, which resulted in the deaths of four American special forces. ISGS was created in May 2015 when its leader, Adnan Abu Walid Al Sahrawi, pledged allegiance (Bay'a) to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) along with several other defectors. Mokhtar Belmokhtar renounced this allegiance, leading to the emergence of a new jihadist organization in the Sahel.

⁶ Formerly named ISGS and the ISWAP-Sahel faction.

Until and throughout 2018, ISGS was deemed a peripheral, debilitated, and chaotic entity; however, the group claimed accountability for several attacks in late 2019 and early 2020. These included attacks targeting military forces in locations such as Inates in Niger, Chinégodar in Mali, and Indelimane, coinciding with its expansion into Burkina Faso.⁷ The assaults conducted on military installations in Niger and Mali demonstrated a progression in ISGS strategic planning and tactical proficiency, an increase in their ground force strength, and advancements in their arsenal and vehicular resources. Led by influential military figures like Abdoul Hakim al Saharoui, Dondou Cheffou, and Petit Chaffori, ISGS displayed apparent growth in its recruitment initiatives. Consequently, ISGS became a top priority for the Sahelian military and the French counter-terrorist operation Barkhane.

Under the leadership of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and several defectors from al-Mourabitoun, the connections between ISGS and the central Islamic State command displayed a degree of looseness.⁸ However, the communication channels affiliated with the Islamic State deliberately avoided acknowledging the military proficiency of ISGS due to apprehensions regarding al-Sahrawi's persistent affiliations with his former contacts from al-Qaeda.⁹ ISGS followed a comparable approach to other factions within the Islamic State, marked by severe violence directed towards civilians. Yet, it appeared to maintain alignment with al-Qaeda's ideology of jihad and coordinated its military endeavors with affiliates of al-Qaeda.

Since March 2019, while direct connections remain unconfirmed, there is a plausible suggestion that Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) might have contributed to the gradual bolstering of technical and financial resources within the ISS province. Additionally, ISWAP might have advocated for a stricter adherence to ideological doctrines and operational directives by ISS. This apparent manoeuvre by the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) led to the rebranding of ISGS as the Greater Sahara branch of ISWAP from March 2019 to 2022. Subsequently, it is noteworthy that ISGS has since gained regular mention and coverage within the Islamic State Central's Amaq newswire, indicating a strategic correlation.

ISWAP-Sahel province was declared a separate province in March 2022. The name "Islamic State Sahel Province" was officially assigned after the death of its founder, Abu Al-Walid Al-Sahrawi, killed by French forces in Mali on August 17, 2021. The command structure of ISS-P suffered substantial losses in 2020 and 2021 due to military offensives carried out by indigenous armed factions, national military forces, and their international allies.¹⁰

⁷ Jeune Afrique and AFP. "Sahel: l'armée nigérienne subit ses plus lourdes pertes à Chinagoder avec au moins 89 soldats tués." January 12, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/880668/politique/sahel-larmee-nigerienne-subit-ses-plus-lourdes-pertes-a-chinagoder-avec-au-moins-89-soldats-tues/>.

⁸ Zelin, Aaron Y., and Sarah Cahn. "Exploiting a 'Vast Jihad Arena,' the Islamic State Takes Territory in Mali." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Notes, No. 141, September 2023.

⁹ Nasr, Wassim. "How Africa Has Become the Epicentre of Jihadist Activity." Orient XXI, April 4, 2023.

¹⁰ Mainly France and the United States.

At present, the ISS-P is active within regions¹¹ spanning Niger (Tillabéri and Tahoua), Mali (Ménaka and Gourma), and Burkina Faso (Seno and Oudalan), establishing its main base in the northern segment of Niger's Tillabéri region, proximate to the towns of Abakar and Araban. The ISS-P has expanded its longstanding presence in North-West Nigeria, leveraging local connections to enlist new fighters referred to as "Lakurawa," translating to "The recruits" in Hausa.¹² Currently, ISS-P's fighters originate from various ethnic backgrounds, including Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Dawsahak, Songhai, and Djerma communities, while the fundamental leadership remains composed of militants from Western Sahara. Abu al-Bara al-Sahrawi leads the ISS-P, supported by a fresh cadre of leaders from diverse backgrounds, exemplified by figures like Ousmane Bara and Abdoulaye Djadjé, known as "Daga."¹³

III. Conflict Dynamics and Ideological Rivalry: Al-Qaeda Affiliates and the Islamic State in the Sahel Region

Al-Qaeda-affiliated factions such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM) and the ISS Province have been engaged in intense conflict since early 2020.¹⁴ This rivalry has resulted in the deaths of numerous militants and civilians, including children, in clashes between the two groups. The pursuit of territorial expansion in the Sahel regions and ongoing efforts to undermine the opposing faction's interpretation of jihad by ISS-P and al-Qaeda have additionally precipitated the displacement of thousands of individuals.

Since 2014, the global leadership of al-Qaeda has consistently opposed the Islamic State's caliphate, which promotes violence, exclusion, and indiscriminate takfir.¹⁵ ISS-P contends that jihad represents an unwavering commitment to employ combat for the strict adherence to tawhid (the unity of Allah and all life on earth), thereby establishing absolute divine rule on the planet. To accomplish this objective, the use of violence is considered proportional to the current suffering of devout believers and the "true religion." According to this ideology, all adversaries of Islam, including civilians, must be uniformly confronted, and the scope of takfir extends far beyond that advocated by al-Qaeda. Any tolerance or alignment with communities, leaders, or armed factions deemed deviant is deemed intolerable and unacceptable.

¹¹ Since 2022, ISS has also been active in North Benin.

¹² Nsaibia, Héni. "Introduction: The Islamic State's Sahelian Affiliate." ACLED, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

¹⁵ Accusation of misbelief or non-believing punishable by death.

In a January 2020 Amaq news video, the ISWAP-Sahel province was unveiled for the first time, depicting notably aggressive content directed towards al-Qaeda. The leaders of al-Qaeda were accused of compromising with the enemy, an act vehemently condemned by the Islamic State. Moreover, in May 2020, the Islamic State, through a pamphlet titled "The Crusade against West Africa" in their weekly al Naba issue no. 233, accused the "al-Qaeda militia" and its leaders Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa of apostasy, a grave offense punishable by death in their perspective. These accusations centered around their alleged betrayal, perceiving them as having committed treason against both themselves and the Muslim populace by engaging in peace negotiations with the "apostate" factions in northern Mali and consenting to dialogue with the Malian government. The Islamic State argued that such compromises undermined the strict adherence to tawhîd and the defense of Muslim communities.

Contrarily, al-Qaeda aligns itself within a socio-religious and cultural framework, seeking validation from locally esteemed religious figures or authorities to initiate and sustain its jihad. This approach is strategic, as the endorsement from experts in Islamic jurisprudence (fuqaha) plays a pivotal role in conferring social and "legal/normative" legitimacy to the armed protection of a vulnerable Muslim society. This socio-normative foundation is further fortified by purposefully involving legal scholars (qadis) and community figures in decision-making entities such as shuras, Islamic courts, and advisory councils within battalions (katibas).

IV. The Sahel Unification: Tamkeen, Takfirism, and Territorial Pursuits by ISS-P

The Islamic State in the Sahel-Province leaders and fighters put a strong emphasis on ideology as a justification for violent action.¹⁶ Unlike al-Qaeda, the ISS and ISWA Provinces regard Tamkeen as an ideological guiding principle. Tamkeen represents a political doctrinal concept aimed at empowering and fortifying the Muslim community (Ummah) to fulfill the political and religious objectives of the Islamic State.¹⁷ The methodologies rooted in Tamkeen within Jihadi teachings involve the cultivation of capabilities, resources, and institutions essential for confronting and surmounting perceived threats against Islam and the Muslim world. These strategies include the establishment of a Caliphate as a means to achieve these aspirations. In the words of an ISS-P chief: "Our engagement is to

¹⁶ "Al-Naba #405." <https://jihadology.net/2023/08/24/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-405/>; "Al-Naba #402." <https://jihadology.net/2023/08/03/new-issue-of-the-islamic-states-newsletter-al-naba-402/>.

¹⁷ Analysis of the video entitled "Sons of the Stinky" produced by Islamic State Sahel. Amaq Newswire, August 2022; Analysis of the video entitled "Generation of Tamkeen" produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province. Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

establish a Caliphate everywhere in the Sahel, no matter the means or time it necessitates. We are part of a universal Ummah, and we are fighting for it".¹⁸

Takfirism, the ideological framework embraced by the Islamic State, deems not only the governing bodies as apostate but also societies that do not rigorously adhere to Islamic principles.¹⁹ A preacher affiliated with ISS-P elucidates the ideological and political motivations behind their actions: "We do not recognize the authority of state authorities and their secular institutions and education. They do not recognize us and the rightful religious beliefs, so we won't recognize them. We will fight and eradicate these unbelievers (kuffar) and impose the government of Allah on this land. We are the (sadeqeen) holy and chosen warriors of God (mujahedeen). We will apply Sharia everywhere and for everyone living in this land of Islam (Dar al-Islam)".²⁰

It is notable that the Islamic State in the Sahel province, as does al-Qaeda, presents itself as a unifying force, bypassing inter-community struggles in view of the shared objective to spread the teachings of Allah. In an audio recording from a public lesson (dourous), the ISS-P Qadi for the Gourma region in Mali adds: "The word of God needs to overthrow democracy. We are the only ones that can guarantee that Sharia will rule. We are not alone, we are composed of many ethnic groups: Arabs, Mossi, Pulaar, Bozo, and Tamashek."²¹

The Islamic State Provinces pursue an assertive strategy centered on Tamkeen, emphasizing their immediate objective of acquiring and governing territory through military conquest while enforcing Sharia law. Within their controlled regions, ISS-P fighters have been observed disseminating Qurans along with the Islamic State's handbook titled "This Is Our Creed and Methodology."²² Their pursuit of territorial dominance and stringent imposition of Sharia law leads them to sanction brutal tactics, including mass executions, enslavement, severe Islamic penalties (H'udud), and compulsory indoctrination targeting non-Muslims and those labeled as apostates. Notably, they employ Islamic police forces (Hisba) to enforce their regulations and suppress any behavior or conduct they view as contrary to their ideological framework.

As a justification for violence against other Muslims an ISS-P chief declares: "We fight any population or ethnic group that we suspect to collaborate with an adverse group or army in the Sahel. We condemn other Muslims for not applying Islam as it is, as it has been recommended to us, i.e., authentic Islam. We consider all of them as al

¹⁸ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

¹⁹ Moghadam, Assaf and Brian Fishman, eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2011).

²⁰ Interview with Abou S., preacher of the Islamic State Sahel Province in the Menaka region, July 2023.

²¹ Audio of a public teaching conducted by "Kissou", Cadi of ISS-P for the Gourma region, in a zone at the border between Mali and Burkina Faso named Djalogodji, June 2023 (approximate date).

²² Zelin, Aaron Y., and Sarah Cahn. "Exploiting a 'Vast Jihad Arena,' the Islamic State Takes Territory in Mali." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Notes*, No. 141, September 2023.

Munafiq which means those who say they are Muslims, but they are not ready for the real cause of Islam, they are closer to Kuffar (misbelievers) than their Muslim brothers".²³ The Islamic State often distorts and manipulates passages of the Koran and the Sunnah to provide a religious justification to its violence.²⁴

The Islamic State's propaganda strategically underscores the concept of martyrdom, emphasizing the potential rewards for those who perish in service to Allah's cause. The messaging seeks to instill the belief that despite potential earthly defeat, their sacrifice and dedication guarantee rewards.²⁵

V. Fear, Violence, and Strategy: Understanding ISS-P's Operations in the Sahel

The Islamic State in the Sahel Province has devised and implemented distinct military tactics and strategies. Alongside overtly violent actions, IS Sahel engages in resource acquisition through various means, including ransom-driven kidnappings, cattle theft, looting, extortion, and the collection of zakat. Notably, this encompasses both lawful and unlawful activities such as gold mining, motorbike trade, coal extraction, and fuel trafficking. Unlike many JNIM actions, ISS-P operations can target unarmed civilians, encompassing women, elders, and children. They enforce a constant atmosphere of fear within the communities under their control, using physical violence to intimidate individuals of any age for perceived infractions against their strict interpretation of Sharia law and Islamic precepts. The populace lives under constant fear of being labeled as traitors or informants working for rival forces, a transgression punishable by death. ISS-P routinely follows through on these violent threats, resulting in both private and public beatings, sexual violence against women, torture, beheadings, dismemberments, and forceful abductions of individuals. In their combat strategies, ISS-P predominantly employs ambushes and swarming techniques, often executed through armed assaults using motorcycles and vehicles. Prior to most attacks, militants of ISS-P commonly display the black flag of Khilafa (Ray'at Al-Uqab) associated with the Islamic State and sometimes don red headbands. Their modus operandi involves destruction, arson, indiscriminate shooting, and intimidation before retreating to remote regions. The group exhibits high mobility, primarily operating in small, agile units.

²³ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

²⁴ A video broadcasting the "apostate (Murtad) army of Niger" shows a *mujahid* forcing some soldiers with tied hands to walk forward and then executing them while citing verse 4 from Surat Muhammed as an inspiration and justification: "So when you meet the unbelievers strike their necks, then, when you have killed many of them, tie the bonds".

²⁵ Interviews conducted in the framework of this study corroborate that martyrdom is glorified as a noble means to fulfill jihad.

The Islamic State in the Sahel and West Africa provinces have both exploited vulnerable individuals, including children, to further their ideological and military goals.²⁶ Interviews conducted with al-Qaeda commanders, qadis, and recruiters have provided confirmation of their recruitment and use of hundreds of children within their ranks. These minors are subjected to indoctrination and involvement in combat operations.

VI. Children as Pillars in ISS-P's Strategic Continuity and Expansion

In ISS-P and ISWAP propaganda children are broadcasted as central elements in the continuity of the jihad.²⁷ They are entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining and developing the world according to the principles of Islam and the "Khilafa Manhaj (way of life of the Caliphate)", and to perform the prophetic "renewal of the Ummah" in Africa. The new generation of Islamic State fighters will be replacing the allegedly lost and morally deprived Muslims as they fight to defend Islam. Children who undergo extensive grooming to become future fighters for ISS-P or ISWAP are regarded as crucial in ensuring the perpetuation of their jihad in the Sahel and West Africa.

From an ISWAP propaganda video, an expansive image capturing children arranged to spell the word "generation" in Arabic (Jeel) could be construed as an enticement for other youngsters to enroll in the Caliphate Cubs school and contribute to the generation poised to revive the Ummah's former glories. This communication is vividly portrayed in a significant video issued by ISWAP earlier this year, wherein the orator lauds the sacrifice of Islam's new generations, laying the groundwork for reinstating Islamic eminence and hoisting the banner of Tawheed.²⁸

Several interviewees for this study have expressed aspirations for their future, envisioning marrying exceptionally beautiful women to cultivate the next cohort of fighters. Women are specifically targeted not solely as prospective mothers of future combatants but also as potential allies and militants. The Islamic State strategically relies on women as pivotal elements in its agenda, aiming to guarantee both its sustained existence and global expansion. Within the Sahel region, fighters have highlighted the pivotal role of their wives or future spouses as key conduits responsible for instilling the correct Islamic ethical code, societal norms, and behaviors into their offspring.

A prominent individual in the Menaka region elaborates on this perspective: "Jihadists found homes through forced marriages, i.e., without the parents' consent. They give large sums of money to the girls afterward. Jihadists have married our young girls and had their children; these jihadist families lead a good life today and this can push the

²⁶ "Civil Society Perspectives: ISIL in Africa – Key Trends and Developments." UNCTED, April 2022. Accessed October 26, 2023. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/files/files/documents/2022/Apr/cted_civil_society_perspectives_isil_in_africa_april_2022.pdf.

²⁷ Analysis of the video entitled "Empowerment Generation (Generation of *Tamkeen*)" produced by the Islamic State in the West Africa province, 2022.

²⁸ Analysis of the video entitled "A book to guide and a sword to support" produced by the Islamic in West Africa province, 2023.

rest of the population to join their games. I'm afraid that jihadism in the Sahel is becoming more and more entrenched, as these children (their sons) can ensure the continuity of destabilization in the Sahel in the future. Even today in the zone you will see jihadists who are on the battlefield with all their sons and even their whole family. For example, the Emir Malam²⁹ was accompanied by his two sons, all of whom were killed in battle by Barkhane".³⁰

VII. ISS-P Youth: Recruitment Strategies and Trends

The recruitment focus of ISS-P appears to heavily target young individuals,³¹ with these potentially forming a substantial portion of its militants, as corroborated by the testimonies of ISS-P fighters operating across Mali and Niger. This trend seems to have intensified since the onset of the conflict between ISS-P and al-Qaeda, leading ISS-P to urgently replenish its ranks.³²

A senior fighter within ISS-P responsible for recruitment across the tri-border areas and Gourma regions has highlighted that out of the 500 fighters in the vicinity, approximately 300 were children and adolescents situated across various "learning centers" (Markaz) established by the jihadist organization in that region. These centers focus on teachings of the Quran and military techniques.³³ An Islamic State leader in the Asongo circle reported: "In April 2022, across all Markaz in our region - Bazi, Assalata, Kounsoum, and Toobon - which I personally inspected, I documented 217 children and adolescents. By March 2023, upon revisiting each Markaz, I noted an increase of 93 new children within our ranks. The current total stands at 310 children."³⁴ Moreover, an ISS-P leader and recruiter operating within the Menaka region disclosed that over 300 children and adolescents from the Bella community were presently recruited in Markaz linked to ISS-P in that area. Additionally, he mentioned that 430 children from the Bella community were undergoing training in the tri-border region within small towns like Agala, Tintislime, Echgane, Inhinita, and Garangabo.³⁵

Although Qadis and regional leaders hold the capacity for this responsibility, there appears to be a distinct specialization among recruiters within ISS-P. ISS-P recruiters frequently hold roles as leaders within Koranic learning centers (Markaz) or maintain affiliations with networks of Markaz and small mosques, primarily situated in

²⁹ Emir Malam possibly refers to a former ISS-P chief for the Menaka region who could have been killed by the French military operation *Barkhane* in March 2022 at the border between Mali and Niger. Voice of America, "La force française Barkhane "neutralise" 15 membres du groupe Etat islamique au Mali, March 25, 2022. Retrieved at : <https://www.voaafrrique.com/a/mali-la-force-fran%C3%A7aise-barkhane-neutralise-15-membres-du-groupe-etat-islamique/6501920.html>.

³⁰ Confidential interview conducted with a traditional chief of a village located close to Inekar, a territory under the influence of the ISS-P in the Menaka region, July 2023.

³¹ Lounnas, Djailil. *Le djihad en Afrique du Nord et au Sahel*. l'Harmattan, 2019, page 114.

³² Interview with Abdehrramane K., Niger intelligence officer, Niamey, June 2023.

³³ Interview with Djamil O., ISS-P recruiter in the tri-border areas and the Gourma regions, May 2023.

³⁴ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023.

³⁵ Interview with Mohamed B. (Idoufane Tribe, Bella community), ISS-P chief and recruiter in the Menaka region, June 2023.

rural areas and small towns across the Sahel region.³⁶ As previously highlighted, the Islamic State has formulated ideological arguments to justify its enlistment of minors. Specifically, the ISS-P official responsible for overseeing recruitment in the tri-border areas and the Gourma regions notably emphasized: "We don't refer to the age when recruiting someone, because God in the Koran says: "Teach your children to fight from an early age". Recruitment remains open and continues as soon as the person understands that he or she has been created only to serve God, that the world here below is nothing, and that he or she is accountable to his or her Creator."³⁷

VIII. Sahelian Context and Child Recruitment in ISS-P: Dissecting the Interconnected Ideological, Economic, and Social Drivers

The recruitment tactics employed by ISS-P to enlist children encompass a range of methods. ISS-P militants coerce children into joining their forces through abductions conducted in raided villages and communities, employing threats and intimidation tactics to ensure their continued allegiance and assignment to various missions.³⁸ Allegedly, ISS-P specifically targets forsaken or orphaned children, particularly those from families they have decimated, as well as refugees.³⁹ Largely, children within ISS-P ranks hail from the local areas where the group operates.⁴⁰ However, an observable trend reveals an increasing presence of children from more distant regions in the Sahel within the ranks of ISS-P.⁴¹

Children across the Sahel region undergo indoctrination within madrassas and Markaz, where they are systematically influenced to adopt the ideology of the Islamic State, compelling them to join forces willingly.⁴² Whether individually or with their families, and often without community consent, an increasing cohort of youth is migrating to territories governed by ISS-P and ISWAP to contribute to their jihadist endeavors. This inclination has been verified by multiple accounts from ISS-P fighters.

- "At the start, we were joined by fanatic young members of the Pulaar community who already knew quite well the real Koran. The movement started to expand (in the Tillaberi region), and it became a trend for

³⁶ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023; Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

³⁷ Interview with Djamil O., ISS-P recruiter in the tri-border areas and the Gourma regions, May 2023.

³⁸ Phone interview with Malik Samuel, Researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, 09th May 2023.

³⁹ Interview with Abdehramane K., Niger intelligence officer, Niamey, June 2023; Interview with a Burkinabe researcher, Dakar, June 2023.

⁴⁰ Confidential interview conducted with a notable man from the Fafa area (Mali), a zone occupied by the ISS-P, May 2023.

⁴¹ Interview with Djamil O., ISS-P recruiter in the tri-border areas and the Gourma regions, May 2023; Interview with Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023.

⁴² Interview with Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023.

the local youth to join us, especially those under 18 years old. Each year, they recruit nearly 150 young adolescents in our Markaz".⁴³

"I am not a fan of seeing children adhere to our cause, however, it is quite natural that they join us as they see our influence mounting in the Sahel".⁴⁴

Several children affirmed that their families opted to migrate in order to join the ISS-P:

"I am from a family of mouhadjira (migrants of the jihad). Hundreds of families with elders, men, women, and children left Niger for Mali to conduct jihad for the Islamic State, sometimes walking for a very long distance. On the road, we recited Koranic verses together, which were first read by a 12-year-old boy. I think we were like a hundred children with babies too and very young girls who were all veiled".⁴⁵

"When I joined the jihad in Mali with my family, we just accomplished our duty based on the principles of Islam. I know all the verses, and they glorify shaheed (martyr) as they can access paradise quicker. We can stay for six months to two years in a town and then move again for our mouhadjira (migration for the jihad)".⁴⁶

The primary drivers for child recruitment throughout the Sahel are relatively homogenous and interconnected. They can be categorized into three main areas—ideological, economic, and social.

Children are enticed to join the ranks of ISS-P through a compelling ideological narrative, wherein manipulated Hadiths and Islamic teachings emphasize the notion that unwavering commitment to jihad will secure for them and their families a place in paradise (Jannah) along with recognition from the Ummah. ISS-P preachers and recruiters entice children by instilling the belief that in regions where an altered form of Islam prevails, they would face inevitable oppression and hardship.⁴⁷ The preachers also instill fear in children by asserting that failure to adhere to this purported duty will result in divine punishment for them and their families.⁴⁸

⁴³ Interview with Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023.

⁴⁴ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023.

⁴⁵ Interview with Mazou M., children recruited by the ISS-P, Menaka region, June 2023.

⁴⁶ Interview with « Houbeyda » (war name), children recruited by the ISS-P, Gourma region, August 2023.

⁴⁷ Confidential interview conducted with a notable man from the Fafa area (Mali), a zone occupied by the ISS-P, May 2023.

⁴⁸ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

The ISS-P recruitment campaigns target destitute children originating from poor and deprived areas,⁴⁹ where public services are absent and economic activities are almost nonexistent.⁵⁰ In the words of an ISS-P recruiter:

“The children are indoctrinated by our preachers through radical and firm speeches that quickly change their mentalities. The families we talk to range from shopkeepers to livestock breeders and farmers. The children have no income and are always in trouble, which drives them to adhere to our ideals and at the same time reassure their families who are in distress. The indoctrinated are all young people aged between 10 and 18. When you question them, you'll see that 40% of them have had a difficult time in their lives, so it's easy to bring them back to the true belief that Islam wants.”⁵¹

In regions lacking operational educational facilities, economic prospects, or engaging activities, numerous children have opted to align themselves with ISS-P in pursuit of increased safety, educational opportunities, and potential prospects for the future.⁵² A recruiter for the ISS-P informs: “We're taking full responsibility for them by giving each of them a gun, a motorcycle, and a sum of money for himself and his family.”⁵³ These material incentives are important as the families are also being compensated for the future absence of the boy, notably in the running of agricultural or other small business activities.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the consistent presence of States and semi-official paramilitary groups such as the *Volontaires de Défense et de la Patrie* (VDP) in regions where they engage in repetitive acts of extortion and violence, particularly as part of counter-insurgency approaches, tends to compel certain communities to align with ISS-P,⁵⁵ as confirmed by an ISS-P recruiter: “We base our recruitment on the poor management of the State, especially its management of natural resources. In the region, our sources of revenue are the selling of coal and wood, and this commerce is forbidden by the Malian State. The situation is sensitive, and our arguments are pushing young people to join us. We guarantee indeed the liberty of populations that have been abandoned and plundered by the Malian State. Thanks to this commercial guarantee, we provide these populations with total satisfaction on material, social, and moral levels.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Lounnas, Djallil. *Le djihad en Afrique du Nord et au Sahel*. l'Harmattan, 2019, page 121.

⁵⁰ Bøås, Morten, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane. “Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent, Appropriation of Local Grievances?” *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2020, page 8.

⁵¹ Interview with Ezab A., ISS-P recruiter in the Oudalan area, Burkina Faso, September 2023.

⁵² Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

⁵³ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023.

⁵⁴ Confidential interview with a Nigerien law enforcement officer, Niamey, June 2023.

⁵⁵ Confidential interview conducted with a notable man from the Fafa area (Mali), a zone occupied by the ISS-P, May 2023; Bøås, Morten, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane. “Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent, Appropriation of Local Grievances?” *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2020, page 12.

⁵⁶ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

These arguments are further corroborated: “children are recruited in nomadic and sedentary communities after our preachers show to them the realities of the sufferings that their parents endure all year long: ethnical discriminations, inegalitarian management of natural resources. We tell them that God has created objects, and notably weapons for them to use and that there is no other commander than God.”⁵⁷

The ISS-P entices children and their families by pledging safety, guidance, education, and potential prospects for a better future. Heightened insecurity prompts some children to seek refuge within the ISS-P, viewing membership as a means to safeguard themselves and their families, now affiliated with a group and equipped with access to weaponry. Through strategic messaging, the ISS-P successfully instills in certain children the belief that aligning with their cause and employing violence represents the most pragmatic approach for survival and livelihood.⁵⁸

IX. Markaz, Child Indoctrination and Propaganda Strategies

Children in the Islamic State in the Sahel are all receiving Islamic education and forced to follow theological courses by preachers, Imams, or Qadis in Koranic learning centers (Markaz).⁵⁹ The Islamic State preachers and propagandists promise to future recruits and their families that in these schools of “Little Lions of the Caliphate” (Khilafa Cubs), children will receive all the necessary training, both spiritual and physical, to become future mujahidin.⁶⁰ Within schools overseen by ISS-P and ISWAP, children receive instruction in Koranic studies, learning about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, studying hadiths, and engaging in lessons on Quranic Arabic (Fus’ha). These educational settings also impart teachings that encourage combat against non-believers (Kufr), advocating for the establishment of a Caliphate, the implementation of Islamic law, and the rejection of human-made laws, Western ideals, secular governmental systems, and democratic principles.⁶¹

An ISS-P Imam and recruiter concurs: “Yes, children enrolled in our ranks receive theological and military courses in our Markaz, i.e., our training centers run by imams and supervisors. They are also taught how to assemble and disassemble weapons and learn to read and write the Koran”.

⁵⁷ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023.

⁵⁸ Bøås, Morten, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane. “Explaining Violence in Tillaberi: Insurgent, Appropriation of Local Grievances?” *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 2020, page 14.

⁵⁹ Interview with Ahmed P., ISS-P recruiter in the Asongo area, June 2023.

⁶⁰ Analysis of the videos entitled “Sons of the Stinky” produced by Islamic State Sahel, Amaq Newswire, August 2022; analysis of the video entitled “Generation of Tamkeen” produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

⁶¹ Analysis of the video entitled “Generation of Tamkeen” produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

The latter statement was confirmed by children in ISS-P: “There are two categories of religious training, the “Koranic education” and the “Islamic education”. Our Koranic education is a non-formal education that aims at teaching us the Koran. In Markaz located in each village or town controlled by the Islamic State, a Koranic master, with the support of its oldest students, teaches many children how to memorize the Koran. Sometimes they also change the locations of the teachings, and we learn in someone’s house or under a tree. The Islamic teaching aims at giving us an education in Islamic sciences, in the Koranic Arab language (Fus’ha), and of the hadiths.”⁶²

In every broadcast disseminated by ISS and ISWA Provinces, the presence of children is consistent. Ostensibly, Islamic State propagandists showcase children to depict adherence to Islamic teachings and to underscore their integral role within its routine operations. Through repetitive exposure to rigid interpretations of Islamic doctrines, harsh punishments and forceful engagement in military activities, ideologues and trainers push children into assimilating violence as an ingrained aspect of their behavioral patterns.

The deliberate tactics employed by Islamic State preachers target children, leveraging their less developed cognitive faculties and heightened susceptibility compared to adults. The objective is to mold their mindsets towards a normalized acceptance of violence.⁶³

An ISS-P Imam and recruiter confirms the manipulative intent of the teachings given to children in their organization: “After recruitment, through theological courses, you’ll see that the child changes more or less his habits, withdraws into himself, stops seeing his friends and relatives. He will devote himself to an exclusive relationship with our group and towards the Cause. He becomes very eloquent, knows how to speak well, and then performs well his mission”.⁶⁴

Propaganda disseminated by ISS-P and ISWAP consistently conveys the message that joining the Khilafa not only offers opportunities for education, leadership, and access to power, but also promises the ultimate reward: martyrdom in service of a righteous cause, ensuring an eternal afterlife.⁶⁵ Children are repeatedly informed that those who perish advancing the word of Allah will forever be revered, regardless of their roles, whether in combat

⁶² Interview with « Houbeyda » (war name), children recruited by the ISS-P, Gourma region, August 2023.

⁶³ For instance, in a video depicting children undertaking violent actions against a Nigerian soldier, an ISWAP preacher selectively references only a portion of verse 71 from Surat Younes to justify the organization’s violence against perceived non-believers, altering its original context entirely: “O my People! If my presence and my reminders to you of Allah’s signs are unbearable to you, then know that I have put my trust in Allah. So devise a plot along with your associate-gods—and you do not have to be secretive about your plot—then carry it out against me without delay!” The context of the verse is not taken into consideration by IS propagandists.

⁶⁴ Interview with Aboukrouf K., ISS-P recruiter and Imam based in the Tessit area (Mali) and belonging to the Imghad community (Tamashek), August 2023.

⁶⁵ Analysis of the videos entitled “*Sons of the Stinky*” produced by Islamic State Sahel, Amaq Newswire, August 2022; Analysis of the video entitled “*Generation of Tamkeen*” produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

or supporting the mujahid.⁶⁶ Islamic State preachers further manipulate children by instilling the belief that, as chosen individuals, they contribute to a potent global Islamic movement unified under the legacy of the Prophet.⁶⁷

Jihadi preachers and trainers also exploit competitive dynamics among children as a tool for indoctrination and radicalization. By fostering a spirit of competition and nurturing a sense of superiority tied to religious knowledge and predispositions aligning with the jihadi cause, ISS-P recruiters highlight rewards for top students, such as the prospect of serving as guards or private assistants to leaders and Emirs.⁶⁸ Propaganda material showcases competitions among children to evaluate their religious comprehension.⁶⁹

X. Beyond Combat: Multi-dimensional Roles of Children in ISS-P

Children are central to ISS-P operations and military pursuits.⁷⁰ Within propaganda, Islamic State preachers actively highlight the military instruction provided to children upon their recruitment, with children wearing combat attire and participating in military training encompassing martial arts, tactical maneuvers, and simulations of tactical response teams.⁷¹ In this framework, propaganda materials aim at showcasing that children adhering to the Islamic State will be able to defend themselves and their loved ones as well as acquire social status, power and economic resources.⁷²

An Islamic State recruiter indicates that: “following their recruitment, we immediately send them (children) for a minimum of three weeks of accelerated military training, where they learn how to handle weapons and ammunition.”⁷³ An ISS-P chief outlines that: “adolescent children can be used for several missions, such as kamikaze operations, ambushes, investigations, intelligence gathering, and general participation in combat operations.”⁷⁴

In the words of a child formerly associated with ISSP: “We receive a large number of training kits of all kinds. First, they (the Islamic State trainers) cut us off from our families for 6 months to 1 year in our training centers. We have

⁶⁶ Analysis of the video entitled “*A book to guide and a sword to support*” produced by the Islamic in West Africa province, 2023.

⁶⁷ Analysis of the video entitled “*Generation of Tamkeen*” produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

⁶⁸ Interview with Aboukrouf K., ISS-P recruiter and Imam based in the Tessit area (Mali) and belonging to the Imghad community (Tamashek), August 2023.

⁶⁹ Analysis of the video entitled “*Generation of Tamkeen*” produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023; Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023. The same constatation is verified relatively to children recruited and used by ISWAP.

⁷¹ Analysis of the video entitled “*A book to guide and a sword to support*” produced by the Islamic in West Africa province, 2023.

⁷² Analysis of the videos entitled “*Sons of the Stinky*” produced by Islamic State Sahel, Amaq Newswire, August 2022.; In a video of ISWAP broadcasting the “apostate (*Murtad*) army of Niger”, the children are also participating in the distribution and reception of war gains, a clear attempt to lure them and their families into the fight – profits await those who join their fight, and death awaits those who oppose it.

⁷³ Interview with Aboukrouf K., ISS-P recruiter and Imam based in the Tessit area (Mali) and belonging to the Imghad community (Tamashek), August 2023.

⁷⁴ Interview with Oubel M., ISS-P chief in the Asongo area, July 2023; Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023.

training kits for decapitation, where they teach us how to cut a hand or a foot for thieves; there's also a risk for those who commit fornication. They teach us the proper use of the frisk, and we're also shown how to throw a stone to kill a man or a married woman who commits fornication. These steps are very sensitive and require great vigilance and mastery in our training process. They teach us the different systems for placing explosive devices and the use of individual weapons and large-caliber heavy weapons. We do simulate combat every morning and evening, and they tell us about the history and achievements of the Prophet's (PBUH) companions, such as Aoubacar, Oumar, Ousmane, and Ali. The trainer tells us that this is how we will become the true future servants of Islam."⁷⁵

Upon training ISS-P assigns operational responsibilities to children: "There are several tasks on leaving the learning center: some children stay close to the population in the villages, towns, and hamlets to give information to the chiefs; some children stay on for commissions, and the strongest accompany the chiefs into the fighting ranks; others also receive special training and moral support to become martyrs."⁷⁶ Children participate in combat operations and in "discrete and intelligence tasks."⁷⁷ The use of children in various military-related roles has been praised by several fighters within ISS-P: "We use these children because we have found that operations led by children are more successful than others, in addition to their skills with military training and Koranic knowledge, they follow better orders and are more determined than adults."⁷⁸

Children are coerced into engaging in combat activities. A significant instance demonstrating the involvement of children in ISS-P operations occurred on the evening of June 4, 2021, during a massacre in the village of Solhan in northeastern Burkina Faso, resulting in the tragic deaths of over 130 individuals.⁷⁹ The United Nations and the government of Burkina Faso suggested that the assault was perpetrated by the ISS-P, primarily involving young males aged between 12 and 14 years old.⁸⁰ Children have also been involved in recent attacks in the north of Mali and Niger.⁸¹ The official ISS-P and ISWAP broadcasts also show several children involved in military operations, including battles between mujahedeen of the Islamic State and what they called "apostates Militia of al-Qaeda."⁸² Children are presented as a demonstration of their dedication to the Islamic State, symbolizing the perpetuity of new waves of combatants within their ranks, aiming to sow a sense of fear and weariness among their adversaries.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mazou M., children recruited by the ISS-P, Menaka region, June 2023.

⁷⁶ Interview with Aboukrouf K., ISS-P recruiter and Imam based in the Tessit area (Mali) and belonging to the Imghad community (Tamashek), August 2023.

⁷⁷ Interview with Mohamed B., ISS-P chief of the tri-borders area (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger), August 2023.

⁷⁸ Interview with Abou P., ISS-P fighter operating in the North-East of Burkina Faso (unclear), July 2023.

⁷⁹ Muraga, Daniel. "Can the spread of religious extremism be stopped?" *ISS*, October 22, 2021, Volume 31, Issue 37.

⁸⁰ "Burkina Faso says most of attackers in village massacre were children." *Reuters, The Guardian*, June 24, 2021.

⁸¹ Interview with Mohamed K., ISS-P officer in the Tillaberi region, June 2023; Interview with Mazou M., children recruited by the ISS-P, Menaka region, June 2023.

⁸² Analysis of the video entitled "Sons of the Stinky" produced by Islamic State Sahel, Amaq Newswire, August 2022.

It seems that children might have been used as human shields by older ISS-P fighters during several operations.⁸³ However, it does not appear that children have been used on suicide missions to attack civil targets by both ISWAP and ISS-P⁸⁴ due to cultural perspectives and reticence from local communities.⁸⁵

ISS-P also utilizes children for intelligence-gathering missions based on their familiarity and understanding of specific geographic areas.⁸⁶ For similar reasons, children are also being used as guides and interpreters, preparing operations or surveilling individuals and movements within a specific area.⁸⁷ A notable man from the Asongo region indicated that: "Children and young people are the intelligence agents of the jihadists. Children are the informers. The "talibés", the children who sold cigarettes, cookies, oranges, manioc, and sweets have the role of informing the members of the armed group hidden in the bush."⁸⁸

Ultimately, akin to practices observed in other Islamic State regions, children are similarly utilized in non-military capacities, primarily in domestic capacities, attending to the day-to-day requirements within camps and tending to the needs of fighters: "Children deemed to be slow learners or not fit to be trained are treated as slaves and assigned non-combat roles. They are deployed to commanders' homes, where they perform tasks such as fetching firewood and water, doing laundry, and delivering messages to other villages. They are also deployed to the battlefield as cheerleaders and are called Jundullah (Soldiers of God) to make them feel important".⁸⁹ Young women are similarly involved in these auxiliary functions, contributing to the maintenance of camps by assisting with various tasks, including provisioning sustenance and clothing. Additionally, they are occasionally tasked with conveying messages, handling finances, and gathering intelligence for ISS-P.⁹⁰

XI. Children as Victims: Unveiling Systemic Abuses within ISS-P Ranks

Children within the Islamic State experience various types of mistreatments, encompassing threats, psychological coercion, and physical abuse. Upon enlistment in terrorist organizations such as ISS-P and ISWAP, children are

⁸³ Muraga, Daniel. "Can the spread of religious extremism be stopped?" *ISS*, October 22, 2021, Volume 31, Issue 37.

⁸⁴ International Crisis Group. "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province. Report 273 / Africa." May 16, 2019. Duration: 20+ minutes. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

⁸⁵ Confidential interview conducted with a traditional chief of a village located close to Inekar, a territory under the influence of the ISS-P in the Menaka region, July 2023.

⁸⁶ Confidential interview conducted with a notable man from the Fafa area (Mali), a zone occupied by the ISS-P, May 2023.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Confidential interview conducted with a notable man from the Asongo area (Mali), September 2023.

⁸⁹ Samuel, Malik. "Children in the Battlefield: ISWAP's Latest Recruits." *Institute for Security Studies*, March 10, 2022. Retrieved from <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/children-on-the-battlefield-iswaps-latest-recruits>.

⁹⁰ Interview with Aboukrouf K., ISS-P recruiter and Imam based in the Tessit area (Mali) and belonging to the Imghad community (Tamashek), August 2023.

compelled to undergo tests as a testament to their allegiance.⁹¹ ISWAP broadcasts showcase children participating in the execution of Nigerian army soldiers revealing a pattern in the group's propaganda that seeks to normalize violent actions.⁹²

A child victim of ISS-P recruitment and use recounted the various forms of abuse endured at the hands of their instructors and leaders: "Sincerely speaking, there's a big problem here because we don't have any rights, we don't enjoy the same benefits as the other adult fighters, we're not entitled to anything during our training except teaching and preparing to fight. Many of our comrades are the victims of bodily injury, either as a result of fights or as a punishment from our military commanders, usually, they are children who tried to escape. Everyone is required to wear skipping pants and grow a beard - it's an imposed style of dress, and one very detached from any kind of modern life."⁹³ Children also consistently voiced apprehension about inadvertently engaging in any perceived transgressions, driven by the dread of facing physical punishment administered by ISS-P instructors.⁹⁴

Young women endure a range of abuses at the hands of Islamic State fighters within the Sahel region. They face severe limitations, restricted from engaging in activities beyond those imposed on them. There appears to be an increasing incidence of young girls forcibly abducted and forced into marriage with ISS-P and ISWAP fighters. These marriages are, on occasion, paid for by ISS-P and ISWAP to enable the sexual exploitation of these minors.⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch investigations have corroborated instances where IS fighters have resorted to threats and violent acts against numerous families, including fathers and mothers who resisted giving their daughters in marriage.⁹⁶ Additionally, Islamic State fighters frequently perpetrate rape on both young and older women before or after attacks, coercing them into marriage and compounding trauma, social shame, and ostracization.⁹⁷

XII. Conclusion

Children are integral to the ideological underpinnings, operational tactics, and daily functions of ISS-P. The enduring impact of the physical and psychological maltreatment they endure can persist for extended periods. Safeguarding these children against Islamic State recruiters and propaganda ought to be a primary concern for Sahel governments and their allies seeking to halt the Islamic State's growth in the area and subsequently

⁹¹ Interview with Ahmed P., ISS-P recruiter in the Asongo area, June 2023.

⁹² Analysis of the video entitled "*Generation of Tamkeen*" produced by the Islamic State in West Africa Province, Amaq Newswire, February 2022.

⁹³ Phone interview with "Abou" (war name), ISS-P child victim currently in the Tahoua region (Niger), June 2023.

⁹⁴ Interviews with four children's victims of ISS-P in Mali and Niger, June to September 2023.

⁹⁵ Guichaoua, Ivan, and Ferdaous Bouhlel. "Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger." *Research Findings and Lessons for Policy - University of Kent*, 2023, page 50.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch. "Mali: Mounting Islamist Armed Group Killings, Rape." July 13, 2023.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

eradicate ISS-P's influence within local communities. Authorities and various invested entities within the Sahel region are encouraged to prioritize proactive measures over reactive approaches, given their inherent difficulty in implementation. This strategic shift should stem from an understanding of the conditions that enable children's recruitment, notably encompassing deficiencies in formal education and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Promotion of online media and radio initiatives geared towards deterring future indoctrination and recruitment of children by ISS-P and ISWAP warrants encouragement. These initiatives should meticulously address the underlying motives of children and contextual factors that drove their involvement with ISS-P and ISWAP. Incorporating sophisticated safeguarding protocols, these programs should integrate accounts from previously affiliated children, thus enriching their efficacy.

The presence of numerous domestic and international entities engaged in humanitarian and developmental endeavors within the central Sahel region, often driven by divergent interests, has potentially hindered the establishment of cohesive collaboration in combatting violent extremism and ensuring sufficient safeguards for vulnerable youths under the influence of the Islamic State. Enhanced efforts focusing on information exchange and coordination among developmental, humanitarian, and security actors are essential in protecting child victims of action by violent actors, including the ISS-P.

Efforts to strengthen assistance for children affected by ISS, aiding in their recovery from traumatic experiences and facilitating their transition toward a new future, warrant greater emphasis. This support framework must encompass an understanding of the ideological indoctrination these children endured, and care should involve the collaboration of psychologists, educators, and religious experts. Additionally, meticulous attention to the cultural, religious facets of the children's lives, and their community's dynamics should form integral components of care protocols.

Moreover, it is imperative to reintegrate children liberated from the clutches of ISSP into their original or alternative communities. It is pivotal to instill awareness within these communities that children dissociating from violent groups such as ISSP and ISWAP are victims themselves, akin to those directly impacted by extremist violence. This heightened awareness has the potential to encourage more children to disengage from such organizations, facilitate their successful reintegration into society, and ultimately mitigate the likelihood of their return to the Islamic State or similar violent militant factions. Enhanced efforts should be allocated to ensure that these departing children from ISSP and ISWAP are protected from the risks of incurring additional traumas upon rejoining their communities, as they might encounter profound rejection.⁹⁸ Families and communities impacted by

⁹⁸ International Alert/UNICEF Nigeria. 2016. "Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria. UNICEF."

ISWAP have voiced apprehensions about the potential inheritance of criminal tendencies by their children and young individuals from those who have defected, potentially leading to inclinations toward violent actions.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Ibid.

C R T G

C R T G W O R K I N G G R O U P

