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How Does Political Violence Make Terrorists out of Children?

Special Symposium Brings Experts From Around the World at SRCD Meeting

A recent survey of Palestinian youth in Gaza found that 36 percent of 12-year-old boys dreamt of dying as martyrs when they turn 18. Why are these children thinking of dying as a way of winning? And why do some of them change their minds? The accumulated research evidence strongly supports the claim that terrorists are made, they are not born.

Political violence has become a worldwide phenomenon in recent years. Individual acts of terrorism get a lot of attention from the media, but there is little understanding of how growing up in a politically violent environment makes terrorists out of ordinary children. Politicians typically phrase the debate as “us” versus “them,” as if to imply that certain groups of people are susceptible to become terrorists. Many experts believe that approach leaves out the question of “why” someone becomes a terrorist.

The biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development will bring together an international panel of experts to look at a variety of important questions about political violence and terrorism.

- As a practical matter, can experts in child development provide a long-term solution to terrorism?
- Is terrorism tied to religion or ethnicity? Could any child anywhere become a terrorist?
- What can we learn from “failed” suicide bombers who changed their minds and did not blow themselves up?
- Are Islamic societies experiencing an “identity crisis,” and how does that affect children?
- Do experts know how children become “radical” and support terrorism?

Researchers: Fathali Moghaddam, Georgetown University; Abraham Sagi-Schwartz, University of Haifa, Israel; Brian Barber, University of Tennessee; Eyad El-Sarraj, Gaza Community Mental Health Program, Palestine; Anne Speckhard, University of Brussels, Belgium.