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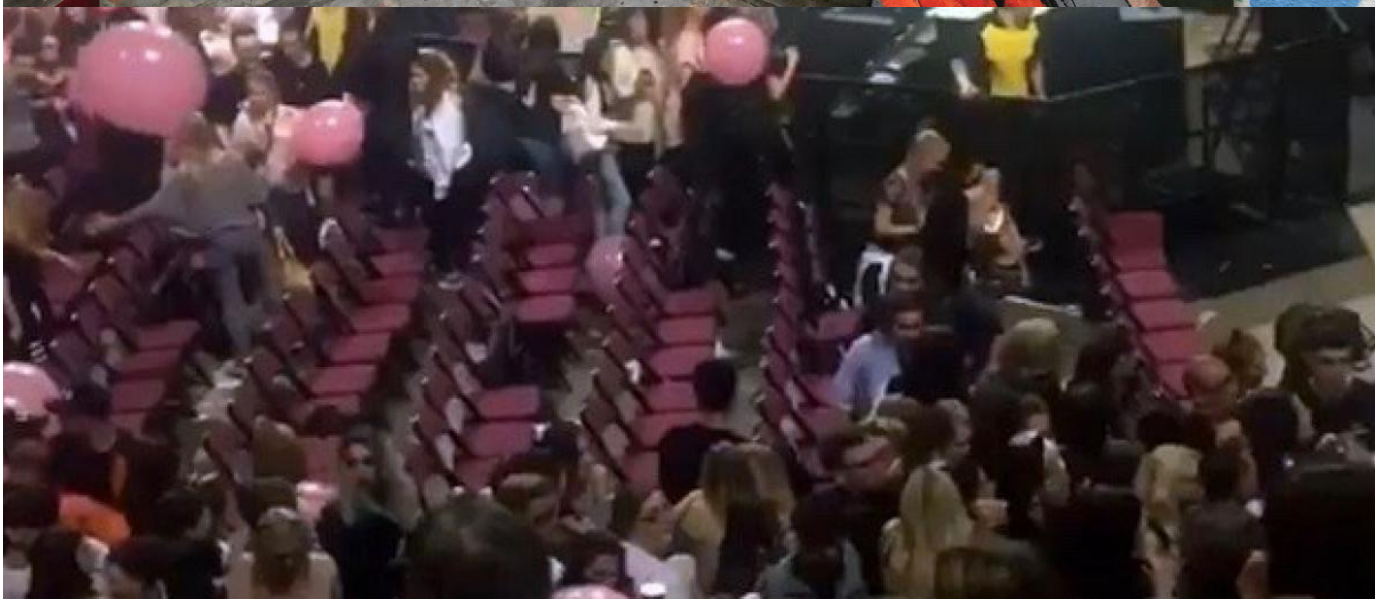

Children as Targets: The Manchester Arena Attack in the Context of Terrorist Propaganda

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On May 22, 2017, the 21,000-capacity Manchester Arena in England, host of the sold-out Ariana Grande concert, was the target of the latest terrorist attack. Within 24-hours the so-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack via their Telegram channels. Across the internet, one particular response to the incident quickly began to trend: namely that it appeared to specifically target children and young people. The BBC was quick to tweet several headlines, including:

"Youngest victim of Manchester Arena attack was of primary school age, BBC learns"

"12 seriously injured children under age of 16 being treated at Manchester Royal Infirmary, paramedics say"

"Eight-year old Saffie Rose Roussos from Leyland killed in Manchester Arena attack, Lancashire County Council says"

As the horror of the attack begins to sink in, questions are being asked as to why this particular demographic group was targeted. In this essay, we consider why children were targeted so callously by examining some of the factors surrounding the attack, and the propaganda that the attacker was likely consuming in the run-up to it.

Ariana Grande's idol status is likely to be one reason why her concert was targeted by a jihadist. She rose to prominence in a popular TV show on the children's *Nickelodeon* network, where she became a teen idol before launching a successful career as a pop singer. IS has condemned idolatry through a number of its publication and propaganda channels,[1] and in its press release following the attack

the victims were referred to as “mushrikin,”[2] which translates as “idolater.” It is worth noting that music has been banned in IS controlled territory to prevent “temptation and corruption of the heart,”[3] and teenagers have been executed for listening to Western music.[4] In addition, Ariana's liberal and progressive views on sexual empowerment for women and gay people are unlikely to have endeared her to adherents of IS’s reductivist ideology.[5]

This is not the first time that individuals inspired by IS have attacked a music venue; the 2015 attack on the Bataclan theatre in Paris is another example. This may raise questions as to why the Manchester Arena was so easily penetrated by the attacker, but from news reports it seems that, in fact, it wasn’t: the attacker simply entered a public area of the venue and waited until enough individuals had exited before detonating his device. This marks music venues, especially those catering to young children who need a designated pick-up zone, as soft targets for terrorists. Here again IS propaganda can be cited, as it encourages perpetrators to identify areas where there will be high levels of crowding, but a low level of security.[6]

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However, none of this fully answers why children were specifically targeted. One possible answer would be the intent to inflame and upset as large a population as possible. The protection of children from evils is arguably one of the social norms unanimously shared across all cultures,[7] so breaking such a large taboo guarantees perpetrators of this act sustained media coverage extending far beyond the initial attack-phase and well into its investigation and subsequent discussion in the discourse of terrorism. This is a central concern for any terrorist group.[8]

It is also possible, however, that children were targeted as a direct consequence of current trends in jihadist propaganda created by IS and al Qaeda. Analysis of this propaganda reveals that IS has recently dramatically increased the level of violence that is undertaken by its child recruits. This is particularly on display in the online magazine *Dabiq* and many other IS social media platforms.[9] IS understands that children are the future. The recruitment, indoctrination, and training of children is how the group plans to sustain its goal of creating a new generation of soldiers and achieving a strong caliphate, and their propaganda shows that they are not afraid to advertise this[10] IS believes that training children from a very young age will create a stronger and fiercer army than it has ever had before.[11] The children in this propaganda are often wearing military uniforms, carrying weapons, and are depicted as being more than capable of undertaking gruesome executions and fighting adults on the battlefield.[12] Moreover, IS child recruits often undertake suicide missions. The portrayal of children as perpetrators of terrorist violence has a legitimizing effect—it suggests that children do not necessarily need to be protected and kept safe, but are capable soldiers and executioners who present a clear and extant threat. And this threat has been realized: in recent Western-backed Iraqi government military advances on the IS stronghold of Mosul where approximately 300 child soldiers were killed.[13] This, unfortunately, provides IS with a dual propaganda message: portraying children first as soldiers and second as martyrs of the Caliphate, honoured and respected by fellow ideologues, and killed by an unrepentant and evil army backed by the UK and other Western Nations.[14]

Although, al Qaeda has not taken any responsibility for the Manchester attack, its propaganda reveals a similar underlying theme of victimized children. In its magazine propaganda, most notably *Inspire*, al Qaeda does not show “militarized” children in the way IS does; however, it invests enormous effort in showing the injuries and death that children suffer at the hands of Western-backed warfare. Speaking to journalists following the Manchester attack, the sister of the perpetrator claimed he was likely motivated by images and stories of the children he saw dying as a result of US and UK airstrikes on Syria[15]—the same images that are broadcast and disseminated by al Qaeda propagandists. In this light, the targeting of children at the Manchester Arena can be seen as vengeance. Terrorist propaganda has long been regarded as an effective radicalizing agent, especially in terms of how it encourages young people to ‘stand up’ and protect children and youths.[16] Thus, it is quite possible that the perpetrator of the Manchester attack decided to target children in order to mirror the scenes he had seen on the pages of terrorist magazines and websites.

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It is our argument, therefore, that the targeting of the Ariana Grande concert was not simply an expression of rage directed at a randomly selected target, but was instead a carefully considered and thought-out choice inspired and influenced by terrorist propaganda that has been produced, cultivated and disseminated for a number of months. This decision, we believe, was aimed specifically at mirroring the consequences that children of both IS and al Qaeda face in terrorist-occupied territory. The key difference here, of course, is that the purpose of Western

airstrikes has never been to target children. What happened at Manchester on May 22 was a direct attack on children when they were unsuspecting and vulnerable.

While it is impossible to make sense of such a tragic event, this analysis of the 'legitimization agents' at work in this attack can assist in building a picture of the trends, narratives, and ideologies present in modern-day terrorist organizations and can go some way to understanding the motivations of terrorist actors.

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