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number of students needs to be matched by a similar emphasis on quality of educa-
tion, and basic education needs to be matched by
further opportunities.

Militant socialization has long-term effects. Exile
socialization may materialize in inspiring intoler-
ance or violence upon return to country of origin.
Worldviews shaped in settings that are fairly
insulated from the situation in the state of origin,
not being molded in the everyday interaction with
political opponents, may prove particularly inflex-
ible. At the extreme, such worldviews may prevent
reconciliation and promote further violent conflict.
Ideological narratives that emphasize the duty to
return in order to bring about an ideal state are
particularly worrisome.

Conclusions

Refugee contexts lend themselves easily to militant
socialization. The challenges to policy and practice
are many, and they are profound. In exile, the most
evident implication is to ensure that education
systems for refugees do not fail under the influence
of rebel groups. Moreover, socialization concerns
also give further weight to the need to delimit the
influence of rebels on refugee populations, not
only when it comes to control over resources and
provision of security, but also the ability to shape
the political narrative and the everyday climate of
interpersonal encounters.

Refugeehood is good material for irreconciliatory
narratives. The shared fate of being unjustly driven
from one’s homeland is a basis for cultivating a
sense of duty to contribute to a return in which
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Notes

Refugee populations can provide fertile ground for rebel entrepreneurs who seek to expand their membership with a view to pursuing military campaigns against power-holders in the country of origin. The phenomenon is well known through the so-called ‘refugee warrior’ literature, which emphasizes access to resources through humanitar- ian channels, as well as from the host and other states. Despite an interest, in the same literature, in collective consciousness and ideological frames, this is an issue that has hardly been taken up explicitly, and the mechanisms of socialization are poorly studied. An exception is the field of refugee education, where UNHCR has taken a lead in a campaign to rethink, and better resource, school- ing for children in exile. While education in exile is important, we have a broader perspective, to look at socialization by rebel groups in general, and to draw some implications also for the return and reintegration in the country of origin.

Taking a lead from what we know about socialization in general, we must presume that refugee populations are more receptive to new and radical ideological narratives than the average citizen. There are two primary reasons that socialization is potentially more effective in exile settings: 1) people find themselves in a novel or uncertain environment; 2) the setting may be secluded, with few competing narratives. The difficult balance for anyone seeking to rally support around an ideological narrative is to take the agency of the actors concerned — whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the inter- face between the two — seriously. With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels’ objectives become a main topic of study.

The work by Zolberg and associates was followed by several books in the first years after the turn of the millennium. These contributed insightful case studies, and added considerable depth to the understand- ing of the phenomenon, yet largely retained a focus on the role of structural factors, not the least the support of states and from humanitarian actors. Only in recent years have studies emerged that take the agency of the actors concerned — whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the inter- face between the two — seriously. With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels’ objectives become a main topic of study.

Fundamentally, socialization involves transforma- tive learning, in the form of acquiring new skills, and also new ways of thinking about the world. It is a familiar story: the same agents, over time and in novel or uncertain environments, are highly susceptible to socialization. Uncertainty may characterize refugee environments in at least two distinct ways. One is the novelty dimension, the uncertainty that is related to upheaval and lack of familiarity, and the costs associated with individual children, and lead to education that is neither of high quality nor protective.6 This challenge manifests itself directly in the Education Strategy that the UNHCR launched following the year 2001. These are significant develop- ments, and clearly education for refugees is subject to more attention and more resources than before. Undoubtedly, there are also significant shortcom- ings in the UNHCR’s approach, which can be improved on, as with the introduction of training programs aimed specifically at refugees (pupils enrolled) at the cost of quality (including political content, as well as the scarcity of possibil- ities beyond basic education [both education- and employment-related]).7 Noting the importance of education, this policy brief is rooted in the con- viction that an even broader perspective on rebel’s socialization is needed, one that seeks to ge- neral education as the only means of socialization, that takes seriously the particularities of refugee contexts, and which starts from an understand- ing of the underlying attraction for rebels in this domain.8

The Refugee Setting

Rebel groups that operate in refugee contexts are special, in that they both operate outside the re- mit of the government that they oppose, and they operate within a political constituency that may be able to fully take part in the struggle. Within a well-functioning state, the institutions of socializa- tion would be under the control of the state. In civil wars where rebel groups operate exclusively within the boundaries of their own state, they will find it difficult to set up schools and other training insti- tutions, except in those cases where they are able to establish lasting control over parts of the territory and its residents. When rebels seek exile, however, they may also move out of the territory that is under the control of the state they oppose. This limits the state’s ability to control its contenders, and its abil- ity to prevent it from setting up alternative institu- tions. A prerequisite, of course, is that the hosting state allows the rebels to build such institutions – or at least does not prevent them from doing so – and to attract members of the refugee population.

The trajectories of rebel groups differ widely, and so do the ways by which they get to be actors in refugee contexts. The default is that an ongoing armed conflict, between a government and a rebel group (or several), leads to an outflow of refugees, eventually followed by the rebels, who would seek to exert their influence in exile, which they also use as a base for continuing cross-border fighting. A different trajectory is when opposition groups build a political consciousness in their home country which clashes with domestic politics, then seek ex- ile to uphold their political project, possibly already equipped with overarching ideological frames, educational templates and curricula, perhaps also with trained teachers, well placed to monopolize socialization in exile. A third variety is when a rebel organization emerges from within an exile context, with no clear predecessor, in which case institu- tions of socialization may very well be key to their emergence. Rebel groups need to attract its desired instru- ments for furthering their agenda.

The context – the concrete messages conveyed and attitudes fostered – matters. The conscious social- ization that rebel groups pursue in exile is reflective of their ideological frames, their justifications for the struggle that they engage in, and in a more or less coherent narrative that provides a sense of shared purpose and an ultimate vision. In the words of one researcher, rebels’ shared frames of origin, a shared political action, Sidney Tarrow, ideology serves both to ‘justify, dignify and animate collective action’.9 Ideology is the key aspect of a rebel group, the question of whose side you are on, permitting diverse groups to focus on common aims. Impor- tant is that ideology must also be persuasive, but stand in a dynamic relationship to the narra- tives of, and interactions with, other actors, such as media and international organizations. As empha- sized in the refugee warrior literature, however, the international refugee regime in itself – constructed to safeguard the rights of refugees, thereby inevi- tably different political narratives, and the need for external sympathy and support – can serve to justify armed resistance to the larger world.

No visitor to the Middle East can avoid no- ticing the yawning gap between the educa- tional, entrepreneurial and occupational ambitions of the region’s populace and the harsh reality that deprivations so many of them of a positive future. Indeed, in that landscape, two out of five (40%) 18-25 are either unemployed or underem- ployed. Aggravating this situation is the global refugee crisis, which has displaced some 20 million children, six million from Syria alone, very few of whom are likely to return home during their school-age years. It should come as no surprise that the Islamic State group believes that it can find fertile ground for recruitment in this vast population of dispossessed and disaffected young people.

Political messaging needs in some way to resonate with what is familiar to the population that it tar- gets. As Charles Tilly and others have pointed out, to maintain a coherent ideological program, while presenting it in a vernacular that resonates with local culture, is a delicate balancing act.10 To Tilly, it became increasingly clear that culture – which he referred to as ‘shared understandings and their rep- resentations’ – is key. Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge emerged through their period (1979-98) in exile, engaged in a systematic socialization campaign, did well in maintaining support from its cadet, but had limited success in attracting new members from among the refugee population. Their broad mes- sage as the ultimate liberation from Vietnamese aggression was undermined by the Vietnamese force withdrawal, as well as the Khmer Rouge’s own re- cord of violent repression while in power.

Identity formation in exile is the main issue in Lisa Nakamura’s Purity and Exile, where she compares refugees settled in camps in Tanzania, where she refers to a political consciousness, focusing on a future of, and interactions with, other actors, such as media and international organizations. As empha- sized in the refugee warrior literature, however, the international refugee regime in itself – constructed to safeguard the rights of refugees, thereby inevi- tably different political narratives, and the need for external sympathy and support – can serve to justify armed resistance to the larger world.

The acquisition of new skills and the transforma- tion of consciousness can be seen as two inter- related aspects of socialization. In military socializa- tion, the acquisition of new skills and the transforma- tion of consciousness is seen as training to fight and kill is inextricably linked to changing perceptions of self as well as to justifications for ex- erting violence. Elizabeth Jean Wood suggests that military recruits ‘have to be socialized in the use of violence for group, not private, purposes.’11 She continues by noting that ‘training and socializa- tion to the armed group take place both formally, through the immersion experience of “boot camp”, and informally, through initiation rituals and haz- ing’. Ultimately, building coherent organizations, whose members are willing to risk their lives for the larger group, requires that the absence of durable, systematic socialization.

In exiling refugees may change their political out- look, whether as a result of interacting closely with others that share their traumatic experiences, or because they are exiled as a result of being run by the military among the refugees, transnational entities, or by states. In some cases, efforts seek to build a political consciousness, focusing on a return project, with the ambition of taking political power in the country of origin. Socialization is re- informed by engaging in violence, as when fighters from the ‘Green Line’ in Darfur gained access to the border. The likelihood of post-return vio- lence will depend on whether military socialization continues post exile, or returns to the country of origin, as a consequence of return. At its most effective, however, socialization fosters attitudes that will

In the latter half of the 1980s, Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguyo launched the concept of ‘refugee warrior communities’. The concept stirred massive con- troversy at the time as it was seen as underlying crimes of factionalistic violence and the broader narrative of victimization, and implicitly suggest- ing that refugees possess agency of their own.

Engaging mainly with the very structures that create refugee flows, and the refugee regime that responds, Zolberg and associates defined refugee warrior communities as:

highly conscious refugee communities with a political leadership structure and armed sections engaged in warfighting for a political objective, be it to repropel the homeland, change the regime, or secure a separate state. (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguyo 1989: 273)

While acknowledging the increasingly crucial role played by non-state actors, the insistence on a clear distinction between refugees and militants con- tinues to inform most work that addresses refugee mobilization. The way in which the very conscious- ness implied by the definition is created, main- tained or transformed is dealt with mainly marginally in the ‘refugee warriors’ literature.

The work by Zolberg and associates was followed by several books in the first years after the turn of the millennium. These contributed insightful case studies, and added considerable depth to the understand- ing of the phenomenon, yet largely retained a focus on the role of structural factors, not the least the support of states and from humanitarian actors. Only in recent years have studies emerged that take the agency of the actors concerned — whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the inter- face between the two — seriously. With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels’ objectives become a main topic of study.

Multilateral actors, and NGOs, with UNHCR at the lead, are addressing the issue, focusing on educa- tion. In Dryden-Peterson’s 2011 report for UN- HCR, on education for refugees, one of the seven challenges reads:

The inherently political nature of the context and structures of refugee education can ex- alt a minority political or ideological frame or narrative, and little knowledge of the destination, which in itself leaves refugees vulnerable, and therefore potentially receptive to more or less subtle politi- cal manoeuvres. As a result, there is a risk that one, and therefore more strongly coherent narrative that provides a sense of shared purpose and an ultimate vision. In the words of one researcher, rebels’ shared frames of origin, a shared political action, Sidney Tarrow, ideology serves both to ‘justify, dignify and animate collective action’.10 Ideology is the key aspect of a rebel group, the question of whose side you are on, permitting diverse groups to focus on common aims. Impor- tant is that ideology must also be persuasive, but stand in a dynamic relationship to the narra- tives of, and interactions with, other actors, such as

media and international organizations. As empha- sized in the refugee warrior literature, however, the international refugee regime in itself – constructed to safeguard the rights of refugees, thereby inevi- tably different political narratives, and the need for external sympathy and support – can serve to justify armed resistance to the larger world.
Refugee populations can provide fertile ground for rebel entrepreneurs who seek to expand their membership with a view to pursue military campaigns against powerholders in the country of origin. The phenomenon is well known through the so-called ‘refugee warrior’ literature, which emphasizes access to resources through humanitarian channels, as well as the host and other states. Despite an interest, in the same literature, in collective consciousness and ideological frames, this, as with so many dilemmas, has been underplayed within debates on the nature and implications of the socialization process, and the mechanisms of socialization are poorly studied. An exception is the field of refugee education, where UNHCR has taken a lead in a campaign to rethink, and better resource, schooling for children in exile. While education in exile is important, we have a broader perspective, to look at socialization by rebel groups in general, and to draw some implications also for the return and reintegration in the country of origin.

Taking a lead from what we know about socialization in general, we must premise that refugee populations are more receptive to new and radical ideological narratives than the average citizen. There are two primary reasons that socialization is potentially more effective in exile settings: 1. People find themselves in a novel or uncertain environment, 2. the setting may be secluded, with few competing narratives. The difficult balance for anyone seeking to rally support around an ideologically motivated project is to strike a balance between that which resonates with firmly held beliefs and convictions and that which feels new and different. That balance, in refugee settings, may be less challenging to strike, as the newness of the situation, and the sense of being unrightfully driven from one’s home leads recipients to embrace new ideas. Often, the ideological narrative takes exactly this as its point of departure, extending it to justify a return to past injustices by violent measures. Unfortunately, the conflict’s ideological narratives are much more effective when they engage with developing new skills of militant action. In an era of global societal conflict, most new conflicts are ideologically motivated, as learning to fight is irrevocably linked to changing perceptions of self as well as to justifying the extermination of violence.

The Refugee Warrior’s Debate

In the latter half of the 1960s, Zolberg and Suhrke launched the concept of ‘refugee warrior communities’. The concept stressed massive consensus, as it was based upon broad and informal narrative of victimization, and implicitly suggest that refugees possess agency of their own. Engaging mainly with the very structures that circulate refugee flows, and the refugee regime that responds, Zolberg and associates define refugee warrior communities as:

- highly conscious refugee communities with a political leadership structure and armed sections engaged in warfare for a political objective, be it to repatriate the homeland, change the regime, or secure a separate state.

(Zolberg, Suhrke and Auyago 1989: 275)

While acknowledging the increasingly crucial role played by non-state actors, the insistence on a clear distinction between refugees and militants continues to inform most work that addresses refugee mobilization. The way in which the very consciousness implied by the definition is created, maintained or transformed is dealt with only marginally in the ‘refugee warriors’ literature.

The work by Zolberg and associates was followed by several books in the first years after the turn of the millennium.1 These contributed insightful case studies, and added considerable depth to the understanding of the phenomenon, yet largely retained a focus on the role of structural factors, not the least the support of states and from humanitarian actors. Only in recent years have studies emerged that take the agency of the actors concerned – whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the interface between the two – seriously.2 With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels’ objectives become a main topic of study.

Multilateral actors, and NGOs, with UNHCR at the lead, are addressing the issue, focusing on education. In Dryden-Peterson’s 2011 report for UNHCR, on education for refugees, one of the seven challenges reads: ‘

- The inherently political nature of the content and structures of refugee education can enhance or undermine political consciousness among individual children, and lead to education that is neither of high quality nor protective.4

This challenge manifests itself directly in the Education Strategy that the UNHCR launched the following year: ‘These are significant developments, and clearly education for refugees is subject to more attention and more resources than before. Undoubtedly, there are also significant shortcomings, and the notion that refugees are passively enrolled at the cost of quality (including political content, as well as the scarcity of possibilities beyond basic education (both education- and employment-related).’ Recognizing the importance of education, this policy brief is rooted in the conviction that an even broader perspective on rebel socialization is needed, one that seeks to go beyond education as the only means of socialization, that takes seriously the particularities of refugee contexts, and which starts from an understanding of the underlying attraction of rebels for this domains.5

The Refugee Setting

Rebel groups that operate in refugee contexts are special, in that they both operate outside the remit of the government that they oppose, and they operate within a political constituency that may be able to fully take part in the struggle. Within a well-functioning state, the institutions of socialization would be under the control of the state. In civil wars where rebel groups operate exclusively within the boundaries of their own state, they will find it difficult to set up schools and other training institutions, except in those cases where they are able to establish lasting control over parts of the territory and its residents. When rebels seek exile, however, they also move out of the territory that is under the control of the state they oppose. This limits the state’s ability to control its contenders, and its ability to prevent it from setting up alternative institutions. A prerequisite, of course, is that the host state allows the rebels to build such institutions – or at least does not prevent them from doing so – and to attract members of the refugee population.

Fundamentally, socialization involves transformative learning, in the form of acquiring new skills, and also new ways of thinking about the world. It is a fundamental and continuous learning process, by which people, when finding themselves in novel or uncertain environments, are highly susceptible to socialization.6 Uncertainty may characterize refugee environments in at least two distinct ways. One is the novelty dimension, the uncertainty that is related to upheaval and displacement, inability to control one’s own life and little knowledge of the destination, which in itself leaves refugees vulnerable, and therefore potentially receptive to more or less subtle political manipulation. The other type of uncertainty is the more enduring one, which has to do both with the possible physical insecurity that may characterize refugee environments, and the uncertainty about the future. Both types of uncertainty prepare the ground for a rebel group that is capable of offering solutions to reality that is often shaped by the harsh reality that deprives so many of the region’s young people of their aspirations of, and interactions with, other actors, such as media and international organizations. As emphasized in the refugee warrior literature, however, the international refugee regime in itself – constructed to safeguard the rights of refugees, thereby inevitably fragmenting the political landscape of the region – is a source of external sympathy and support – can serve to justify armed resistance to the larger world.

We also know that socialization is particularly effective in secludecl settings, such as refugee camps, where individuals interact only with a finite – often homogeneous – set of individuals, rather than shifting between various social environments. Wherein is a more regulated context, there is normally a clear distinction between interpersonal (family, friends and institutional bonds), workplace, and forms of socialization, this distinction is fundamentally blurred in refugee contexts. With few alternative choices, the difficulties of breaking down an identity that is on the one hand, the correctives normally offered by these institutions of socialization weaken or evaporate entirely. These are ideal conditions for cultivating adherence to radical worldwide, even a commitment to military.

Ideological Narratives

The trajectories of rebel groups differ widely, and so do the ways by which they get to be actors in refugee contexts. The default is that an ongoing armed conflict, between a government and a rebel group (or several), leads to an influx of refugees, eventually followed by the rebels, who would seek to exert their influence in exile, which they also use as a base for continuing cross-border fighting. A different trajectory is when opposition groups build a political consciousness in their home country which clashes with domestic politics, then seek exile to uphold their political project, possibly already equipped with overarching ideological frames, educational templates and curricula, perhaps also with trained teachers, well placed to monopolize socialization in exile. A third variety is when a rebel organization emerges from within an exile context, with no clear predecessor, in which case institutions of socialization may very well be key to their emergence and growth in and out of the state.7 Varying skillsets.

Fundamentally, ideological narratives are as diverse as the groups that take the agency of the actors concerned – whether they are rebels, refugees, or at the interface between the two – seriously.8 With that, the processes by which potential recruits within the refugee population are socialized to identify with the rebels’ objectives become a main topic of study.

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell describes a political reality in which the message is simultaneously the medium. The very content of the message – the “newspeak” – is the “instrument of the revolution,” the means of accrueing power in the absence of the means to use it.9 The politics of this moment, like the politics of many before it, are structured around questions of identity. Is this a narrative that your community can get behind? Can it be used to inform our decision about how we spend our resources? Do our community members feel that this is a narrative that speaks to their experiences? Can it be used to inform how we approach the next phase of this work?

The effects of militant socialization in exile endure. When a large number of refugees sharing a radical vision return together, as often occurs following major political and military changes at home, continued violence is a real possibility. To aid in many conflict settlements, rapid and voluntary return carries with it a risk for destabilization. 

Militant Skillsets

The acquisition of new skills and the transformation of consciousness can be seen as two interrelated aspects of socialization. In military socialization, the acquisition of new skills and the transfer of consciousness intertwine, as learning to fight and kill is irrevocably linked to changing perceptions of self as well as to justifications for existing violence. Elizabeth Jean Wood suggests that military recruits “have to be socialized in the use of violence for group, not private, purposes.”10 She continues by noting that “training and socialization to the armed group take place both formally, through the immersion experience of ‘boot camp’… and informally, through initiation rituals and hacker-gang.” Ultimately, building coherent organizations, whose members are willing to risk their lives for the larger group, is a difficult task that the absence of durable, systematic socialization.

In exile refugees may change their political outlook, whether as a result of interacting closely with others that share their traumatic experiences, or through personal relocation. A political leader may be run by militants among the refugees, transnational entities, or by states. In some cases, efforts seek to build a political consciousness, focusing on a return project, with the ambition of taking political power in the country of origin. Socialization is reinforced by engaging in violence, as when fighters from outside a group’s immediate environment engage them across the border. The likelihood of post-return violence will depend on whether militant socialization continues in exile or ends, as a consequence of return. At its most effective, however, socialization fosters attitudes that will
Refugee contexts lend themselves easily to militant socialization. The challenges to policy and practice are many, and they are profound. In exile, the most evident implication is to ensure that education systems for refugees do not fall under the influence of rebel groups. Moreover, socialization concerns also give further weight to the need to delimit the influence of rebel groups on refugee populations, not only when it comes to control over resources and provision of security, but also the ability to shape influence of rebels on refugee populations, not only when it comes to control over resources and provision of security, but also the ability to shape the narrative and the everyday climate of interpersonal encounters.

Refugees may be particularly vulnerable to such attempts, living with insecurity and uncertainty, often with a degree of seclusion which weakens competing narratives. While influence over the institutions of education is highly prized, socialization takes place in a number of different arenas, ranging from informal personal encounters to the media. The experience of being driven from one’s homeland is good material for cultivating intolerant narratives, at times with violent return to form the ideal state as the ultimate ambition. Hence, the impact of exile socialization may go well beyond the refugee period, to inform inter-group relations, even violence, upon return to the country of origin. A little studied dimension of the so-called ‘refugee warrior’-phenomenon, the inherent risks of militant socialization calls for serious attention.

Notes

When, Why and How Are Refugees Receptive to Militant Messaging?

For rebel groups operating from exile, the opportunity to build support and recruit fighters through socialization is attractive. Refugees may be particularly vulnerable to such attempts, living with insecurity and uncertainty, often with a degree of exclusion which weakens competing narratives. While influence over the institutions of education is highly prized, socialization takes place in a number of different arenas, ranging from informal personal encounters to the media. The experience of being driven from one’s homeland is good material for cultivating intolerant narratives, at times with violent return to form the ideal state as the ultimate ambition. Hence, the impact of exile socialization may go well beyond the refugee period, to inform inter-group relations, even violence, upon return to the country of origin. A little studied dimension of the so-called ‘refugee warrior’-phenomenon, the inherent risks of militant socialization calls for serious attention.

Exile Socialization