

Jihadi Brides or Muhajirat?

Understanding the Uptick in Western Women Being Recruited and Emigrating to the Caliphate

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Introduction

When the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS/ISIL/ISIS) declared its Caliphate in June 2014, the group created something that the groups that had existed before IS had only imagined about—the physical location of a Salafist extremist Sunni-driven Sharia law society. Not only that, but it also developed a sophisticated media machine with targeted message points for recruitment, packed with visuals to cater to the wide range of potential recruits. These message points not only garnered attention from Muslims around the Middle East, but the interest also spread East and Westward, gaining the attention of Europeans and Americans.

The United States (US) House Homeland Security Committee's monthly terror threat snapshot states that nearly 40,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria, of which 6,900 are from the West, and 250 from the United States. The United Kingdom's (UK) HM Government Counter-Extremism Strategy states that 750 UK-linked individuals have traveled to Syria. According to a March, 2016 New York Times article, an estimated 56 British women and teenage girls have left the United Kingdom to go to Syria (Stack), and according to a newly released New America report, about 35 women have traveled to ISIS territory from the United States (Bergen, Sterman, Sims, Ford 3).

While this established Caliphate created a new way of recruiting, something even more profound occurred – ISIS started actively recruiting women, not as active suicide bombers, or simply as wives of fighters, but as active members of society. This observable difference started intriguing Western women so much that the recruitment of them, specifically, became an endeavor for ISIS for a variety of reasons. This paper will address ISIS' media machine tactics, themes for women's recruitment, the roles of women in ISIS, (specifically women from the UK and the US) and the counterterrorism narratives in these countries. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the International Centre for Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), there is no way to create a broad profile of a muhajirat (female migrant) based on demographics, which makes the development of a counternarrative that much more complex.

The ISIS Media Machine

As recent as 2011, jihadist groups began to

expand outside of traditional media. Traditional media reports official videos released by jihadists or reports on attacks, according to Jytte Klausen of Brandeis University. She states that instead of traditional reporting, "groups, media outlets, and individuals moved on to mainstream social media platforms and created new accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Most groups' media outlets still post their content to jihadi forums but will simultaneously create sponsored Twitter accounts where they release new statements or videos," (quoted in Klausen 3). This concept of reaching out directly to the public without the aid of making official statements to international media allows groups like the Islamic State to remain technologically relevant and have the opportunity to directly interact with the target audience(s).

Since the establishment of the Caliphate in the summer of 2014, ISIS has been actively recruiting members through social media platforms. They do this through targeted messaging for men, women and families to join the society they have set up in the territory they acquired. The types of media being pushed are photo essays, videos, audio statements, news bulletins, posters, and theological essays (Winter 3), and the largest platforms used, outside of the dark web (where special browsers are required to access content anonymously) are Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viper, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr (Klausen 1). Through these platforms, they are able to acquire large sums of followers who receive their messaging. ISIS has official accounts and other media wings, which push messages out to its tens of thousands of individual social media followers, and message points get shared through this trickledown effect.

ISIS also has supporters that have multiple accounts which promote the official messages and/or post messages in support of ISIS activity. In fact, according to Alex Kassirer of Flashpoint in New York, ISIS has an entire media life cycle. It begins with what she refers to as "battlefield recording", which is raw content. This footage is then exported to a computer, which is edited by ISIS' production team. The logistics team then uploads the compressed file to playback sites, which are then published via links to anonymous text ties. ISIS then posts a press release and a download link to forums, which is then "crowd sourced" by supporters to push out the message

points (Kassirer).

According to the Quilliam Foundation's report Documenting the 'Virtual' Caliphate, the Islamic State propaganda machine issues 38.2 individual propaganda posts every day (Winter 5). While 38.2 may not seem abundant, these are ISIS official accounts that generate these messages, and this does not include additional supporter accounts and followers of these accounts. Therefore, the Islamic State is pushing at least one to two message points per platform every single day, so potential followers or members just need to land on one of their pages to get information. With this increased social media push and the expansion from uploading of videos like al Qaeda's, which were less sophisticated in comparison, according to Terrorism Researcher Michael Zekulin (qtd. in Casciani), ISIS has a larger reach and is able to connect and interact with its target recruitment audience.

There are specific themes that have emerged in the propaganda: mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war, and utopia (Winter 6). In a world where every Western media report documents the brutal nature of the group, and the violations and infringements on society, a glimpse into a softer side of ISIS is what may be appealing to curious Westerners. If these are the largest themes, it appears that they are strategically categorizing media so that they can send their message to those who want to defend the Islamic State's actions against non-Sunni Muslims who do not support the ISIS agenda, while at the same time promote what they consider civil society. It is inviting, though dangerous, the latter of which is increasingly appealing to young men and women.

One of the unique things that ISIS has done with recruiting is not message points or mediums used, but the actual recruiters themselves. Women have been recruiting women online, and even more specifically, Western women who have entered ISIS territory are now recruiting other Western women. "Anecdotal evidence suggests that, compared with their counterparts in Muslim countries, young Muslim women from the West are most likely to respond to the call and that the most effective recruiters are other Western-raised women who have already migrated to Islamic State," (Atwan 183). It makes bringing women into the Caliphate much easier when there is a network and support system in place for these expatriates.

The Call to Make Hijra (Pilgrimage) – Recruitment of Western Women

The Islamic State has been strategic in how it approaches recruitment for hijra. ISIS is actively seeking individuals to come and live in the territory in order to build society. The media team has been very savvy in recognizing that likeminded individuals will gravitate towards one another, so young Western women can relate to others who are curious. This push for friendship, sisterhood, and doing what they believe is right in the name of God, helps build this group.

According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue report, Till Martyrdom Do Us Part, over 550 Western women have traveled to ISIS territory to join the Caliphate (Saltman and Smith 4). Women recruiters tend to primarily focus on civilian life, and the promotion of marriage and sisterhood. They engage young women in topics of Caliphate life, relationships, marriage discussions, and the pride one has in being the wife of a to-be shaheed (martyr). The Institute for Strategic Dialogue argues that there are "push and pull factors" for why women join, ranging from isolation in the Western world as Muslims, persecution of the international Muslim population and emotions over a lack of response to the persecution (Saltman and Smith 9). The pull factors identified are an idealized vision of the Caliphate, sisterhood, and romanticized expectations (Saltman and Smith 13). Many of these women come from cultures that are individualized, and Eastern cultures are traditionally collectivistic. Collectivism can create more salient relationships in the eyes of these women, because they have the common goal of working for the betterment of the Caliphate, where everyone has the same objectives and wishes, or at least it is marketed that way.

Although there is no one-size-fits-all description of women who join ISIS from the West (Saltman and Smith 5), there are likely certain themes that can be carried across. There is not extensive research on this because the sample is difficult to interact with; it is possible that some of these women are from families which are ethnic or religious minorities, or they are third culture children, growing up in a culture that is different from their parents'. Also, some of these women may have identified with the ISIS agenda and converted to Islam to have access to the Caliphate. There are many possibilities for the backgrounds of

these women and what draws them to the adventure and danger of the Islamic State.

Roles of Western Women in ISIS

Once they reach the Caliphate, women are encouraged to get married soon after arrival, which gives them the opportunity to have children and raise the next generation. According to Jayne Huckerby of Duke University, once there, women can serve in all-female units that patrol and inflict violent punishment on other women; they also raid homes, serve in recruitment capacities, train suicide bombers, serve as fundraisers, and spread propaganda (A27). Some women have been largely effective at dissemination of propaganda for recruitment through social media

Frenett 31). What seems to be problematic with this idea is that these women are told what an honor it is to be the wife of a shaheed, and oftentimes these women may have already had children with their husbands, so the likelihood of them becoming martyrs themselves is small. Therefore, they are encouraged to raise the next generation of jihadists. From this standpoint, it is easier for many mothers to become recruiters, and this way, they still have access to the internet. "Female supporters of ISIS, especially the Western female migrants to ISIS-controlled territory, contribute significantly to spreading ISIS ideology," (Hoyle, Bradford, Frenett 34). Western women fill a recruitment niche because they understand how to connect with other Western women and their

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platforms. There are others who have specialized roles relating to women's health or education. Some women are interested in being martyrs themselves.

As aforementioned, it is suspected that others join groups like the al Khansaa Brigade, which is principally an all-women's morality contingent. al Khansaa roams the ISIS territory looking for Sharia violations, making sure the women of the Caliphate are following the rules (Bhutia). If they come into contact with a violator, then they have free reign to punish her. The women who participate in the brigade also get intensive weapons and religious training (Moaveni). According to the al Khansaa handbook for women, translated by the Quilliam Foundation, women in the Islamic State are meant to primarily serve their husbands and children, but may have secondary roles that allow them to leave their homes, such as jihad when called, furthering their Quranic studies and/or serving as doctors or teachers (al Khansaa Brigade).

According to the report by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, Becoming Mulan, some women in ISIS territory express a readiness and willingness to fight, in addition to their other roles (Hoyle, Bradford,

collective narrative.

Why Women Are Joining from the United Kingdom and the United States

Michael Petrou of Maclean's writes, "Previous jihads, even high-profile ones, such as in Afghanistan during the 1980s and '90s, did not attract anywhere near the same numbers of foreign women, and especially Western ones." The online propaganda has been strategic in brainwashing these young women, known as jihadi brides, to join the Caliphate. This concept of jihadi brides puts these women in a category that inferences weakness, impressionability, and being incapable of any decision making of their own. Mia Bloom from the University of Massachusetts Lowell has written extensively on the topic of women in terrorism, and has argued that women in ISIS territory are viewed as "baby making factories," (quoted in Bell). This idea of a jihadi bride that only serves as a wife and mother is something that has largely plagued Western media. How is it then that these young women are able to make the step of initiating contact, plotting to leave what they know,

and making it all the way to ISIS territory? They choose to actively engage in these online platforms and engage with recruiters. The international media has too long regarded these young women as victims, but are they actually perpetrators? According to Jayne Huckerby of Duke University, “We do still very much operate in a world where the idea that women don't have agency – that they must be tricked or under the influence or brainwashed or they only joined to become jihadi brides – is very much still a dominant frame,” (quoted in Petrou).

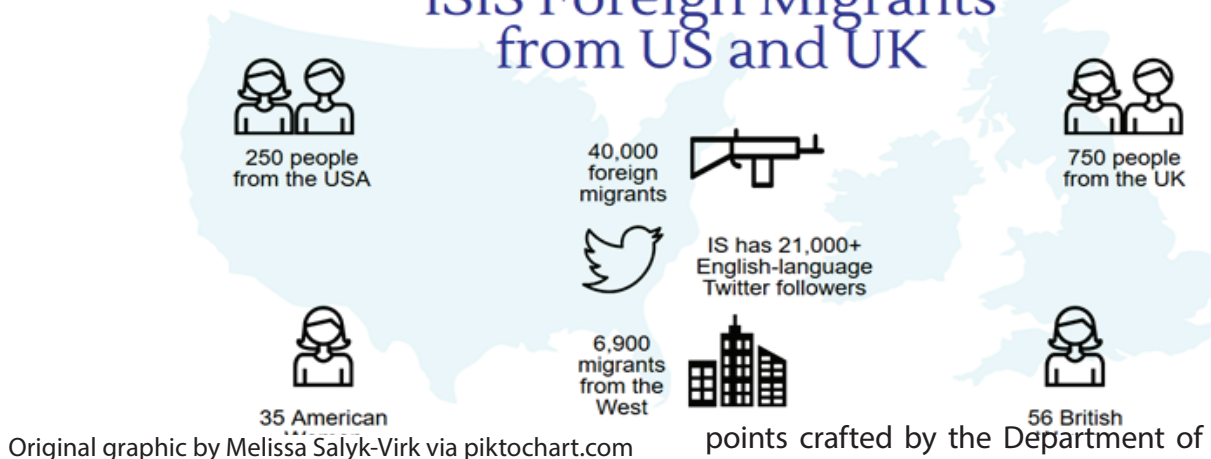
As previously discussed, women who travel to ISIS territory are often provided with opportunities to engage in society. Perhaps some do wish to be brides of shaheed. Some may want to fight with mujahideen (one who is engaged in jihad) in the literal sense, but realize that they are not given opportunities to fight on the frontlines. In that case, they are able to contribute in other ways, such as promoting Sharia law by being in a group like the al-Khansaa Brigade, which provides an outlet for violence and anger towards those not abiding by Caliphate law. Others may simply feel like they are contributing by teaching Quranic studies and practicing this extreme version of Islam that ISIS has developed. Yet, others want to recruit women to join their ranks because they truly believe that this is the will of God.

and the acts of it are always evolving. Counterterrorism measures and counternarratives/alternate narratives to recruitment and radicalization need to also evolve. Of the countries discussed, both the United States and United Kingdom have created broad counterterrorism measures. The United Nations (UN), of which both of these states are members, has its own counterterrorism strategy. According to the United Nations Action to Counter Terrorism website, the UN has a four-pillar strategy that includes “addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; preventing and combatting terrorism; building states’ capacity and strengthening the role of the United Nation; and ensuring human rights and the rule of law,” (United Nations). In addition, the UN has a Counter-terrorism Implementation Task Force.

The United States has a Bureau of Counterterrorism (CT). Within CT, specific initiatives have been created to work toward countering violent extremism (CVE) and specific supporting groups such as partnerships, eliminating financing of terrorist groups, terrorist screenings, among others (US Department of State).

The United States has been trying to counter the narrative that ISIS has been propagating, and has created its own CVE programming with message

ISIS Foreign Migrants from US and UK



Counterterrorism Narratives in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the United Nations

Terrorism is not a new concept, yet perpetrators

points crafted by the Department of State. In terms of successful views, it has largely been criticized by the media as being ineffective because it is not drawing website traffic, and may actually be aiding ISIS’ cause instead of deterring (Poole). In addition, this program has been further criticized because it focuses on key neighborhoods which have a strong Muslim population. This has caused tension within

communities due to fear of informants, as well as concerns about stereotyping of the community.

The United Kingdom has gone one step further and has created multiple programs, such as CounterExtremism.org which is managed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. This group has developed a process called Channel, which focuses on the identification of individuals who may be prone to violent extremism. The UK government also has a program called PREVENT that has now started serving as a surveillance tool. This program has largely been criticized by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), which argues that this program is based on illegal or racist and approaches to surveillance, (Chambers).

These programs are created to combat terrorist ideology that has the potential to harm large numbers of people if violent action is taken. However, the most significant problem with these functions is that they are often directly tied to government entities. This means that programs are tied to institutions with numerous and wide-ranging priorities apart from this individual project, which results in limited financial and personnel allocations. Additionally, local communities are less empowered to combat this concern. Since the vast majority of those from the West who have traveled or have tried to travel to ISIS territory are males, the counternarratives and alternate narratives do not really exist for the Western female population, specifically, although, all of these political/government entities recognize the importance of including women in the CVE process. Therefore, "efforts to prevent women from leaving for Iraq and Syria need to address such grievances, just as programs for those who return must be tailored to their specific experiences in the group. The strong influence of social media and peer networks also points to including more young women in these efforts, as well as female community leaders and family members," (Huckerby).

Additionally, most of the counternarrative activities seem to be driven by ideology and not methodology, (German). This becomes problematic because since September 11, 2001, counterterrorism narratives and strategy largely focus on Islamism and terms of radicalization and countering violent extremism. Although message points can be broad, programs like those in the United States and the United Kingdom cater to groups focused on terrorism and violence.

This puts large segments of the population in racist or Islamophobic categories that ostracizes people and builds fear, racism, and resentment against these groups. Even if the governments intend to do something different, programming and research still focuses on young men, and the stereotypes and hypermasculinization of war-driven violent men.

Conclusion

While there was much speculation about an influx of foreigners from the West joining the ranks of ISIS, Western women as jihadi brides has become a focal point in international media. The original notion about helpless young women becoming radicalized and brainwashed online has turned into a complex conversation about rationale for traveling, roles of women, and the appeal of ISIS to Western women specifically. The United States and the United Kingdom alone have under 100 women who have traveled abroad, but the number is not what has driven the conversation so much as the lack of understanding as to why they have left. The other alarming aspect is the response to the counternarratives and alternate narratives available to this population. Much of the available counter conversation has been limited, and the effectiveness of these programs has been questioned by the nations they are meant to support. While states attempt to combat terrorism recruitment, communities impacted the most are facing new challenges such as increased surveillance, stereotyping, and CVE programming developed without their input. Local knowledge and community-driven programming is the most effective way to combat this international concern, and needs to be supported and promoted by governments.

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