

# Women on the March to Islamism

Women, if in relatively small numbers, have become as radicalized and militant as males of their own age on behalf of Islamic terrorist organizations. According to recent studies by British research groups, gender is largely irrelevant in likelihood of people becoming extremists. Young Muslim women are as likely, and may even be more likely, as men to have sympathies with terrorist activity.

These women, as well as men, living in democratic Western countries have left their homes to join and assist the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS). Of the estimated 20,000 foreigners who have joined IS, 3,400 came from the West, including 150 from the U.S. Among them are more than 300 women from Western countries, including 60 from the UK.

But is gender irrelevant? The Western world needs to explore the personal and psychological factors that lead to female jihadism in the necessary attempt to control terrorist activity. This form of behavior by women should provide a warning for Western democratic systems because of the danger of their inciting terrorist action on home soil if and when they return to their countries of origin.

Feminism in the West has not succeeded with these young Muslim women. Changing attitudes towards gender in democratic, secular, Western countries have resulted in more educational and career opportunities for women. The young Muslim women who have joined IS have rejected the Western emancipation of women and have reverted, for the most part, to fulfilling the traditional gender stereotypes that categorize women as the property of men, support figures who fit male constructs of gender roles, submissive to what men want them to do.

At first glance, it may seem that these stereotypes do not pertain to the seemingly aggressive role of young Muslim women. Does their Islamist militancy deny the old gender stereotypes of women as weak and submissive whose appropriate role is to take care of a family and raise children?

There is no overall profile of those going to fight for IS, or of the reasons why they do so. Some women have been militarily active as well as in support roles for male jihadists. They constitute the al-Khansaa brigade, and the Umm al-Rayan brigade, moral police forces. Some serve as doctors, nurses, and teachers. But most have become either "jihadi brides", some as sex slaves, producers of "baby factories," cooks, wives, and homemakers.

The sober reality of female life with the Islamic terrorists is far different from the propaganda of the social networks. In that reality, women are treated as the traditional second-class citizens in a patriarchal society, their role confined to motherhood as the purpose of their existence. This is far from equal opportunity.

The Muslim women attracted to IS are not ignorant of the nature of their actions nor unwilling victims of male pressure. They appear to be willing participants by their own volition in the cause of violent extremism. Some women no doubt may have romantic notions of a Middle Eastern paradise, but they are more likely to focus on implantation of Islamist jihad. Some Muslim women have been on the front line as well as in merely supporting roles. Some are fanatical believers in "true" Islamic rules and behavior and have an apocalyptic vision of the future.

Young women and men have joined the IS as a result of different messages and inducements. Some of them have succumbed to the influence of Imams and Islamist propagandists in European countries. Perhaps now more important is a more spontaneous process of becoming militants through friendly

group relations and attractive propaganda in social media networks.

Studies suggest that the most effective influential factor has been Muslim family relationships. Those families that are observant tend to structure the life of their daughters on traditional values of homemaking and childbearing. Thus, though it may appear the young women are acting on their own volition, they are in reality fulfilling family and religious rules.

A second influential factor consists of the social media networks, Facebook, LinkedIn, questions on Ask.fm, banter on Twitter, and Tumblr, and videos. Westerners have been surprised by the sophisticated nature of IS propaganda with its mixture of religious ideology, pleasantries about common life, and seductive allusions.

Terrorism has become attractive through this form of brainwashing as foreign fighters discuss openly the wonders of the Islamic State on various forms of the Internet. They are influenced by charismatic figures already attached to jihadists, such as Aqsa Mahmood, the 20-year-old female radiology student from Glasgow who is an Islamist role model.

The young Muslim women are after all teenagers with sexual desires and fantasies, and the Islamist propaganda plays on those dreams by painting IS as a Middle Eastern paradise of romantic love and adventure. But the romantic fantasies quickly become linked to implementation of Islamist jihads.

Most female jihadists have the idea or delusion that their actions are for the good of the Muslim people or for the promotion of Islamic ideology. They, especially recent converts, are dedicated to the cause. Even if not well versed in Islamic religious ideology, their desire is to live under sharia law, to escape the supposed immoral behavior patterns of the West or what they see as the lack of purpose of Western

societies. Teenagers, like the rest of society, can find comfort in losing oneself in a supposed higher cause that determines one's actions, and which is a release from personal problems or failures.

In rejecting Western identities, the young women see themselves as rebels with or yearning for a cause that they will further as part of the Muslim Umma. If they cannot recreate the glorious caliphate of the past, they believe they can serve by observing Islam in the proper manner, ranging from wearing the burqas, now forbidden in France and elsewhere, to the extreme act of joining the jihadists. Like other anti-Western extremist movements, the Islamic State has attracted disaffected or alienated youth by providing certainty and moral absolutes.

Those absolutes may be based more on hatred of Western civilization or what is regarded as "false faiths," than on love of the true religion. One does not expect 15-year girls to be experts on the Koran. Some jihadists may be genuinely concerned about Muslims being killed around the world, and may seek revenge in savage beheadings of the unbelievers.

These female jihadists do not usually suffer from poverty or lack of education, nor are they emotionally disturbed. The women attracted to terrorist ideologies are more likely to come from second-generation families in Western countries than from recent migrants. Those migrants are likely to be poorer and too busy making a living to engage in ideological warfare or acts of violence.

In general, there is no substantial evidence that low levels of economic development, high rates of unemployment, considerable malnutrition, automatically produce terrorists. Terrorism is not a consequence of global poverty or of unequal distribution of global wealth.

Those sympathetic to terrorism often are educated, at least

have post-secondary education, and live in homes with solid families and a middle class income. We now know that Mohammed Emwazi, aka "Jihadi John" the poster boy for IS beheadings, went to an upscale school in London, and obtained a technical degree from the University of Westminster in 2009. The three teenage girls (two were 15 and the third was 16) who left London in mid February 2015 to go to Syria via Turkey were all good students at the Bethnal Green Academy. They are more likely to be skilled in computer science than have any expertise in Islamic theology.

Yet all this may be an insufficient explanation for the willingness of young women to go to fight for Islamist causes. Adventurism may be more of a factor than Islamic ideology. The recruits may long for a life of excitement and camaraderie. That excitement might include love of killing those believed to be the enemy.

The Islamic State has cleverly constructed its propaganda strategy to tempt educated and physically attractive women. It understands that the blonde and blue-eyed female bombers will gain the most foreign publicity and television coverage. There is a paradox in that a religious extremism that is afraid of modernity and carries on an uncivilized war against the cultural heritage of the past should attract well-educated men and women scientists and engineers to its cause.

The Western young Muslim women joining IS are rejecting modern Western society. The democratic secular nations must find messages to counteract the effectiveness of IS propaganda. Those women must be helped to move beyond their traditional roles in patriarchal societies. It is not a question of the line in *My Fair Lady*, "why can't a woman be like a man." It is a question of empowering half of the Muslim population in a more fulfilling manner that subverts the lure of fanaticism.

First published in the