

# Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

Written by Brigitte L. Nacos

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/05/young-western-women-fandom-and-isis/>

BRIGITTE L. NACOS, MAY 5 2015

"To them [Muslim girls in the West obsessed with ISIS men], jihadists are like Brad Pitt, only better because Brad Pitt is not religious" (Driscoll 2015).

Nobody knows for sure how many Western girls and young women have traveled so far to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also ISIS or ISIL), but intelligence agencies and terrorism experts believe that there is an upward trend. Nobody knows for sure why young women, used to the stability and comfort of Western societies, leave their families and friends for lives in a far-away war zone to become brides of ISIS fighters. Some observers suggest that these young females are the victims of online propaganda and brainwashing, turning the seemingly "normal" women next door into religious zealots; others believe that young women, just like young men, are bored and seek adventure; still others see admiration and love for courageous Islamic warriors as driving motivators. After looking at ISIS's female recruitment sites I wonder to what extent internet and social media networks are instrumental in turning some impressionable girls and young women into fans of the Islamic State and its fighters, just as entertainment media turn some of their peers into passionate fans of pop music stars or movie celebrities.

There is not one dominant profile that explains the radicalization and recruitment of male terrorists and there is no universal model with respect to females. This realization does not mean, however, that we should not search for plausible explanations. I do not present a research paper here but share some thoughts about a future research direction utilizing communication, para-social interaction, and fandom theories.

### Females in Past and Present Terrorist Groups

There is a long history of women as leaders and followers in terrorist movements and groups. But even in organizations that claimed to be shining examples of gender equality, females often followed their lovers or husbands into the terrorist underground. With respect to Western European Marxists like the German Red Army Faction (RAF), or Palestinian groups like the Black September faction, Robin Morgan (2001 [1989], 208) wrote, "Whether as troops or 'leaders,' these women were followers. Their 'rebellion' for love's sake is classic feminine—not feminist—behavior." Robin called these women collectively "demon lovers" in the title of her book.

While women in the leadership strata of the RAF and similar groups were highly educated and older than today's female ISIS recruits, attachments to male members were important motivators. Commenting on women joining ISIS, Melanie Smith of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization told an interviewer, "Most of the women fit into two groups, those who travel with their husbands to jihad, and those who travel to Syria or Iraq to get married" (Vinograd, 2014). But there are also important differences. Women in Western Marxist groups as well as in secular Palestinian organizations were involved in planning and/or carrying out terrorist attacks; the role of the ISIS woman is that of wife, mother, and home-maker. And unlike earlier female terrorists who were well versed in the ideology of their respective organizations, today's ISIS girls and women have often little or no knowledge of Islam and ISIS's use of the Quran as justification for their reign of terror. After interviewing radicalized Muslim teenagers in the suburbs of Paris a French journalist concluded, "They knew very little about religion. They had hardly read a book and they learnt jihad before religion. They'd tell me, 'You think with your head, we think with our hearts.' They had a romantic view of radicalism. I wondered how that happened" (Driscoll 2015).

# Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

Written by Brigitte L. Nacos

## ISIS Online Magazine: Where Are the Women?

The glossy online magazine *Dabiq* is ISIS's official publication with the stated mission of communicating to Muslims factual and truthful information contrary to the content of the "Satanic" international media. As I write this article, eight issues of *Dabiq* have been published. Each issue is heavily illustrated with photographs but each one of these visuals depicts males only. When the images of children are shown, they are of boys in different age groups. In issue five there is a photograph of children, among them two little girls with head scarves—the only exception to the male-only rule.

So, in the official press organ of ISIS women do not exist. *Dabiq* is exclusively about brothers, muhajids, (male) martyrs, soldiers, warriors and Muslims in general. The few times the typically long articles mention females they refer to women and children as victims of apostates or Crusaders. Then there are threats, explanations, and justifications concerning the role of female slaves and in passing a reference or two to "wives" as expressed in the following passages:

We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women, by the permission of Allah, the Exalted...

Allah ta'āla [almighty] said, {Successful indeed are the believers who are humble in their prayers, and who shun vain conversation, and who are payers of the zakāh [alms], and who guard their modesty except from their wives or the [female slaves] that their right hands possess, for then they are not blameworthy, but whoever craves beyond that, such are transgressors}.[1]

## Sisterhood and Social Media

While women are non-existent in the premier online periodical of ISIS, the brothers have outsourced the indoctrination and recruitment of Western girls and young women to sisters already living in the self-proclaimed ISIS Caliphate. While Western ISIS women in Syria must know by now about the Islamic States' views on the roles of wives and female slaves as expressed in the citation above, they do not mention this in their online posts. Instead, they glorify ISIS's religious cause, the courage of jihadists and martyrs, and the responsibility of women to marry holy warriors and give birth to and educate future jihadists.

When Western females are ready to join, they ask for information and receive answers from women who give advice based on their own experiences and decisions. One of the most frequently asked questions is posted by teenagers whose parents are either in the dark about their daughters' plans to join ISIS or refuse to give their permission. This is a typical question-and-answer exchange:

[Anonymous] hello sister! I am 17 years old and I want to come to Syria very much. I have done my research but the only obstacle i am facing is my family. They have no idea i want to join isis. I want to come very badly but how? do i leave without telling them? what did you do?

[Answer] I tried giving them daw'ah [invitation]. They were completely at the end spectrum of the correct aqeeda [dogma], then I knew they would be an obstacle, so I came without telling them.[2]

## Communication, Para-Social Interaction, and Fandom

Six decades ago Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956, 215) coined the term "para-social interaction" based on their observations about the relationship between mass media personalities and their audiences. "One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media—radio, television, and the movies—is that they give an illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer," they wrote. While for most people para-social interactions take place side-by-side with actual social relationships, for some they become their sole social life. As the authors (223) explain, for socially inept or isolated persons the media persona "is readily available as an object of love—especially when he succeeds in cultivating the recommended quality of 'heart'." Admiring audience members "play a psychologically active role which, under some conditions, but by no means invariably passes over into the more formal, overt, and

# Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

Written by Brigitte L. Nacos

expressive activism of *fan behavior*”[emphasis added] (Horton and Wohl, 228).

In the internet age, social media platforms offer groups, movements, and personalities ample opportunities for mass self-communication (Castells 2009, chapter 2), and for the establishment and cultivation of para-social relationships with audiences and particularly susceptible individuals. The fans that today’s originators of para-social interactions win over are no longer mere spectators but participants in virtual interactions tying them even closer to their idols and whole fan communities.

Social media posts reveal that young ISIS devotees have great admiration for the Islamic State and its jihadists, not unlike the sentiments displayed by fans of sports clubs and stars in the sports or entertainment world. As for young women devotees of ISIS, Melanie Smith calls them ISIS-fangirls (Vinograd, 2014). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines “fan” as “an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator” and “an ardent admirer or enthusiast (as of a celebrity or a pursuit).” When adding, according to the same dictionary source, that the term fan is probably a short form for “fanatic,” it makes sense to consider these young Muslim women in the West as part of a virtual fandom community similar to fanatic fan groups devoted to sports teams, pop bands, or Hollywood celebrities. Based on their analysis of Twitter data concerning the 2012 edition of Eurovision’s Song Contest, Tim Highfield, Stephen Harrington & Axel Bruns (2013, 315) characterized “Twitter as an important new medium facilitating the connection and communion of fans.” We can assume that the same is true for other social media platforms.

According to Gayle S. Stever (2009, 5), “People use media relationships to relieve boredom, fight loneliness, or give focus and direction to their lives. They look for romance, understanding, inspiration, communion and identity, meeting these needs through mediated relationships.” Although Stever’s research focuses on entertainment celebrities, her explanations of why people, especially the young, become fans seem relevant with respect to ISIS fans and eventual recruits. At first glance, there is seemingly no difference between young females and males who become involved in ISIS’s cleverly staged para-social interaction. But whereas Muslim males enjoy a considerable degree of freedom and independence even in the most devout families and communities, their female counterparts—even in the West—are typically more restricted by religious edicts and cultural tradition.

Take the example of Hoda, a Muslim girl growing up near Birmingham, Alabama, who left her family and joined ISIS in Syria. She grew up in a household where the father was far stricter with his daughters than his sons. While her father and brothers set up social media accounts, the females in the family were not allowed to do the same. But after her father gave her a smart phone, Hoda secretly utilized social media, established her own accounts, and became a fanatic ISIS fan. In a way, this and the flight of the 20-year old to the ISIS Caliphate can be understood as a declaration of independence from her family and life in America, a step to finding her own identity and determining her own social interactions. In the eyes of her father the daughter was brainwashed, but the young woman herself claimed in an interview from Syria that she had a religious awakening and that life was no longer “bland,” but has now “much more meaning.” And then there may have been the allure of romance. Instead of letting her parents choose her husband, the young woman made her own decision. It was reported that she married an Australian jihadist and soon thereafter became his widow, the widow of a martyr in the eyes of ISIS women. A spokesman for Hoda’s distraught parents said in a public statement,

It’s often young, naive, impressionable, ignorant troubled youth who are dissatisfied with their life and are seeking a sense of belonging. And it’s frankly the same social factors that lead to youth joining various gangs. I think ISIS is just another gang.

While gangs in the American setting tend to draw their rank and file members typical from the lowest social strata, Hoda comes from a middle class family and community. In one respect, though, the gang metaphor rings true in that females tend to be less involved in gang violence than male gangsters, a practice similar to gender roles in ISIS.

As noted above, besides becoming the wives of jihadists, ISIS women act increasingly as internet recruiters and online jihadists. Hoda is among the circle of ISIS women who express their commitment to and fanaticism for the cause online. According to BuzzFeedNews, “Terrorize the kuffar [derogatory term for non-Muslims] at home,” she

# Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

Written by Brigitte L. Nacos

tweeted. “Americans wake up!” “Men and women altogether. You have much to do while you live under our greatest enemy, enough of your sleeping! Go on drive-bys and spill all of their blood, or rent a big truck and drive all over them. Veterans, Patriot, Memorial etc Day parades..go on drive by’s + spill all of their blood or rent a big truck n drive all over them. Kill them.”

At the heights of RAF terrorism in the 1970s German security forces considered female RAF terrorists more violent and brutal than their male comrades and allegedly advised each other, “Shoot the Women First.” Unlike those RAF females, today’s ISIS girls and women are not involved in terrorist attacks, what the early anarchists called “propaganda by deed,” but they are among the extreme online jihadists that spread what I call “propaganda by word.”

Speaking at the 2015 White House Summit on Combating Violent Extremism President Barack Obama said,

Terrorist groups like al Qaeda and ISIL deliberately target their propaganda in the hopes of reaching and brainwashing young Muslims, especially those who may be disillusioned or wrestling with their identity. That’s the truth. The high-quality videos, the online magazines, the use of social media, terrorist Twitter accounts — it’s all designed to target today’s young people online, in cyberspace.[3]

Not surprisingly, neither the president nor representatives of American Muslim communities addressed the question why some of the young women and men in the Western Muslim diaspora are more susceptible to jihadist propaganda than are others. Nor was there a discussion of possible gender differences in this respect. Since there are no sure explanations, we need research that utilizes all kinds of research areas, including those focusing on propaganda, fandom, para-social interaction, gangs, soccer hooligan groups, and gender studies.

## Notes

[1] “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour.” *Dabiq* 4: 17. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>, accessed April 14, 2015.

[2] In order not to promote this ISIS woman’s Tumblr site, I do not provide account details. The texts are left unedited in order to showcase social media’s informality as well as the age of those who are involved.

[3] Transcript is available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/remarks-president-closing-summit-countering-violent-extremism>, accessed April 20, 2015.

## References

Castells, Manuel. 2009. *Communication Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Driscoll, Margarette. 2015. “My ISIS boyfriend: A reporter’s undercover life with a terrorist. *New York Post*, March 7, 2015.

Highfield, Tom, Stephen Harrington, and Axel Bruns. 2013. “Twitter as a Technology for Audiencing and Fandom. *Information, Communication & Society* 16 (3), 315-339.

Horton, Donald and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance.” *Psychiatry* 19 (3), 215-229.

Morgan, Robin. 2001 [1989]. *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Stever, Gayle S. 2009. “Parasocial and Social Interaction with Celebrities: Classification of Media Fans.” *Journal of Media Psychology* 14 (3); <http://web.calstatela.edu/faculty/sfisch/>

# Young Western Women, Fandom, and ISIS

Written by Brigitte L. Nacos

Vinograd, Cassandra. 2014. "Jihadi Brides Swap Lives in the West for Front Line with Syria Militants." NBC News, July 8, 2014. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/jihadi-brides-swap-lives-west-front-line-syria-militants-n150491>, accessed April 15, 2015.

---

## About the author:

**Brigitte L. Nacos** teaches at Columbia University, New York. Her fields of specialization are mass media, public opinion, and decision-making; terrorism and counterterrorism. Among her books related to terrorism and counterterrorism are: *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Threats and Responses in the Post-9/11 World*; *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, and *Terrorism and the Media: From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the World Trade Center Bombing*. She also writes a blog called [reflectivepundit](http://reflectivepundit.com).