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ISIS, Radicalization and the Gendered Online Jihad

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In 2013, 21-year old Aqsa Mahmood unexpectedly left her home in Glasgow to travel to the caliphate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Dearden, 2016). Before embarking on her journey to Syria, Aqsa Mahmood went to a private high school, studied radiography at university and lived in a wealthy neighborhood (Windsor, 2018, p.5). She was a fan of Harry Potter and Coldplay (Windsor, 2018, p. 2). Her family adhered to moderate Islam and her upbringing was apolitical, yet Aqsa became a so-called “bedroom radical” (Windsor, 2018, p. 5) (BBC, 2014). In 2015, she posted a picture of herself standing alongside children while holding the severed head of a Syrian man who supposedly committed a crime (Ali, 2015, p. 15). Aqsa’s radicalization can be traced back on her Tumblr profile, in which the trajectory from typical teenager to ISIS migrant can be observed (Windsor, 2018, p. 2). While unusual, Aqsa’s story does not stand alone (Windsor, 2018, p. 7). Aqsa Mahmood belongs to a group often referred to as foreign fighters. These “foreign fighters are defined as non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil war, but whose primary motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial” (Perešin, 2015, p. 23).

Many scholars have become invested into researching what drives these people to join ISIS. One of the main factors contributing to the large group of foreign fighters is said to be online communication (Farwell, 2014). Through the exploitation of media, ISIS has aimed at convincing Muslims worldwide that reinstalling the caliphate is their religious and moral duty (Farwell, 2014, pp. 49-50). While an overwhelming majority of Muslims severely condemn ISIS, reports by the UN suggest that over 40.000 foreign fighters have travelled to areas in Iraq and Syria to join the caliphate (BBC, 2019). According to a study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 4,761 of these foreign fighters were women (Cook & Vale, 2018, p. 3). This essay will investigate how and why ISIS recruits women and aims to provide insight into the role of women within the caliphate. How does gender play a role in ISIS online propaganda and recruitment? This essay aims to show that ISIS’ offline gender roles are recreated and romanticized in their online strategy, serving to attract men and women to the caliphate.

Gender, Warfare and Radicalization

Before considering the gendered dimension of war and violent conflict, it is important to establish the difference between sex and gender. Whereas sex can be understood as the biologically based categories of male and female, gender refers to the social construction of what is perceived to be masculine or feminine and leads to gender roles, gender identity and gender stereotypes (Aolain et. al., 2011, p.3) (Deaux, 1985, p. 51). These gender roles and gender stereotypes are very prevalent when it comes to violence and conflict. When discussing women in war situations, they are often merely portrayed as victims or passive participants (Windsor, 2018, p. 1). Security and violence have traditionally been conceptualized in masculine and militarized terms, excluding women (Alison, 2004, p. 447). This perception informs both the general public’s view on female radicals as well as responses to female terrorism by the international community (Pearson, 2015, p. 7). News reports about female terrorists or radicals usually depict them as either victims of human trafficking or as brainwashed and irrational people without agency (Pearson, 2015, p. 12). Although there have been cases of human trafficking concerning women in ISIS territory, many female ISIS migrants have had agency in their decision to leave home (Binetti, 2015).

Often, foreign fighters have encountered a process of radicalization prior to their departure (Shapiro & Maras, 2018, p. 1). Radicalization is understood as “a gradual process whereby individuals are socialized into extreme beliefs that are articulated in nonviolent and/or violent acts” (Shapiro & Maras, 2018, p. 1). Radicalization often takes place in

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real-life locations such as community centers, religious spaces, prisons and clubs (AIVD, 2006) (Pearson, 2015, p. 16). However, these spaces are highly gendered and offer limited physical and cultural access to women, especially in restrictive environments adhering to strict separations between men and women which some Muslim communities belong to (Pearson, 2015, p. 16) (Ali, 2006, p. 29). This lack of access combined with inadequate provision of Islamic literature, has led some to argue that women are more vulnerable to online radicalization (Pearson, 2015, p. 16). The internet seems to offer women an accessible and inclusive platform through which they can easily come into contact with peers and retrieve information (Shapiro & Maras, 2018, p. 3). This is why gender should be taken into consideration when discussing (online) radicalization.

ISIS: State- and Media Construction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also referred to as ISIL, emerged in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a spinoff of Al-Qaeda (McDowall, 2019). In 2011, after the start of the Syrian civil war, the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi sent agents to Syria to set up a Syrian branch, and officially broke with Al-Qaeda in 2013 (McDowall, 2019). In 2014 the group managed to take Fallujah and Raqqa, later followed by the seizure of Mosul, Tikrit and the Syrian border zone, and declared the Caliphate (McDowall, 2019). The surge of ISIS has gained a lot of media attention over the years, mostly because of their state-building ambitions, brutal massacres and successful use of propaganda (Farwell, 2014, pp. 49-50). Because ISIS holds their own territory, it differs from other terrorist groups in their ability to completely and violently exclude journalists from the caliphate, thus maintaining full control over information from inside its borders (Ali, 2015, p. 9). ISIS has established its own media centre (Al Hayat), magazine (Dabiq) and has produced propaganda movies (Flames of War) (Ali, 2015, p. 10) (Greene, 2015, p. 15).

Apart from their own media channels, which are considered to be very professional and high quality, ISIS has virtually perfected their use of social and mainstream media channels, using various techniques to increase publicity and to catch maximum attention from the public (Ali, 2015, p. 10). Whereas the shock strategy of ISIS, including the use of beheading videos, has attracted much attention from the mainstream media, their sophisticated use of so-called 'Twitter Bombs' – the use of trending hashtags in ISIS posts – has helped them to gain a large online audience (Greene, 2015, p. 15) (Awan, 2017, p. 142). Besides their social media posts and gruesome execution videos, ISIS is also widely known to be one of the worst perpetrators of gender based and sexual violence against (Yezidi) women (Spencer, 2016, p. 74). This has prompted many to ask how ISIS is able to attract women to join the caliphate (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p. 4).

State-building and Gender Roles

Whereas historically women have largely been absent in the recruitment and profile of terrorist organization, ISIS needs women in order to maintain their state-building capacity (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 6). The recruitment of women was necessary to fulfill domestic and supporting roles in the caliphate and to legitimize ISIS and their new state (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 6). Women have specific roles in the caliphate, which are strongly related with broader gender norms articulated in Sharia Law (Spencer, 2016, p. 80) (Perešin, 2015, p. 24). According to ISIS, Allah's core purpose for women is the 'divine duty of motherhood' (Spencer, 2016, p. 82). Women carry the responsibility to birth the next generation of jihad warriors, often referred to as 'lion cubs' (Patel & Westermann, 2018, p. 61). Mothers therefore carry enormous value to the maintenance and future of the caliphate (Shapiro & Maras, 2018, p. 19). Another essential role for women is to be a supporting wife to her fighting husband (Spencer, 2016, p. 81). As a wife, women are expected to take care of the household, provide mental support to their fighting husband and fulfill their partner's need for sexual intimacy (Spencer, 2016, p. 82).

In some exceptional cases women are allowed to perform operational roles, as a member of the Al Khansaa Brigade, an all-women militia group (Ali, 2015, p. 13). This brigade was established to perform search and stop activities after numerous attacks by opponents of ISIS dressed in female religious clothes, and is said to be led by Aqsa Mahmood (Spencer, 2016, p. 82) (Ali, 2015, p. 13). The Al Khansaa Brigade also drafted a manifesto on the role of women within the caliphate which states that women should remain hidden in the home and veiled (Ali, 2015, p. 13). The manifesto also opposes Western society, accusing it of reducing women to sex objects and forcing them to leave their natural roles of mother and wife, and represents a kind of new jihadi feminism conforming to traditional gender

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norms (Perešin, 2015, p. 24) (Ali, 2015, p. 13). However, the manifesto has only been published in Arabic, which could indicate that ISIS is aware of its possible deterrent effect on foreign female sympathizers (Ali, 2015, p. 13).

In general, women are excluded from fighting jihad (Lahoud, 2014, p. 780). War and violence are seen as male domains under ISIS reign (Shapiro & Maras, 2018, p. 2). This means that female ISIS migrants are largely restricted to non-violent radicalization (Pearson, 2015, p. 7). However, this does not mean that women do not pose a threat. Women support the jihad violence and their fighting husbands. Furthermore, considering the current defeat of ISIS, female participation is evolving (Spencer, 2016, p. 97). If ISIS is under attack and experiences a lack of male soldiers, a fatwa (Islamic scholarly opinion) might be issued by an imam allowing women to (temporarily) engage in combat (Spencer, 2016, p. 83). Considering ISIS' current situation, this is an option which should be reckoned with.

Push & Pull Factors and Propaganda Tactics

In an attempt to answer the question why women would join ISIS, Saltman and Smith (2015) identified a number of push & pull factors contributing to the attraction of ISIS (p. 4). They found three main push factors (elements priming women to be more vulnerable to radicalization) which were quite similar to push factors for male foreign fighters (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p. 9). A feeling of social and cultural isolation in the local (Western) community, the feeling that the international Muslim community is being persecuted and frustration about the perceived lack of international attention awarded to this issue are considered the main contributors 'pushing' women towards ISIS (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p. 9).

Main pull factors driving women to migrate to ISIS territory are said to be a desire to fulfill their religious duty, the quest for a sense of belonging and sisterhood and the romanticization of the adventure of joining ISIS (Saltman & Smith, 2015, p. 13). These push & pull factors, as well as the gender norms of ISIS, are extensively and effectively instrumentalized in ISIS' online media strategy (Pearson, 2018, p. 862). ISIS' media campaign directed towards women predominantly relies on Western female recruits using sites including, Twitter, Tumblr, Kik, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Ask.FM (Spencer, 2016, p. 85). The online channels exist in multiple Western languages (Perešin, 2015, p. 26). Out of all online options, Twitter seems to be the platform of choice for most ISIS accounts, primarily because on Twitter it is easy to conceal your identity and restart a profile after being shut down (Perešin, 2015, p. 26).

Even though online recruitment is used for both women and men, online spaces are separated and owners of channels request to not receive any DM's – direct messages – from the other sex (Pearson, 2018, p. 854). Whereas profiles targeting men focus on their duty to fight for the caliphate and show battlefield pictures, female online profiles tend to focus more on domestic life under the caliphate (Pearson, 2015, p. 19). The official propaganda aimed at women features a lot of pink, purple, landscapes, hearts and flowers (Jugendschutz, 2017, p. 1) (Pearson, 2015, p. 19). Online profiles show images of females cooking, spending time with their children, showing baby clothes, eating Nutella pancakes and watching the Syrian sunset (Spencer, 2016, p. 85) (Jugendschutz, 2017, p. 3). They display pictures and stories of what some have called a 'Muslim Disneyland' – a romanticized picture of the ISIS utopia (Perešin, 2015, p. 25). The positive stories from female ISIS migrants focus on the strong relationship between wife and husband and between the sisterhood of ISIS women (Perešin, 2015, p. 25).

Apart from promoting the emotional and social benefits of life in the caliphate, women are promised financial benefits such as a free house including all appliances (Perešin, 2015, p. 25). Where many (Western) women find themselves caught between liberal and traditional values, ISIS offers women a sense of belonging to a global cause, security and a community, which they previously lacked (Perešin, 2015, pp. 24-25). Moreover, many accounts targeting females argue that Western society has failed women by sexualizing them and imposing the unnatural idea of gender equality on faithful women (Jugendschutz, 2017, p. 3). ISIS is portrayed to offer an alternative form of female empowerment routed in the respect for mother- and sisterhood (Ali, 2013, p. 15).

Besides the ideological and social influence of the online accounts, many profiles also offer practical advice and support to women and girls planning to travel to ISIS territory (Spencer, 2016, p. 85). These tips range from what to pack and how to deal with leaving your family to providing contact numbers, airport pickups and legal advice about

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what to do in cases of border controls (Spencer, 2016, p. 85) (Perešin, 2015, p. 26). The use of former ISIS migrants in female recruitment is effective because these women share many similarities with radicalizing women and are easy to identify with, posing as an approachable role model or digital influencer (Perešin, 2015, p. 26). All in all, these media accounts frame the jihad as a romantic and empowering adventure (Jugendschutz, 2017, p. 2).

The friendly appeal of female ISIS propaganda stands in stark contrast to the brutality and violence infused campaigns targeting men (Pearson, 2015, p. 19). ISIS accounts urge young men to fulfill their religious duty and join the jihad through displays of weaponry and quotes such as “Real Struggles Need Real Men” (Pearson, 2015, p. 19). Personal profiles of male foreign fighters often describe the fun and excitement they experience while fighting, comparing their lives in the caliphate to their ‘boring’ lives at home and sometimes even describing it as a “five-star-jihad” or better than playing the game Call of Duty (Perešin, 2015, p. 27) (Awan, 2017, p. 139). This leads to the creation of a ‘cool jihadi subculture’ driving more youth to ISIS territory (Perešin, 2015, p. 27). In addition to being promised a house and a salary, male fighters are also promised a wife, often more than one (Perešin, 2015, p. 27).

In order to enforce gender norms online, propaganda accounts punish men and women who fail to abide by them (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 5). Men who refuse or are afraid of going to battle, and therefore fail to fulfill their religious duty of committing jihad, are mocked and humiliated (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 5). Women who defy the morality norms, such as ISIS’ strict dresscode, are named, shamed and shunned (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 5). On the other hand, male warriors and faithful females are idealized and worshipped (Shapiro & Maras, 2019, p. 5). These observations show that the strict binary offline gender norms are reproduced online – establishing what Pearson (2018) has called a “virtual frontline” (p. 862).

Conclusion

This essay has aimed to shed a light on the gendered dimension of online ISIS recruitment. Through the careful online reproduction of strict offline gender norms ISIS has been able to attract both males and females to join the caliphate. Special attention has been paid to how female ISIS migrants are understood in ISIS territory as well as in public discourse. Current counterterrorism and deradicalization policies mostly focus on male jihadists or portray women as victims. However, as women are often agents in their radicalization process they should therefore also be treated as agents in deradicalization approaches. Considering the amount of male and female foreign fighters now aiming to return ‘home’ and the evolvement of female participation within ISIS, a gendered understanding of (de)radicalization is especially relevant.

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