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Why ISIS Appeals to Muslim Women in Western Countries: Need for Counter Message

By Dymphles Leong

Synopsis

The appeal of IS (Islamic State) to young Muslim women in Western countries stems from their psychological vulnerabilities. Several communication strategies are suggested to counter IS propaganda.

Commentary

THREE AMERICAN women were arrested last month for terrorist-related activities in connection with the Islamic State (IS), two in New York, and a third from Philadelphia. Besides these some 550 women from several Western countries are reported to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join IS ranks. These suggest that IS has managed to win a significant following among many young Muslim women in the West.

Another significant phenomenon is that many of these women are educated, come from middle-class families, are well-integrated within their societies, and have similar socio-economic backgrounds, such as four British Muslim women who covertly travelled to Syria to join IS.

These examples belie the long held assumption that young persons from impoverished backgrounds have a higher chance of being influenced and radicalised by IS' brand of violent extremism. In fact research has shown that IS supporters and sympathisers, regardless of gender, tend to be well-educated, young, social media savvy and socially-mobile. Why does IS appeal to this demographic?

Leveraging Vulnerabilities

Like their male counterparts, IS' young female supporters and sympathisers from the West have psychological needs and vulnerabilities that can be exploited and manipulated by sophisticated propaganda and personal outreach of recruiters.

The first is the perception that Sunni Islam is under attack, and Sunni Muslims around the world are being persecuted and marginalised. The ongoing Syrian conflict has been portrayed as a key example of this, and although IS emerged as one of the armed opposition groups to the Assad regime, its extensive territorial gains in both Iraq and Syria enabled it to portray itself as a vanguard against the forces that were trying to contain or oppress Sunni Muslims. By declaring a

caliphate on captured territory, IS was able to boast that it had successfully established the ideal state – one that was based on Islamic law, where fairness and justice for all Sunni Muslims would prevail. IS also appealed for help to administer, defend and contribute to its state-building efforts.

This combination of propaganda, actual territorial gains and the potential to tangibly contribute to state-building seems to have been the primary motivators for many young women to join or support IS. For those who sought active participation as opposed to online or armchair support, travel to Syria, regardless of whether they would take on roles as brides, surgeons or administrators, was a necessity.

Second, societal and personal circumstances seem to have been another contributory factor to young women's support of IS. Many have felt discriminated and/or disenchanted with Western values from their lived experiences in their home countries. Not to mention that the search for identity as well as the challenge of reconciling religious beliefs with Western societal values has added to the discomfort. IS claims to be able to solve both issues effectively.

In relation to reconciling identities, IS often showcases (via Twitter) how newly-arrived female recruits from the West can still enjoy the comforts of home, such as fast food and takeaway dinner, whilst living under Sharia law. Contrary to feelings of alienation and marginalisation, camaraderie, belonging and sisterhood between women in IS are constantly emphasised in IS propaganda.

Third, promise of adventure, empowerment and prestige in IS appeal to young women who are so inclined. This also helps dispel counter-narratives that women in IS are treated poorly, even though there is evidence of their plight. The all-women Al-Khansa Brigades, for instance, was created to enforce Sharia law and assist with overall security among women in IS-controlled territory. They reportedly undergo fire-arms training as well as self-defence courses, and are also deployed at checkpoints to help conduct body searches of women, which men are not permitted to do.

Becoming a bride of an IS fighter has been touted as an important element in sustaining the IS' caliphate. By marrying a foreign fighter and setting up a family, young women are made to believe that they are fulfilling a sacred duty. IS has even gone so far as to match-make potential women recruits with male fighters through social media, in order to encourage the women to travel to IS territory to facilitate the marriage.

Countering Influence

Young female supporters and sympathisers from the West find IS appealing for many reasons; each case being different and unique. It is also crucial to note that even when facts and/or counter narratives are presented, such as IS' real treatment of women, many young women seem to buy into IS propaganda.

Social media networks have been effective in recruiting young women not only by disseminating propaganda but also by linking up like-minded individuals. From a technical dimension, the aggressive and systematic deletion of pro-IS social media accounts would reduce the exposure for recruiters and supporters to contact young women. However, this could force recruiters to find alternate sources of contacts, such as the deep web or closed forums, where it would be harder to track such activities.

Counter messaging from the state may not be effective as many might feel antagonistic and distrustful of authorities. Hence, the engagement of young women and their families by trusted religious leaders in the Muslim community should be of utmost importance. Muslim community leaders can raise awareness about social and economic situations that young Muslim women are facing, and increasing engagement with young women may alleviate the social disconnect that they feel.

Parents have an important role to play in counter messaging. Mothers, in particular, are an influential force in most cases, and as such, should be co-opted in prevention and de-radicalisation initiatives. The UK police for instance, launched a campaign in March 2015 encouraging mothers to observe their daughters for behavioural changes that might signify their intention to join IS. The German Institute of Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies' (GIRDS) 'Mothers for Life' programme enlists the help of mothers who have experience with "violent jihadist radicalization in their own families" to

help counter IS propaganda. Fathers, too, can play a vital role in this regard as that special bond they share with their daughters makes them highly influential.

As documented in past reports on countering violent extremism, disillusioned women returning from Syria, such as two Austrians, are useful spokespersons when attempting to counter IS narratives as well. Ultimately, counter-messaging must be used in tandem with tangible efforts to undermine IS. However, with IS' recent territorial gains, many more women and men may now be inspired to join or support the group. Therefore, while traditional counselling and de-radicalisation programs have tended to focus more on young men, it is necessary to focus on young women as well.

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