

The role of new media in the radicalization of diasporic youth

On Sunday, February 15, 2015, three young women passed through the security gates at London's busy Gatwick Airport. Kadiza Sultana, 16 years old, wore dark slacks and a gray sweater; her friends, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum, both 15, were similarly attired, with the former in a bright yellow shirt and the latter sporting a leopard-print scarf. They carried little luggage and dressed as they might at their East London private school, Bethnal Green. In a city with a large Muslim community, the headscarves worn by the younger girls did not draw much attention. Their names were not on any watch lists. Their passports did not raise any alarms. The girls boarded a plane bound for Turkey and, in a manner of speaking, disappeared.¹

Their whereabouts are a fusion of speculation and hearsay. The trio likely crossed the Turkish border into Syria shortly after landing, assisted by online acquaintances who met them there. Rumors abound: that the girls joined the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS); that two of them had married and become "jihadi brides;" that Sultana was killed in a Russian airstrike. With little evidence and almost no communication from the girls themselves, their families and the British government have been left tracing the steps that led them to Gatwick and examining the online community in which they had become embedded. Their disappearance has provoked international sensation and raised endless questions about their façade of well-adjusted, middle-class contentment.

The defection of the Bethnal Green girls illustrates the opportunities and challenges created by the emergence of many forms of instant and interactive communication. While new media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have in many ways overcome geographic boundaries and strengthened the social and cultural connections of transnational and diasporic communities, they have also provided a forum for the normalization of extremist ideologies. At the center of this discourse is a generation of young people who occupy the digital domain, particularly those harboring a sense of placelessness. While this essay explores the ways that Islamic jihadists use social media to attract Western sympathizers and recruits, their predatory methods have been applied by extremist groups across a wide span of religions,

ethnicities, and nationalities, from white supremacists in the United States to anti-Muslim factions in southeast Asia.

New media, new methods

A 2014 report by the New York-based security consultancy firm The Soufan Group (TSG) estimated that 26,000-31,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join extremist groups since 2011.² The majority hail from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, and Jordan, but a growing subset originate from Europe and North America. Between June 2014 and December 2015, TSG saw the radicalization and recruitment of European actors more than double. By contrast, only 10,000 foreign fighters were estimated to have been involved in the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89).³ Many join up directly with radical groups attempting to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in favor of an ultra-conservative religious caliphate, though others initially travel to Syria to be part of the more moderate Syrian National Coalition and Free Syrian Army.⁴

Social media is perhaps the most effective tool in the successful recruitment strategies practiced by organizations like Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS (all offshoots of Al-Qaeda). These groups have adapted to new forms of warfare (both physical and psychological) by fully embracing the capabilities of internet-based communications. Unlike “old” newspaper media, which acted as a single voice reaching a particular audience, the new media is both participatory and ubiquitous; globally, over 2.4 billion people use at least one form of social media and more than 2 billion are active on Facebook.⁵ The growing availability of mobile applications means that social media users have nearly constant access to the messages sent over these platforms.

The target audience for social media platforms (males aged 18-25 for Facebook, though this range tends to be slightly higher for Instagram, Twitter, and other sites)⁶ overlaps with the target demographic of foreign fighters conscripted to Islamic extremist groups (18-29, a full ten years younger than the average age of foreigners who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980's).⁷ Most are males (though,

as in the case of the Bethnal Green girls, some women have “gone jihad”) and inexperienced in combat or politics. The majority are from immigrant, exiled, or refugee families.⁸

Terrorist organizations have a vital head start in recognizing the value of social media as a self-selecting environment; that is, users tend to “buy into” pages and groups that share and reinforce their existing beliefs. Using vehicles like Facebook and Twitter they are able to disseminate information (and misinformation) through videos, images, and memes in brief, easily digested segments that younger users are accustomed to consuming. In doing so, these groups normalize their rhetoric, becoming approachable and mainstream to people who may not yet fully embrace their mission and values. The diverse range of social media platforms ensures that these groups can appeal to users who are already on the cusp of radicalization, as well as those who are not likely to participate in terror acts directly, but will share, repost, or “like” their content.⁹

Unlike their predecessors, modern extremist groups are often well-funded and sophisticated in their recruitment campaigns. They are strategic in their use of enticing content, careful not to alarm potential sympathizers. ISIS, for example, employs a large social media office, al Hayat, which releases periodic “Mujatweets,” depicting the recovery of injured ISIS fighters in modern healthcare facilities. The organization Jabhat al-Nusra has advocated for the execution of Shia Muslims, but avoids calling for attacks on public places until it builds a stronger popular following; this strategy has proven effective in bolstering the group’s growth¹⁰.

TSG urges governments to step up their efforts to study and utilize social media in counter-radicalization tactics. Potential Western recruits rely heavily on these platforms to attain first-hand accounts of the conflict. To understand how information spreads across “shared” media, TSG conducted an analysis of 44,000 tweets about an array of topics (politics, sports, social concerns, etc.) in the Gulf region. There was a high rate of re-posts but a low number of replies, indicating interest but not direct engagement by users. Conversely, a survey of 22,000 tweets pertaining to the Syrian war during the same period saw a dramatic spike in reposts *and* replies to original tweets, implying a high level of

personal engagement. Furthermore, the group's comparison of tweets related to the Syrian war by self-proclaimed jihadist fighters received a much higher rate of replies and reposts than a 35% greater number of original tweets posted by international security experts on the same subjects.¹¹

The more well-funded extremist organizations demonstrate a refined understanding of how social media operates, as well as the benefits of strategic marketing. ISIS makes frequent use of stock photos of apparently happy young people engaged in conversation (not unlike many Western product advertisements). They use a graphic of the Facebook "like" button holding an ISIS flag and a Twitter bird portrayed in black with the group's symbol.¹² A notable short video circulated by recruiters last year was a clip taken from the game *Grand Theft Auto*. Dubbed over the imagery was a narrator: "Your games which are producing from you, we do the same actions in battlefields."¹³ To a target audience of young male viewers, this implies that joining their ranks will provide access to an authentic experience, while those at home are left with a digital replication of real adventure and honor.

There is strong evidence that terrorist organizations, both in the Middle East and elsewhere, have weaponized recent innovations in communications to extend their global reach. If governments and watch groups hope to counteract their recruitment efforts, it is critical that they, too, learn to speak in the same vernacular as the target demographic.

Borderless networks

Authorities suspect that the Bethnal Green girls may have been radicalized online by a woman who goes by the moniker Umm Layth ("Mother of the Lion").¹⁴ An advocate of the Islamic caliphate, she has haunted the internet under a number of social media profiles, posting essays and blogs that encourage young women to make the *hijrah* (the journey back to the Islamic homeland). Through her now-closed Tumblr account, "Diary of a Muhajirah" (a woman who has made the *hijrah*), she encouraged women and girls from Western countries to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State as brides of jihadist soldiers. "We are created to be mothers and wives—as much as the western society has warped your views on this with a hidden feminist mentality," she wrote in her account.¹⁵ She offers

advice for slipping across international borders and procuring the funds required to make this journey (the family of Kadiza Sultana believes that she stole jewelry from the family home and used her older sister's passport to travel to Turkey).¹⁶ She also offers advice for women whose husbands have been killed.¹⁷

Just as video game culture has been co-opted for the purposes of recruiting young foreign fighters, the roles of marriage and motherhood have been reframed through new media content as a sacred duty. Fighting against an oppressor alongside a jihadist husband and raising a new breed of warrior has been branded as cool, counter-culture, and courageous. Umm Waqqas, an online recruiter who authorities suspect lived as a student in Seattle, Washington until early 2014, shared photos of women in black hijabs, posed with semi-automatic rifles in front of fortified vehicles to her 8,000 Twitter followers.¹⁸ Another blogger, the "Bird of Jannah," posts "listicles" that follow the template of mainstream clickbait found on social media, such as "10 Facts About Marriage in the Islamic State" and inventories of leisure gifts offered as incentives for young jihadi brides.¹⁹

The Bethnal Green girls may have felt a particular kinship to Umm Layth: the recruiter is originally from the UK. A Scot of Muslim descent, her real name is Aqsa Mahmood. Raised in an affluent part of Glasgow and well-educated at a private school, Mahmood was purportedly a happy, social teenager, not particularly concerned with religion. Her personality underwent a drastic change in 2013 when, at the age of 19, she met British Muslim Adeel Ulhaq at a mosque in England. Ulhaq encouraged Mahmood's conversion to fundamentalist Islam and the two quickly made plans to travel to Syria to elope. Mahmood dropped out of Glasgow Caledonian University and was able to complete the journey; Ulhaq, on the other hand, was stopped before he could leave England. He has been imprisoned since 2015 for a conviction related to helping an underage British boy travel to Syria to join ISIS.²⁰

Since her departure from the UK, Mahmood posts on various social media, creating new accounts as her old ones are discovered and deactivated.²¹ She has called on Muslim youth in Western countries to commit acts of violence against authorities and governments, and has lauded atrocities

committed in Tunisia, France, and Kuwait. Allegedly, Mahmood holds a powerful position in the female-only al-Khansaa, a group responsible for enforcing moral behavior espoused by Sharia law. According to intelligence reports, she is an adamant Salafist (an extremely conservative reformist arm of Sunni Islam, *salaf* meaning “devout ancestors”) and *takfir* (one who accuses other Muslims of apostasy). Since learning of her activities abroad, her family in Scotland has denounced the young woman, issuing the following statement: “There is no honour, no glory, no god at work in the cowardly massacre of holidaymakers, people at prayer in a Shia mosque or an innocent man at his place of work.” They have described her as “twisted and evil,” and “no longer the daughter they raised.”²²

A vulnerable population

Mahmood’s trajectory from affluent Western schoolgirl to advocate of terror is not an anomaly. Cultural marginalization can occur across tax brackets and social strata, alienating young people who belong to an ethnic minority from the dominant culture of the “host” country. Young men and women who are raised in the diaspora often experience a sense of statelessness, caught between the culture of their ethnocommunity and that of the hegemony. Discrimination, micro aggressions, and other trauma can contribute to the overall sense of marginalization. Victims of overt or perceived discrimination may react with aggression stemming from feelings of defensiveness and persecution.²³

Similarly, the separation of religion from culture can be a dividing factor between first generation migrants and their offspring. Experiencing religion and spirituality in a nation where it is prevalent can be a unifying and comforting aspect of life for first-generation migrants. Often diasporic youth live in now-secular families and are not familiar with a less extreme interpretation of their holy texts and ideologies. Because of this, they don’t have access to a counter-narrative to the ultra-conservative religious ideologies being offered by the recruiters they encounter online.²⁴ In households where secularization has occurred, subscribing to extreme religious views can be an act of rebellion by younger family members.

Events in the homeland can also have an impact on diasporic communities, particularly those with colonial pasts. Individuals living in a host country that once colonized their homeland may feel an ingrained animosity towards the host. Likewise, these individuals may take personally events (conflicts, violence, and political dissidence) that occur in the homeland. For a portion of Muslims in the diaspora, the perception of imperialist behavior by the host country can prove motivation to engage in or sympathize with extremist discourse. For example, military intervention for economic gain, thinly veiled as democratization, can be triggering, as can perceived ambivalence or non-action in non-lucrative conflicts (Sri Lanka and Chechnya, for instance).²⁵

A variety of factors on both the individual and collective scale can lead to young people in the diaspora feeling disconnected from their family and peers. Unmoored from a social identity and searching for a sense of purpose and belonging, they may approach online recruiters, rather than being targeted for radicalization directly.

Hijrah

Kadiza Sultana was a widow when she last spoke to her younger sister in December 2015; her jihadist husband, an American national of Somali descent, had been killed in combat. Sultana told her sister that she wanted to return to London. "I don't have a good feeling, I feel scared. You know the borders are closed right now so how am I going to come out?" By that time, British consular service in Syria had been suspended.²⁶

In the face of multiple terrorist attacks in Europe, Sultana's family feared that British officials would not be sympathetic towards a jihadi bride, let alone offer clemency for her defection. British news outlet *The Independent* reported that Sultana and her sister made plans for the teenager to escape the city of Raqqa (then an ISIS stronghold) by taxi. However, Sultana may have panicked and abandoned her plans after witnessing the death of 17-year-old Samra Kesinovic. Kesinovic and her friend, 15-year-old Sabina Selimovic, both daughters of refugees of the Bosnian civil war who emigrated to Austria, left their homes in 2014 after being radicalized by Vienna-based Bosnian Islamic cleric, Abu Tejda. Images

of the girls in burkas holding weapons were widely distributed as ISIS recruitment propaganda. Last year, a Tunisian woman who claimed she had been housed with Kesnovic in Raqqa told *The Independent* that the two girls were kept as sex slaves and passed to new ISIS recruits as “presents” for their enlistment. She claimed that Kesinovic was beaten to death with a hammer in 2016 after attempting to escape the city. Selimovic is rumored to have been killed while fighting in December 2014.²⁷

Harry Safro, a German citizen who left Raqqa and the Islamic State in 2014 and was jailed upon returning to his home country, has been quoted stating, “Many have tried (to flee) but they are either dead or in jail waiting for executions. Among them are a handful of British citizens. I spoke to some of them who wanted to leave – many say it is impossible...When you make it, you will get a life sentence in jail. Many have already been involved in fighting so they said there is no hope for them.”²⁸

A family lawyer for the Sultana family released a statement in August 2016 attesting that his clients had received reports that their daughter was killed by an airstrike in Raqqa earlier that year. The whereabouts of Begum and Abase remain unknown.

Re-integration, de-radicalization, and counter-radicalization

TSG predicts that with ISIS losing territory to Syrian and Western forces, there will be a large reverse migration of foreign recruits. Some who do not shed their jihadist affiliations may continue to perpetrate violence and chaos in nations they perceive as oppressor states. Others will have tremendous difficulty returning to their countries of origin. While a minority may be cultivated as an asset by the government intelligence agencies to provide information on their former collaborators, others may face immediate incarceration upon return.²⁹ Such is the case of Ahmed Abu Fouad, a Belgian Muslim who travelled to Syria, children in tow, to retrieve his wife after learning she had “gone jihad.” Upon returning to Belgium, both adults were arrested and are still awaiting sentencing.³⁰

Their plight is not uncommon for returnees to Western countries, where most governments do not have the resources to monitor the activities of those who have travelled in the caliphate. Fearing the spread of radical ideas, countries like Belgium have adopted a strict “arrest first, ask questions later”

policy, imprisoning returnees upon learning of their arrival. Ironically, this has led to furthering the social isolation of those who left, and has allowed for the rapid spread of extremist ideologies between prisoners.³¹

There are no guidelines, no best practices for reintegrating the de-radicalized. France – a concentration point of both anti-Muslim discrimination and terrorism – estimates that over 9,000 young people (many the children of immigrants, some naturalized French citizens) have been radicalized or are at-risk of being radicalized. In 2015, after terror attacks took more than 230 lives in France, the French government announced plans to open twelve residential centers to house young people (aged 18-30) who voluntarily opted into the program. This was a highly experimental approach; the first center, a renovated 18th century manor in the idyllic small town of Beumont-en-Veron, resembled a college dormitory and claimed to offer a regimented schedule and courses in French history, philosophy, and religion, as well as time for extracurriculars.³² The citizens of Beumont, initially in favor of hosting the experimental facility despite concerns that the center might itself become a symbolic target of terrorist activity, were outraged to learn from a 2016 radio interview that government officials had decided to change the voluntary residential program to a detention center for Muslims who had been stopped by security forces as they attempted to travel to Syria. Because of public outcry, the French government has agreed to adhere to the original plan.³³ However, in July of this year, the Beumont center was closed after receiving only nine residents.³⁴

Gerald Bonner, a sociologist who served on the government-appointed steering committee for the center, expressed doubt as to the ability for de-radicalization centers to work, on the principle that the idea of de-radicalization is itself faulty: “It means that you can take an idea out of the brain, and I think that’s just impossible. Nobody in the history of psychology – nobody – has succeeded. What we have to try is not a kind of mental manipulation but the opposite – mind liberation, a strengthening of their intellectual immune systems. And it’s they who have to do that themselves.”³⁵

Sharing Bonner's doubts is Dounia Bouzar, a French anthropologist who specializes in working with youth – particularly girls – who have been indoctrinated online into radical ideologies. She believes that these youth become at risk because they are “harboring feelings of exclusion, humiliation, or inferiority” while extremist groups offer them “a worldview that can provide them a sense of omnipotence.”³⁶ Bouzar works with the girls and their families in a two-step approach: rebuilding emotional security by asking patients to recall happier sentiments and memories from the time before their indoctrination, and, secondly, deconstructing jihadist narratives by addressing gaps between what the girls have been told and the realities of that life. Bouzar believes that de-radicalization and detention centers like those planned in France, as well as on-residential programs that have been enacted in the UK and in Germany (the latter having been applied, in earlier decades, to de-radicalizing individuals who subscribed to homegrown neo-Nazi ideologies), reinforce rather than break down terrorist frameworks.³⁷ Aside from the troubling historical correlations these proposed detention centers carry, their viability is fundamentally problematic. If an individual at risk of radicalization is responding to a sense of isolation, it stands to reason that further isolation and stigmatization will only compound the motivations leading them to such a dangerous precipice in the first place.

In regard to countering the global reach of extremist ideologies, the growing consensus is that the best offense may be a good defense and that counter-radicalization may ultimately prove more effective than any method of re-integration. A community-based approach, such as the UK's Pakistan and Communications Outreach Team, may be beneficial. The government-sponsored group meets with members of the Pakistani community in Britain to brainstorm policy changes that may disrupt terrorist networks by addressing issues of poverty, unemployment, and employment discrimination that might lead members of the ethno-community to feel sympathetic towards extremist rhetoric.³⁸ In these communities, women are proving to be powerful allies in prevention initiatives. Generally, the primary domestic caretakers of a household, wives and mothers, may serve as an early warning system in observing changes in the behavior of children and family members. As women are often subject to

violence and oppression under extremist ideologies, involving them in countermeasures may provide a sense of agency and perhaps begin a virtuous circle in this fight.³⁹

Engaging diasporic communities in policy discussions is a labor-intensive, if worthy, task, and only takes advantage of personal, face-to-face interactions. The other side of counter-radicalization takes place in the same environment being used by extremist groups: the internet. In a virtual biome where advertisement and attention are the leading forms of currency, intelligence agencies are learning to vie for space. Their approach should involve both the removal of terrorist content and the delivery of counter-narratives. In regards to the former, a joint collaborative taskforce was recently formed between the United Nations and tech giants Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube. Together, they are developing policies and mechanisms for removing content that promotes violence and overt extremist content from their platforms. They are also working with organizations like the European Union's Civil Society Empowerment Programme, which supports open forums where alternative or counter narratives can be shared.⁴⁰

Counter narratives should not dismiss concerns and grievances voiced by the diasporic community, but should address the knowledge gaps in the depiction of jihadist life offered by recruiters. For instance, how many foreign fighters have died in Syria as opposed to native jihadists? What level of contact may a foreign fighter expect to have with their family back in the host country? What living accommodations may they expect? How does the loss of civilian life further their moral beliefs? Alternative stories might be offered by disenchanting returnees, who would be better engaged in sharing the realities of their experiences than awaiting trial. Finally, counter-narratives should be coupled with viable alternatives to combat that would ease the suffering of those in the home country, including volunteer opportunities within humanitarian aid organizations or placements within local government.⁴¹

With the recent losses of Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa, Syria, (both ISIS-held territories) TSG foresees extremist groups will escalate their social media campaigns to attract new recruits.⁴² The democratization of information via the internet means that "local conflicts" no longer exist; every war is,

in some aspects, a global war. It will take a committed global effort to counteract the efforts of extremist groups to legitimize and spread their rhetoric; social media has become both a weapon and a battleground in that effort.

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