

Chapter 68

Western Female Migrants to ISIS: Propaganda, Radicalisation, and Recruitment

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ABSTRACT

Women have long been a blind spot for security, academic and think tank sectors in relation to the growing threat of global extremism. The recent spike in female recruitment to the terrorist organisation, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is a strong indicator of this dangerous trend. While often assumed to be passive agents, women continue to play strong roles in online and offline recruitment to violent extremist organisations. However, women can also act as strong counter-extremism agents in the fight against radicalisation and terrorism. Looking at the issue of gender, there is a new ability through online research to retrieve valuable insight into terrorist strategies around recruitment of women from online propaganda. This chapter aims to address questions of gender within current radicalisation trends through an analysis of online data, and through tracking Western females who are migrating to territories under the control of ISIS.

INTRODUCTION

Women have long been a blind spot for security, academic and think tank sectors in relation to the growing threat of global extremism. The recent spike in female recruitment to the terrorist organisation, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is a strong indicator of this dangerous trend. While often assumed to be passive agents, women continue to play strong roles in online and offline recruitment to violent extremist organisations. However, women can also act as strong counter-extremism agents in the fight against radicalisation and terrorism. It is fundamental to better understand the role women play within violent extremist organisations. It is also important to analyse whether processes of radicalisation differ between men and women, and if so, how counter-extremism efforts can be tailored to specific target audiences.

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This chapter aims to address questions of gender within current radicalisation trends through an analysis of data being collected online, and tracking Western females who are choosing to migrate to territories under the control of ISIS. In an increasingly digital era we are given access to an abundance of data through open source information retrieval on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as other platforms such as ask.fm, BlogSpot, Instagram and Tumblr. Looking at the issue of gender, there is a new ability through online research to retrieve valuable insight into terrorist strategies around recruitment of women from online propaganda (Saltman & Smith, 2015), digital manifestos aimed at women (Winter, 2015), and testimonials from women that have tried, and been detained, from traveling to Syria.

The utilisation of online tools by violent extremist and terrorist organisations, like ISIS, has had real world consequences. The number of Western foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) and female migrants joining ISIS in Iraq and Syria was last estimated at upwards of 4,000, with over 550 women within this figure (Barrett, 2014; Hoyle, Bradford, & Frenett, 2015). While these estimates were originally given in October 2014, it is assumed the number has increased significantly since then. These are unprecedented numbers, particularly with reference to the seemingly new phenomenon of Western women migrating en masse to join ISIS. This has shocked many and forced security services to re-evaluate the risk these women pose both domestically and internationally (Hoyle et al., 2015). While the Internet cannot be considered a sole cause of these figures, there is no doubt that online pathways have facilitated violent extremist recruitment and have been catalysts for processes of radicalisation (Hussain & Saltman, 2014).

Previously, public perceptions of jihadists and members of terrorist organisations have maintained an air of mystery; viewed roughly as fear-inducing fanatics and barbaric terrorists. Messaging within Al-Qaeda and other groups has traditionally been highly centralised and secretive (Saltman & Winter, 2014). The life of a jihadist was perceived as rugged, violent and detached from civil society. However, we are now witnessing a fundamental shift. If the Vietnam War can be considered the first televised war, and the Gulf War the first 24-hour news war, we have come to a point where the current crisis in Iraq and Syria has been deemed the first social media war (Jones, 2014; O'Neil, 2013). While this digital frontline has caused a new level of fear from security services and the greater public towards online extremist propaganda and terrorist networking, it has also provided researchers and analysts with an incredible lens into the lives of FTF, their organisational support networks, and their female counterparts.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has been analysing violent extremist discourse and online extremism for the last six plus years as part of its counter-extremism research and program streams. In partnership with the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), ISD has cultivated a large-scale database of Western females migrating to ISIS territory as part of its Women and Extremism (WaE) program. The Western female migrant database has been expanding in breadth and depth since May 2014. At the time of writing, it is considered to be the largest database of its kind, running in parallel to the ICSR database on male FTF. This database tracks and archives social media material of over 120 female profiles across a range of online platforms. Archived data is of great importance to online research of this kind since violent extremist and terrorist-related accounts are quickly suspended or taken down from larger platforms as their more controversial content is flagged through user-based systems. From this data, the process of radicalisation is tracked from the perspective of female recruits. Likewise the role women play within modern jihadist movements like ISIS can be seen in a much more personal and direct manner than ever before.

Recognising this new and growing phenomenon, the research of this chapter is based largely on the first two publications within the WaE series: *Becoming Mulan?: Female Western Migrants to ISIS* (Hoyle

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