What Do They See?

A Look at the Appeal of IS to Young Muslim Women Raised in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This scholarly research investigates the recent recruitment of young British Muslim women by the Islamic State (IS) in an effort to determine the appeal of said group upon this demographic. Noting that such recruitment falls under the foreign fighter complex, which is usually male oriented, this research seeks to understand why IS is able to extend its appeal to young women. In so doing, many of the preexisting theories for extremism are examined and found to be irrelevant to this particular demographic. Thus, I am arguing that it is not poverty, lack of education, or other economic determinant as is commonly believed to be the roots of radicalization/extremism but rather a search for a personal identity these women feel is lacking, growing up as Muslims in an immigrant context in a non-Muslim country.

About the Author

Rebecca Davis is a senior, graduating with a dual degree in Global Studies and Spanish and a certificate in Global Security. Throughout her work in Global Studies, she has focused on understanding the nature of and root issues behind terrorist behavior and especially the motivations for the foreign fighter complex. She will be continuing this research at the School for International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. in the Fall of 2016.

Introduction

In February of 2015, newspaper headlines covered the story of three young British Muslim women who had gone missing while on holiday and were suspected to be en route to Syria. These girls were Amira Abase and Shamima Begum, both fifteen, and their classmate, Kadiza Sultana, sixteen. The three girls were outstanding pupils at London's Bethnal Green Academy in Tower Hamlets, a rapidly growing community with a heavy concentration of immigrants. Family members described the girls, detailing their favorite TV shows and hobbies and speaking of their high academic achievements. While not the first of such recruits, the trio quickly became the face of the new recruitment efforts by IS. Since their arrival in Syria, at least two of them have been married to IS fighters (Dodd and Khomami, 2015). Amira is the most vocal of the trio, using social media to post updates glorifying life under IS and trying to recruit more girls like herself.

Since the departure of these girls, experts have tried to understand their radicalization process, examining the possible explanations of radicalization by a relative, the school, or an outside contact. According to the principal of the school, it was impossible that the girls were radicalized there, stating that access to social media is blocked on school property ("Syria girls: Trio 'not radicalised' at Bethnal Green Academy.", 2015). However, concern has been voiced

over some of the school staff and their ideological affiliations, noting that some have been involved with radical organizations within the UK and abroad. There are also reports that Shamima contacted a well-known woman from IS who had also left the UK for Syria about a year and a half prior ("Syria girls: Trio 'not radicalised' at Bethnal Green Academy.", 2015). This was shortly before the trio left the country, and suggests that a peer network may have been influential in their radicalization. In addition, another friend and classmate from Bethnal Green had also left for Syria just a few months before.

Given the example above, this research seeks to answer the *why* question by examining three related areas. First, pre-existing radicalization theories are evaluated to decide if they accurately account for the involvement of female foreign fighters. Second, possible motivations are investigated for why these young women are leaving their homes in the United Kingdom to join a movement in Syria, even though many have no prior connections to the country. Third, the appeal of IS and their ideologies on this demographic is examined.

Literature Review

Before delving into an overview of the theories, a clarification of terminology is requisite. Fundamentalist Islam will be defined as the "the belief or advocating of a conservative adherence to literal or traditional interpretations of the Qu'ran and the Sunnah" (Collins Dictionary, 2015). This may lead to extremism-adoption of a position that lies on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. Extremism may or may not lead to extremist acts of terrorism. Terrorism, as referred to in this research, will utilize the definition provided by the United States Department of State, "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003, 120). The term, noncombatants, refers to not only

civilians but also "military personnel (whether or not armed or on duty) who are not deployed in a war zone or a war-like setting." (Legislative requirements and key terms, 2005, 9). When combined with an Islamic religious perspective, this is the definition of *salafi-jihadism* . This is a fundamentalist approach to practicing Islam with an aspect of violence, advocating for the overthrow of all governments that are not adhering to the teachings of the Prophet and Sharia law (Stern and Berger, 2015, xii-xiii). It is important to note that abiding by an extremist ideology is not necessarily correlated with committing acts of terrorism. One merely becomes more vulnerable to committing such acts in an effort to bring about the desired changes.

A new dimension to this extremist problem is the foreign fighter complex, a phenomenon that has existed for centuries, though mostly focused on male participation. Even though foreign fighters are often associated with jihadists such as the *mujahideen*, they are not strictly an Islamic phenomenon, as demonstrated by Malet (2010). In his research, Malet (2010) cites several examples of American heroes who would also be considered foreign fighters, people such as Davy Crockett who left the United States to fight in the Mexican territory of Texas (Malet, 2010, 99). Adding complexity to this issue is the emerging recruitment of female foreign fighters by IS from the Muslim immigrant community in the UK It is a unique and concerning phenomenon, one that cannot be explained by conventional theories on extremist recruitment.

Existing Theories on Extremist Recruitment

In counter-extremism studies, there are four theories that attempt, with varying levels of success, to offer explanations for why individuals adopt extremism and go on to commit terrorist acts, namely Poverty, Illiteracy, Cultural Alienation, and Transnational Ideology. The first two are the most prevalent in official foreign counter-extremism programs; the latter two are newer theories which are more applicable to this case study.

Poverty as a Push Factor

The first of these theories is predominant in counterterrorism. It sees extremist movements as arising from the impoverished masses. As J. Brian Atwood states, there is a "strong correlation between the absence of material well-being and the prospects for violence" (Atwood, 2003, 160). Quoting research done by the World Bank, he goes on to say that the material divide in a country can lead not only to political instability within a nation state, but can also create animosity between developed and developing countries (Atwood, 2003, 160). However, terrorism as a direct result of poverty is more difficult to substantiate than merely the existence of a higher probability of incidence of violence in poverty conditions. Regardless, it is known that terrorist organizations frequently recruit their manpower from this demographic (Atwood, 2003, 161), using economic benefits as leverage. Thus, instead of viewing socio-economic inequality and lack of access to resources as the causes of terrorist activity, they should be viewed as two of several factors that can increase a population's vulnerability to their appeals. As stated by Asef Bayat, "the poor cannot afford to be ideological" and "to be ideological requires certain capacities (time, risk-taking, money) that the disenfranchised often lack" (Bayat, 2013, 201).

Lack of Education as a Push Factor

The second theory for extremism holds that a lack of education can make a population vulnerable to its appeals. This common view is held by many, including those in government. Colin Powell once stated that "that the root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty, where there is ignorance, where people see no hope in their lives." (Berrebi, 2007, 3). John O. McGinnis writes that "Ignorance and poverty are the greatest friends of the

terrorist, because the ignorant and impoverished are easy prey for the conspiracy theories and millennial religious visions that are staple of the Islamic fanatics." (McGinnis, 2003). However, one of the main drawbacks for this theory is that statistics do not support it. Multiple studies have shown that terrorists tend to be educated. For instance, in research conducted by Hassan among Palestinian suicide bombers, all were educated and none were impoverished (Hassan, 2001). Other studies surveyed terrorists from a variety of national backgrounds, including several European countries and Turkey, and found that they all shared a tendency to possess high levels of formal education (Krueger and Maleckova, 2003, 141). Other researchers see terrorism as a mode of political participation, albeit a violent one. Political participation, they argue, is a common trait among educated individuals and terrorism is simply another expression of it (Krueger and Maleckova, 2003, 142).

Cultural Alienation of Immigrant

While the previous theories attempt to explain the radicalization and involvement in foreign fighting, they fail to explain why many extremists are neither poor nor illiterate. Furthermore, they do not explain why a poor, uneducated individual with no prior ties to a country, its struggle or its dominant ideology will join an extremist movement. This policy response vacuum can be filled by a relatively underutilized theory of foreign fighter recruitment that focuses on the cultural alienation of the immigrant.

Once an individual adopts an extremist viewpoint, they may become radicalized enough to seek deeper involvement which may involve foreign fighting. However, Malet (2010) argues that in order to be a foreign fighter, one must be recruited from outside of the country in which the conflict is taking place. Thus, there has to be an underlying motivation to join which takes the form of a shared transnational identity, linking the foreigner with the fighters in the conflict.

Motivations to join can be encouraged through a shared religious affiliation (Malet, 2010, 99-100) of the country in conflict and the foreign recruit. Thus, while radicalization may not directly cause an individual to leave their home to join in a conflict, foreign fighter recruitment could also attract people who have held those beliefs for a long time. Diaspora communities are particularly vulnerable to this, due to their shared ethnic, ideological, and religious ties that transcend the physical borders of the state.

Transnational Religious Ideology

The final reason is the presence of a transnational religious ideology. This is perhaps the most applicable theory to this case study. Adherence to a transnational religious ideology can provide a personal identity that individuals may feel that they are otherwise lacking, especially in an immigrant community. Taking part in a shared religious faith can provide this identity and help them to define themselves in a country where they may feel othered by the citizens of both the sending and receiving countries. This hypothesis derived from records of interviews with former radical Muslims from the UK and research done in a fundamentalist Islamic group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), which has a strong presence in the UK. Malet (2010) also hints at it in his research, quoting former jihadists who describe the appeal of fundamentalist Islam in their lives. One of these men states that they were ''Men who had no home. Men reviled in the West because they were not white and Christian, and reviled at home because they no longer dressed and spoke like Muslims." (Malet, 2010, 109). In the context of recruitment, he also says that "Transnational ideological affiliation was a highly salient identity because immigration and modernization had destroyed other communal ties and produced isolated, embattled individuals" (Malet, 2010, 109). Alienation, which can make them vulnerable to the appeal of radical ideology (Richardson, 2006, 69), can play a key role in these diaspora communities.

These are just a sampling of the theories for why some people become radicalized or assume a position of extremism. There is also significant variation in the process of choosing to become a foreign fighter; they can pursue different paths but they all have a common thread. Each path involves radicalization at some point. The first two theories say that radicalization stems from a social or educational disadvantage. The third theory posits that foreign fighter involvement comes from an appeal to a shared transnational identity. This could be religious (radicalized or not), ethnic, or otherwise. However, none of these theories fully applies to the case study at hand. Thus, the fourth option is the most applicable here. While it is true that none are mutually distinctive, I argue that it is more of a matter of reordering the pieces. Whereas the first two theories posit that it is poverty and ignorance that can contribute to someone turning to extremism, I contend that it is a search for personal meaning and identity. This identity can then become a transnational one, which can lead to foreign fighter recruitment as described by Malet. I posit that this is what is taking place in the case of the young female British recruits to IS.

The Role of Religion and Alienation in the Extremist Appeal

Religion, and in this case, Islam, can provide a unifying force for extremist groups. As Richardson states, "it provides a unifying, all-encompassing philosophy or belief system that legitimizes and elevates their actions." (Richardson, 2006, 63). Religious extremist groups have the tendency to be more violent as well, as they can claim divine permission for their behavior(Richardson, 2006, 61). Changing the existing government from secularism to one of Islamic principles is usually among the goals of Islamic fundamentalists. To this end, they prey upon the alienation of Muslims by promising a better future once the new government is achieved (Richardson, 2006, 67). Thus, while Islam is not culpable for causing terrorism, it can

be the vehicle for creating transnational ties that can motivate a person to leave their home and take sides in a foreign conflict (Richardson, 2006, 68).

This alienation can also lead to a cultural reactionary push back. Experiencing rejection from the receiving nation's culture can lead a population to be vulnerable to the appeal of ultra-orthodox teachings and can result in a complete rejection of the host country's culture. Instead of gradually assimilating into the receiving culture, they instead create a parallel culture, based upon either their heritage or the perceptions of that heritage. This is seen occurring in Muslim migrant communities within the UK. One example is Tower Hamlets, the hometown of the Bethnal Green trio. Termed "Jihadi Cool" by the popular media, it is a complete rejection of everything Western and is the latest cultural youth trend. The more devout one appears, the more 'in' they are. Ironically, though, some of the strongest proponents of this "rejection of all things deemed Western" utilize the latest fashionable social media platforms to target their audience (McCaul, 2014). They also are co-opting other facets of pop culture to spread their message, posting jihadi rap videos to YouTube and distributing t-shirts with slogans glorifying jihad (Chumley, 2014). Thus, it is clear that at least part of the allure of "Jihadi Cool" is a form of cultural self-redefinition that occurs in other cultures as well. However, in this situation and with a militant form of Islam, the result is more threatening than in other cases.

Data and Methods

To examine whether the aforementioned religious appeal and cultural alienation theories apply to female foreign recruits, I collected and analyzed data on young British Muslim women who have left or been detained in attempting to leave the UK to join IS. Whereas it is much more common to see men joining foreign military movements, the participation of women as foreign

fighters has had little historical precedent. The UK has been selected for this study as it has experienced an alarming and significant number of such cases.

This research consists of a media review, examining the issue of this recent recruitment trend. The data is collected from newspaper editorials published in news sources including the BBC, The Washington Times, The Atlantic, The New York Times, and the Guardian. These sources span the ideological spectrum, offering differing perspectives on the same topic or case and avoiding the distortion of political viewpoints in reporting. Some of these online newspaper articles included embedded video footage and commentary on the women, which proved helpful as well. Through the use of such sources, I sought to construct an idea of each young woman's life, economic status, ethnic background, and path to radicalism. I also incorporate published interviews with the remaining family members of these girls.

In collecting and examining these resources, I analyzed them for any common themes that could give clues to their paths to adopting extremist views and acting upon them. These themes include criteria such as age at time of departure, ethnic background, and degree of observed religiosity. These were noted for each of the subjects and were of particular importance as they provided the necessary evidence to counter the radicalization theories discussed previously. Commonalities within the data were noted and efforts made to draw accurate conclusions. I also attempted to determine any common individuals, institutions or alternate sources that these women have taken to reach the point of radicalization. For example, through using available sources, I sought to determine methods of radicalization/recruitment and whether there was a common peer network or a radicalized family member involved.

The results of this media review were then compared and contrasted to the arguments in the literature review. These results gave insight to an under-examined element of the foreign

fighter phenomenon - the engagement and experiences of women. This was in order to determine whether the prominent theories in the field of anti-terrorism research were applicable here.

Preliminary Argument/Hypothesis

I am arguing that the preexisting theories on radicalization and adopting extremist ideology are not applicable to the case of the young British Muslim women that have responded to the appeal of IS. Examination of the data corroborate this idea. Popular ideas offered for adopting extremist views include poverty and a lack of education, among other things. This has not been the case for these women. At least several of them have been young women with exceedingly bright futures ahead of them; young women who were attaining high academic achievements and had promising opportunities for advancement. These findings are substantiated by research done by other terrorism experts such as Hassan (cited above) and Horgan (2014) who found that those who adopt extremist views often have at least completed high school education (Horgan, 2014, 67). However, it is true that these findings can vary geographically.

My argument in the current case is that the young women are turning to the form of Islam that is espoused and glorified by IS in an effort to create an identity that they feel they are lacking, growing up in an immigrant context. I posit that this type of faith is leaving them vulnerable to the appeal of IS and is what differentiates them from the thousands of other law-abiding, peaceful Muslims residing in the UK. It is not an issue of Islam itself, but rather how it is practiced that can become dangerous. I further contend that the appeal of IS to these women comes from the current societal culture in which these women are growing up. It is a culture that rejects everything associated with Western ideology and sees pure Islam as "cool". This leaves them especially vulnerable to the ideological appeals of an organization that is calling for the reestablishment of a pure Islamic caliphate.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

In the process of the collection of the data for this research, it has been interesting to note both the existence and lack of certain trends. By this, I mean the commonalities that group them together as a subject group and the differences that at the same time cause them to retain their humanness and uniqueness. While many of them share an immigrant background, there are a few, such as Sally Jones, who would be termed ethnically British and are not acting from an immigrant context. Thus, it is clear from the beginning that the appeal of IS is not limited to those who have grown up as first or second generation British. There are also various nationalities represented among the data, as subjects come from Sudan, Somalia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.

Economic Background

Economic deprivation does not seem to be a push factor for radicalization or departure to Syria. Instead, the opposite seems to be true. As in the case of Aqsa Mahmood, a high profile recruiter from Glasgow, her family was described as "comfortably middle class" (Randall, 2014). Financially prosperous, her family lives in a reputable neighborhood in an expensive house and sent Aqsa to a prestigious private girls' school for a number of years (Dettmer, 2014). Another girl, Lena Mamoun Abdelgadir, also came from a well-to-do family. Similar to Aqsa, Lena's family also sent her to an expensive girls' school for years until she graduated and entered medical school (Farmer, 2015). Lena has since accompanied a group of eight other medical students and graduates from a medical school in Sudan on a trip to Syria. Their motivations are unclear. While it could be entirely humanitarian in nature, it is known that some of those in the group had at least been exposed to radical teaching while at the medical school (Bennhold, 2015).

Degree of Religiosity

Of the nineteen women and girls on whom data was gathered for this study, most were Muslim by familial background. Of the group, there were two who are known to be recent converts to Islam. These women are Sally Jones and Kadijah Dare. The first woman, Sally Jones, is an outlier in many ways to the rest of the women who have left Britain to join IS. In her mid-forties and ethnically British, Jones is neither young nor was she raised with an immigrant Muslim background. For a number of years in the 1990s, this single mother of two played guitar in a female rock band, flaunting miniskirts and blond hair. This is a significant departure from the black burqa and gloves that she now wears in her Twitter photos. Her neighbors described her behavior as erratic, recalling her male friends and the bizarre things that she did, including the instances in which she believed she was a witch. Then she met online and fell in love with Junaid Hussain, the young computer hacker from Britain who was charged with murdering James Foley (Greenwood, 2014). Hussain, who was young enough to be Jones' son, had left the UK to fight for IS. Jones followed some time later in 2013 (Whitehead, 2015). They were married after her arrival and lived together until a drone strike specifically targeted her husband in August, 2015. She has been very active on IS social media, frequently tweeting messages about the glories of her husband's martyrdom and her desire to behead Christians with a "dull knife" (Whitehead, 2015). Currently, there are fears that she may be preparing to become a female suicide bomber for IS, given a recent threat that she made in her Twitter feed (Newman, 2015).

Kadijah Dare, the other convert to Islam, is not as extreme as Jones. The daughter of Christians, she had migrated from Nigeria to the UK as a child. She was a devout Christian until her college years, when she began attending a mosque and converted (Styles, 2015). In 2012, she

left for Syria, taking her young son with her. Shortly after arriving, she married a Swedish IS fighter known as Abu Bakr, who has since been killed (Piggott, 2016). MI6, the British intelligence agency, views her as one of the biggest threats emerging from IS, on account of her popularity and hostility in her social media posts ("White British girl who's now a 'celebrity jihadi'", 2014). For instance, after the beheading of James Foley, she famously tweeted requests for another foreign journalist for her to behead, desiring to become the first woman in IS to execute a "UK or US terrorist" (Halliday, 2014).

Aside from these two cases of converts, the remainder of the women investigated for this study are Muslim by background. However, their levels of religiosity varied. In the case of Shamima Begum, for instance, she is reported to not even have known how to pray (Ferguson, 2015). Others did not even wear a *hijab*, the Muslim head scarf, until shortly before leaving the UK. This was true in the instance of Sharmeena Begum, the first girl from the Bethnal Green Academy to leave for IS-controlled territory (Sinmaz and Reid, 2015).

Ethnic Background

The nineteen subjects for this study were found to be from six different countries. Three of the women's ethnic background could not be determined due to lack of information. However, the remainder came from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria, with the majority being Somali. All had spent at least part of their lives in the UK and had existing ties to the country at the time of their departure to Syria.
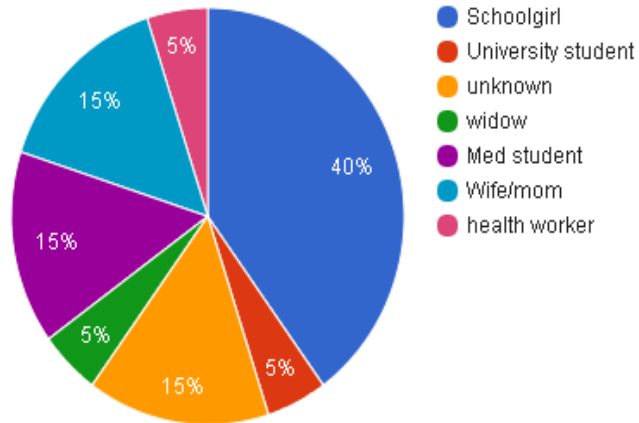
Immigrant Background
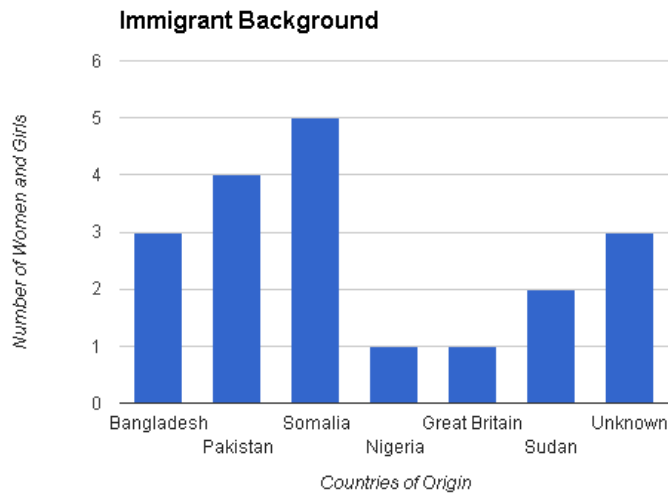
Ethnicity is crucial to note as it cannot be argued that they have national ties to the country since none of the young girls and women were originally from Syria. Indeed, none of them even came from the Middle-Eastern countries surrounding Syria. Neither do they have any direct ethnic stake in the establishment of IS. Nevertheless, they are all immigrants in a foreign society and occupy a position that is relatively vulnerable to exploitation by the same societal structures that IS is ideologically opposing. This shared link then explains the solidarity with a conflict that is not their own.

Occupational Background

At the time of each individual's departure, the majority of the females were enrolled in school and performing well academically. Some forty percent were schoolgirls, with another twenty percent attending a university or medical school. This statistic is reflective of their age (discussed below).

Occupations at Time of Departure

Legend:
- Schoolgirl — 40%
- University student — 5%
- unknown — 15%
- widow — 5%
- Med student — 15%
- Wife/mom — 15%
- health worker — 5%

A brief look at their occupations further strengthens the argument that these women were educated and relatively well-off. Their motivations to join IS cannot be adequately explained by either lack of education or the inability to enjoy a certain lifestyle or provide for basic needs. It follows, therefore, that there must be some non-economic factors providing the impetus for their decision to join.

Age of Female Recruits

At the time of departure, the majority of the females in the subject group were found to be between the ages of fifteen and twenty. A total of eleven of the subjects, over half of the group, were under the age of 25. This is an important fact to note as this age is often associated with a great deal of searching for a personal identity.

Age at Time of Departure
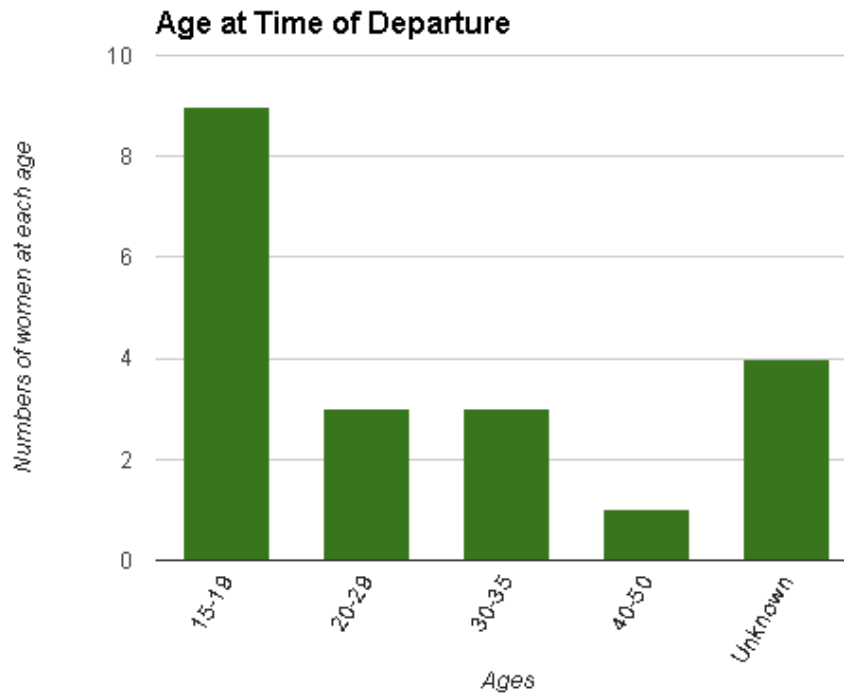
While it is normal for young people to go through a period of self-searching and redefinition, it is not normal for them to become involved in dangerous extremist activities as sponsored by IS. In the case of these young women and girls, they desire to fit in with the culture but the culture does not completely accept them. Thus, they create their own culture in a reactionary move against the mainstream culture. While not a new phenomenon, what is different in their case is that they are forming their counter-cultural identity in a militantly conservative form of Islam and in a radically militant movement associated with it.

Recruitment Network

Many of the women and young girls who left for Syria were friends of one another and did not travel alone. As in the example of the Bethnal Green schoolgirls, the three left together, sometime after their fourth friend had also left. This friend, in turn, is suspected to have been groomed for recruitment by Aqsa Mahmood (Randall, 2014). Now, of the Bethnal Green trio,

Amira Abase has been trying to recruit girls through her social media. This is an example of a peer recruitment network.

Often times, sisters would become radicalized and leave together. This was the case for the Dawood sisters-Sugra, Zohra, and Khadijah. All three left the UK in May, 2015, with their nine children under the pretext of traveling to Saudi Arabia for religious purposes. They disappeared on the return trip and have since been reported being smuggled into Syria. It is also alleged that a brother had already left and was fighting in Syria. This is another example of how the recruitment network operates ("Bradford Dawood family 'split to cross Syria border'.", 2015) and is similar to the case of the twins, Salma and Zarah Halane. Originally from Somalia, these sixteen-year-old girls were high achieving students until they ran away from home in June of 2014, in route to Syria (Glendinning, 2014). Here, there could be two causes for their radicalization. Like the Dawoods, it is alleged that the twins' older brother had already joined IS (Wagner, 2014) and there are rumors that Aqsa Mahmood could have been involved too (Randall, 2014).

Conclusions

This research has focused on the recruitment by IS of young British Muslim females growing up in an immigrant context. It looks at several of the explanations and theories of foreign fighter involvement including becoming radicalized and committing extremist acts. Specifically, it evaluates the theories that material deprivation and poverty and a lack of education cause an individual to adopt extremism. These theories have been proven to be inapplicable here, as the majority of the subjects were highly educated and did not appear to be suffering from the effects of poverty. Thus, alternative theories were offered to explain their motives for joining IS. Drawing upon research done on the foreign fighter complex, it suggests

that the motivating reasons stem not from a lack of material resources or attainment of education, but rather a transnational identity based in some shared identity- religious, ethnic, or ideological. I argue further that these women are grasping this opportunity to develop their sense of identity by participating in an international group. By so doing, they are taking this shared identity, religious in this case, and by participating in it, creating their own personal identities. Thus, adherence to, and participation in, some style of an orthodox form of Islam constitutes the basis of their personal identity and provides them with the impetus for joining a foreign conflict.

The data gathered for this research seems to corroborate this. Most of the subjects were young at the time of departure, an age at which it is common to question and to struggle to define one's personal identity. They also were mostly of immigrant backgrounds, either being first-generation Britons or moving there during their childhood. Sixty percent were pursuing some type of educational degree, most with excellent school track records. With the exception of Sally Jones, none appear to have been on economically difficult times. These two findings rule out the relevance of the first two theories for explaining the causes of extremism.

Therefore, I argue that it is instead a search for a personal identity that is propelling these girls and young women to join IS. Growing up in an immigrant context, they identify fully with neither their country of origin nor the country in which they grew up. Hence, they turn to other alternatives to find their identity, in this case an ultra-orthodox form of Islam. This imperils them to the appeals of radical extremist groups such as IS.

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