The targeting and recruitment of young Western men and women, including Canadians, to the flag of the Islamic State (IS) continues unabated. Some young men have volunteered for the Islamic State as new converts who wish to partake in their Islamic duties and respond to the call of the caliphate. For others, the reasons include a youthful desire for adventure, the wish to partake in the founding of a truly traditional Islamic state, the romantic notion of fighting for religious beliefs and creating a new Islamic homeland, while some experience alienation from modern Western society. Some of these recruits to jihad are psychologically dislocated, discontented with their lot in life, marginalized, and have little to lose. In short, many young men feel ghettoized, ignored, or forgotten by mainstream Western society.

Analysts and observers are baffled by the reasons that spur women to join the Islamic State—women who are as young as 13, but generally between the ages of 16 and 24. Some women are lured by the persuasive and manipulative messages in social media. Islamic proponents and recruiters depict the Islamic State and its evolving caliphate as being a truly conservative Islamic ‘oasis,’ providing young Muslim women with an alternative social, religious, and political option to the so-call corrupt Western society. Through social media, Islamic State representatives effectively promote and promulgate the Islamic State’s vision, conservative ideology, and interpretation of the Koran to attract and recruit young women. Recruitment is done in over 20 languages with the IS controlling as many as 90,000 Twitter accounts to spread their word. The attraction for both young converts and believers is that the Islamic State preaches a Sunni doctrine that adheres to the strict tenets of Islamic law—Sharia—and denounces what is perceived to be the corrupt influences of the material world (dunya jahilliyyah) that abound everywhere outside the caliphate.

A 2015 study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue estimates that there are 3,000 Western migrants with as many as 550 being women. These women originate from areas such as the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Although many women (and children) have followed their husbands and fathers to the Islamic State, others have travelled there for a spectrum of reasons.
Motivations For Joining The Islamic State

Young women are departing the safety and comfort of their families and respective homelands for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the promulgated Islamist view that Muslims are being targeted and oppressed throughout the world, a perception that is buttressed by the conflicts perpetrated over the past two decades including Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and the ongoing civil war in Syria. This perception is compounded by the advances in social media, where the graphic and distressing images of violence purportedly perpetrated against Muslim communities, particularly in Palestine, readily provide the propaganda fodder to feed this perspective. Moreover, the views presented through social media employ examples from a spectrum of conflicts around the world to underline the argument of, “a larger war against Islam by non-believers.” This simplistic propaganda is seductive for impressionable, uncritical young men and women who adhere to and inhabit the world’s social media, and who are easily persuaded, given that they, “do not differentiate between the virtual and real worlds.” The basic argument boils down to two options for true believers of Islam: you are either with us or against us. In short, you are, “either with the camp of iman [belief] or camp of kufr [unbelief] no in between.” This rendering represents the “Saved Sect” view promulgated by the Wahhabi and Salafi-jihadist groups who proffer that theirs is the true interpretation of Islam and that only the true believers of this sect will be saved. For the IS, this justifies violence against non-Muslims, as well as those Muslims who do not follow the right path—the Wahhabi and Salafi interpretation.

The young women who fall prey to these messages soon garner the view that the West is complicit in the perpetration of violence against Muslims. Through their intention to join the Islamic State, female recruits appear empathetic to the plight of Islam, as well as sympathetic to Muslims who are perceived to be victims of violence, particularly Palestinians. These issues appear to be important factors in their decision to depart their families and homes in the West to seek a truly Muslim alternative society—which for them is the Islamic State. The notion of an alternative society appears to be supported by numerous Muslims where a recent poll shows that 20% of Muslims believe that, “Western liberal society can never be compatible with Islam.”

Another substantive reason for young women to rally to the Islamic State is the desire and romanticized notion for a truly Islamic society governed by a strict interpretation of Sharia law and the tenets of the Koran. Notwithstanding the lack of international recognition of the Islamic State, in the eyes of these believers, the Islamic State is in itself a nation-state that incorporates the three fundamentals of territory, population and rule of law in this case—Sharia.

The Importance Of Women To An Islamic Society

For the Islamic State to thrive and grow as a nation state, it must attract women to join them because they have a critical role to play in this new Islamic society. The recruitment of women will be instrumental in creating families to build the society, which will create the aura of an Islamic State as a safe haven for Muslims who wish to follow a strict interpretation of Sharia. In this respect, women migrants hope that the, “region will develop into their vision of an Islamic utopia,” so they may, “contribute to the creation of an ideologically pure state.”

The declaration of the caliphate by the Islamic State leader al Baghdadi, on June 29, 2014, made migrating to the Islamic State [hijrah] a religious duty [fard] for all true Muslims (Sunni). By moving to the region, these women both fulfill their religious duty and ensure their place in heaven. Joining the caliphate enables them to contribute directly, in any way necessary, as mothers, nurses, or teachers to the development of a truly Islamic State. This duty can provide women with a sense of purpose, as well as offering a romantic reality of being one of the first generations involved in creating and fostering a truly Islamic state.
Marrying A Jihadi

The young women who are recruited and journey to the Islamic State are also enamored with the idea of finding a suitable, brave husband to facilitate their transition from childhood into adulthood. This is reportedly a major factor in female migration. Moreover, not just any man, but the notion of marrying a jihadi fighter has an additional appeal, such that some women source a suitable candidate even before they arrive in the caliphate. It must be appreciated that should a husband be killed in battle, not only is he guaranteed a place in heaven, so is his wife and children.

Another attraction to the caliphate is the reported sense of sisterhood that pervades the Islamic State, which differentiates itself from the perceived self-involved culture that pervades and thrives in the West. This desire for a meaning in life—to be a part of a sisterhood while embracing a purist Islamic identity—appears to be, in general, key drivers for young women to migrate to the Islamic State.

However, for many, the reality of arriving in the caliphate in search of an exciting life as a jihadist bride, is soon tampered as they discover that a mundane existence awaits them. The reality of essentially being imprisoned in a house, only to be allowed out when accompanied by a guardian is compounded by the loneliness when men are away fighting, with little else to do but study the Koran. Accounts in social media underline that many of the jihadi husbands are cruel and ruthless. Should the women not be appropriately dressed when outside, they are beaten or accosted by the women of the Al-Khanassaa Brigade who police the dress and deportment of the ISIS women. It is this hard reality that has resulted in some brides returning home or conveying their disappointment of their respective situations via social media.

Mandatory Religious Duty

Additionally, women seek the Islamic State as a reaction to what they believe to be the mistreatment of Muslims throughout the world. They believe that a solution to this dilemma is to build a haven for Muslims where they can live in a traditional Islamic society, free from mistreatment. The aspiration to be part of an idealized Islamic society—as found in the Islamic State—mobilizes and reinforces young Muslim women’s choice to migrate. In doing so, they believe their actions will help them become closer to God, as well as ensuring a place in heaven. This spectrum of mutually supporting factors continues to inspire and motivate women to undertake the migration to the caliphate.
Recruitment Methodology

The London-based “Institute for Strategic Dialogue” estimates that approximately 550 Western women are living within the territory occupied by the Islamic State. Of this number, 10 to 15 are believed to be Canadian.30

The highly publicized travel of three British schoolgirls into Turkey in February 2015 was notable because of how they were recruited. Kadiza Sultana, 16, Shamima Begum, 15, and Amira Abase, 15, crossed into Syria from Turkey with the intention of becoming “jihadi brides.”31 All three girls were reportedly straight-A students from an excellent school in East London. Police authorities noted that there is no evidence the girls had been radicalized over the Internet.32 One report noted that social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Ask.fm, as well as jihadi sites are, “offering teenagers a chance to be princesses of the Islamic state, promising love and fun.”33 Since the days of Al-Qaeda, the Internet and social media have become more interactive including more content available in English, which has resulted in a broader reach by ISIS into Western countries.34

Arguably, many of these young women are psychologically dislocated from British society, sometimes feeling marginalized and stigmatized for their religious beliefs.35 Predicated upon these perceptions, young impressionable girls can be more accepting to the attractions of the propaganda promulgated by the Islamic State. Some observers feel that teenagers are targets of brainwashing by Aqsa Mahmood,36 20, who is believed to have departed Scotland in 2013 to journey to Syria to marry an IS fighter.37 Mahmood employs her persuasive logic via social media to convince other young Muslim women to follow her lead. Mahmood’s parents advised police authorities of their daughter’s recruitment activities, as well as her social media accounts.38 Yet, it would appear that the recruitment and travel of these three young women were not preempted or intercepted by either the British or Turkish security or the police authorities.

Islamic State recruiters appear to be employing sophisticated psychological and media strategies that parallel those employed by pedophiles and sex traffickers. For the March 2015 investigative documentary, “The Wives of ISIS,”39 the producer posed as a young girl online. Using a fake media profile, she posed as a young Muslim teenager who held conservative beliefs and supported the Islamic State’s cause. The profile attracted the attention of a male online correspondent believed to be an Islamic State recruiter.40 Over the course of their communications the recruiter suggested an excuse for her to give to provide the time to make her escape—a weekend sleepover. He advised that it was very important, “to leave home without drawing the suspicion of her parents,”41 and then detailed the route she should use: Edmonton to Calgary, Calgary to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Istanbul. Once in Istanbul, “she’ll be his wife – under his care and responsibility. His top priority is getting her there safely – especially, he says, ‘because you’re so young.’ [sic]”42

Professor Mia Bloom, who researches the roles of women in terrorism at the University of Massachusetts, noted that the Islamic State attracts:

“Western girls in much the same way that pedophiles groom their victims online—by building up trust, establishing a secret relationship and then setting up an off-line meeting. Recruiters often appear fresh-faced and young. And women from Western countries can be seen as especially valuable. “The blonder the better,” she says.”43

Some of these recruiting initiatives take place on dating sites, which are aimed at matching young women with Islamic State jihadists. Professor Bloom argues that, in the case of younger girls, one-on-one platforms like Skype are the mediums of choice. Here, the recruiters focus on lowering concerns that the targeted girl may have about going to or living in the Islamic State. These tactics parallel the methodology that a pedophile would employ.44

As with the three British girls, many of the targeted teenagers are reportedly high achievers and are told that they can aspire to be a nurse, teacher, and make a difference in the new Islamic caliphate. The recruiters focus on personal aspirations, possible romantic notions, and the altruistic instincts of becoming founding members of a pure Islamic State as epitomized in the caliphate.45
Many analysts, as well as the friends and parents of these young women who choose to make the journey to the caliphate, argue that these women are in search of a sense of purpose. For many, the caliphate provides opportunity and a sense of purpose and, to some degree, a romantic notion of being an integral part of an emerging purist Islamic State. At the same time, the Islamic State needs women to become wives and mothers who aspire to create, populate, and facilitate the social growth of the caliphate. For the leadership of the caliphate, this is both practical as well as ideological as it forces young women to reject a feminist agenda and any notion of gender equality. Moreover, it underlines the rejection of what is perceived as the superficiality of Western culture. In many ways, the vision of a simple Islamic society—a utopia—without the complexity and supposed corruption of a modern Western society. This can be attractive to teenagers and young women who are confused or psychologically dislocated from their family and their native or adoptive country. This combined with a youthful desire for adventure, a search for a sense of belonging, as well as the hope of garnering social acceptance (i.e. sisterhood) that some young women are drawn to the so-called attractions of the caliphate and the Islamic State.

Two Austrian teenagers who ran away to Syria in 2014 with the intention of joining the Islamic State reportedly regret their decision. Samra Kesinovic and Sabina Selimovic departed Vienna, Austria in April 2014, leaving their respective parents a note that stated, “Don’t look for us. We will serve Allah and we will die for him.” The 16 and 14 year olds reportedly married Chechen fighters soon after they arrived in Syria. Photographs have emerged on the Internet of them carrying automatic rifles and dressed in a full niqab that is required of women who are in the Islamic State. According to the RT News, both are pregnant and believed to be residing in Rakka, Syria. A March 2015 report has noted that both teenagers want to return to Vienna, which has apparently infuriated the leadership of the Islamic State.

To staunch the recruitment of young and impressionable Western men and women, a well thought-out strategy will be required to counter this attractive—cool—branding that has been slickly formulated within the Islamic State propaganda and recruitment machine. Focusing on the Islamic State's acts of horrific brutality will not prevent potential recruits from signing on. The unfortunate reality is that the violence inherent to this movement has become an integral part of its attraction, particularly for impressionable young Muslim males. It may be more strategically savvy to undercut the attractive violent nature of Islamic State with a more banal but realistic description of life in the caliphate. In recent months, a number of disillusioned members of the Islamic State have fled the caliphate after confronting the daily, unreported, realities firsthand, including boredom, the tedious environment, lack of personal freedom, as well as the realization that their personal fantasies were crushed by the grim realities they had to endure within the caliphate. Former disenchanted recruits may provide some of the best ammunition, in terms of describing the true realities they faced, and may be instrumental in developing an effective counter narrative to the well-honed propaganda and recruitment regime proffered by IS. To effectively engage the IS propaganda and recruitment regime demands a multi-faceted approach. It will require an orchestrated strategy that counters various lines of operations—including their persuasive arguments—with appropriate religious counter narratives to address the threat posed by the Islamic State. This can only be done by internationally recognized moderate Islamic religious and community leaders who can credibly counter the extremist interpretations propagated by the Islamic State. The aim is to persuasively delegitimize the caliphate and the IS mandate, as well as their leadership and adherents in grosso modo terms. To do this, Western nations may wish to review our historical experiences with neutralizing cults.
IS Methodology Similar To Cult Recruitment

Cult recruitment is predicated on heavy persuasion, emotional manipulation, and a demand for total conformity. This manipulation promises prospective members friendship, identity, respect, and security. Given that some new adherents to the Islamic State are seen as psychologically dislocated, depressed, and socially isolated, the tactics being employed by their recruiters are similar to those of traditional cult recruitment. As well, the IS also seeks out bright and idealistic individuals who may be at a vulnerable point in their lives, experiencing family friction, or have a hard time finding themselves in a modern society. The key is to target them at a time when they are looking for something different, something greater, which is exactly the appeal of the slick propaganda film "Flames of War," which took depicts ISIS as heroically fighting all 'infidels' to right injustices against Muslims. The tactic of luring women with the promise of providing a sense of purpose and validation, joining a greater family, and increasing their personal self-worth fit into this "militant cult masquerading as a religious movement."56

Conclusion

For many, it is mystifying that young men and women are attracted to the war zones of Syria and Iraq. Academics, observers, and government officials have proposed a range of potential factors that attract or push Muslim youths to join the Islamic State. Many reasons have been tabled including disenfranchised Muslim youth seek both acceptance and stability under the umbrella of a truly Islamic State—one that may have eluded them in their adopted countries or amongst their own families. Some are imbued with a romantic notion of marrying well to a jihadi and partaking in the creation of an Islamic utopia—a Muslim haven—that promises peace and security under Sharia law. Here, women can eschew the notions of female equality and, "can enjoy the kind of excitement and purity they could not find in their Western homes, and directly contribute to breeding a new generation of believers." In short, "women can marry handsome fighters and raise strong warriors to protect their adopted homeland." As one recruiter noted, "the best thing for a woman is to be a righteous wife and to raise righteous children."60

The West's response to the recruitment methodology of the Islamic State has been insufficient. Western societies appear to be incapable of ascertaining exactly and effectively countering the spectrum of influences that lead young women, in particular, to traverse continents to live among a group of violent jihadists. Strategically, young women are being specifically targeted to be married to extremist fighters. The leadership of the Islamic State fully understands that one way to ensure that their foreign and regional fighters remain: even if disillusioned or having lost interest in living in Syria and Iraq, fighters should be married off with a house, wife, and children. Moreover, this recruitment of young women is strategically vital to the building efforts of the Islamic State leadership as they are needed to create the second-generation of this Islamic utopia. In the end, the reality for those women recruited is far different than what is promised. Upon arrival, they are quickly married and put to work to recruit more women. They are essentially seen as tools for, sex, procreation, domestic labour, and recruitments. The limits on their personal freedom, the harshness of the situation, and the reality of living in a war zone can soon result in disillusionment.

It is therefore vital that families, religious and community leaders, as well as police and security authorities come together to leverage their respective insights and develop a comprehensive strategic information operations plan. This strategic counter narrative should be aimed at effectively delegitimizing the Islamic State, its leadership, and its adherents to ideally sway or preempt Western women from being lured into a false dream. It is in the understanding of the psychology and methodology being employed by the Islamic State recruiters that must be disseminated amongst families, targeted communities, as well as the police and security authorities so that it can be recognized early on and effectively countered.
Endnotes


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12  Ibid.


14  Ibid.


17  Hoyle, p.12.

18  Ibid, p.13

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21  Hoyle, p.13.

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28  Elizabeth Whitman, op. cit.


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47 Elizabeth Pearson, op. cit.
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