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THE FEMALES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE: WESTERN FEMALE RADICALIZATION

JULIA BARBON
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

James Piazza
Professor of Political Science
Thesis Supervisor

Michael Berkman
Professor of Political Science
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

There is a particular and novel element to Western female involvement with the Islamic State and the conflict of Syria and Iraq. This thesis is developed as a case study to intimately look at 6 Western female subjects known to have attempted to migrate or have migrated to Syria in support of ISIS. The cases explore the biographical data, motivations, expectations, and radicalization process of each of the women. This thesis will explore the extant literature on female radicalization with a particular focus on the ways in which the internet and social media may be a salient variable in the understanding of which women radicalize. This study finds that social media interaction across different platforms is a critical component of radicalization for Western females outside of the conflict theatre, female and male recruiters are effective in different scenarios, and that face to face contact with like-minded peers or extremist recruiters may still be a critical mode of radicalization that could make a recruit more likely to partake in violence. This study looks at the different methods of social media and internet recruitment to draw conclusions about when and how these methods are effective. An understanding of the processes by which Western females radicalize is critical to further inform policy decisions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Aqsa Mahmood is the youngest daughter of Pakistani immigrants living out their dream of a better life in Glasgow, Scotland. She enjoys the comforts of a supportive family, a home in an affluent neighborhood, and an education at a prestigious private school. Like so many other young girls, she loves mainstream music like *Coldplay* and reads through copies of *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter*. According to Aqsa's father, "She was the best daughter you could have. She loved school. She was very friendly. I have never shouted at her all my life" (Shubert 2014). She had hopes of obtaining a degree from Glasgow Caledonian University where she studied diagnostic radiology. However, these dreams were cut short when she made the decision to leave behind her privileged life for a life in Syria with the highly violent militant group ISIS. While it is hard to imagine how a young girl with an abundance of opportunities and life routes chooses to join the ranks of a global terror organization, she is not alone. Aqsa Mahmood is a part of a growing phenomenon of Western women leaving the comfortability of their home countries for the frontlines of the conflict in Syria.

Women have been involved both directly and indirectly with ISIS, despite being typically left out of the mainstream narrative and rarely considered in policy decisions. What does this phenomenon of Western women, living in comparatively liberal societies yet choosing to migrate, say about ISIS and their recruitment techniques? What implications does it have for Western countries? Women have become a central part of both the optics of the conflict and the fundamental way of life in the conflicts of Syria and Iraq. Ignoring the presence of women and

the real-time radicalization of women in the West is a failure to see the broader implications of the phenomenon of modern terrorism. It is paramount to understand who these women are, the context of their lives in the West, and what specific techniques employed by ISIS facilitated their radicalization.

This paper will begin to construct a big picture understanding of Western female infatuation with ISIS and explore the threshold in which they must surpass that results in migration to the Islamic State. I will examine the way that social media propaganda and social media engagement is a necessary component for the facilitation of radicalization outside of the conflict theatre. Using available case studies, this study will assert that social media is a main tool of recruitment for Western women. This study will construct an understanding of how social media and the internet were used differently across cases in order to draw conclusions about when different methods of internet recruitment were effective. The driving research inquiry of this work is: How do different types of social media and internet interaction facilitate the radicalization and migration of Western women?

Defining Radicalization

The GTD defines terrorism *as the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation* (Global Terrorism Database). This will be the definition kept constant throughout my exploration of the topic. In the case of my research it is particularly important to understand the concept of radicalization, what it means to be radicalized, and the point in which a subject will be considered radicalized within the framework of my case study.

Radicalization is a topic contested throughout the study of terrorism and other conflicts, whereas it is difficult to define as a concept but rather as a process with a multitude of steps. According to *The Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence*, “Radicalization leading to violence is a complex process whereby people adopt a system of extreme beliefs and a willingness to use, encourage or facilitate violence, to promote an ideology, political project or cause as a means of social transformation” (Conseil Du Statut De La Femme 2016). According to Tarras-Wahlberg, radicalization is a process consisting of several steps that include multiple factors increasing the risk of radicalization, and so what is considered radical in one setting may not be considered radical in another (Tarras-Wahlberg 2016).

The working definition I will be utilizing is derived from work by David R. Mendel, *Radicalization: What Does it Mean?* (Mendel 2009). *Radicalization is the increase or reinforcement of extremism in the thinking, sentiments, and/or behavior of individuals* (Mendel 2009). Subjects in my cases will be considered radicalized when they subscribe to the extremist ideology of ISIS and actively pursue an interest in migrating from their home country to Syria. This attempted migration will be a critical element in deciphering whether a subject is radicalized or not.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

To lay the foundation for understanding who these women are, I direct the first portion of my literature review towards studies which explore and compile demographic data, discuss

specific cases of radicalized women, and will help paint a general picture of which Western females are susceptible to radicalization. A study titled *Explaining Extremism: Western women in Daesh* explores the female participation in armed Islamic struggle and the phenomenon of Western women traveling to join this struggle, known as Daesh. This study tackles two major questions that inform my research question as well: Why do Western women join Daesh? Are their motivations distinct from other Islamist recruits? (Loken and Zelenez 2017). Their participation perplexes policymakers, government officials, and researchers who call attention to the group's gendered regulation, violence, and widespread use of rape which typically leaves many with the notion that women are manipulated into migrating (Loken and Zelenez 2017). According to this study by Loken and Zelenez, in December 2015 it was reported that up to 31,000 people from over 86 countries had travelled to join the struggle, over 5,000 of these recruits were from Western states, and more than 600 of them were women (Loken and Zelenez 2017). The study seeks to answer why Western women join the struggle and how their motivations may differ from their male counterparts.

The study hypothesizes that these women are rational actors, and subsequently dispel the romanticized notion of a "jihadi bride", asserting that it is a dangerous narrative that women would not make the decision to radicalize on their own. Loken and Zelenez theorize that the political hyper-focus on women in the group stems from the fact that ISIS is recruiting foreign, Western women from comparatively gender-equitable societies (Loken and Zelenez 2017). This voluntary female participation disrupts the popular Western narrative that women are manipulated into migrating. This is a challenging phenomenon to understand without hearing first-hand accounts from these women.

Denying the deliberate and rational choices of Western *muhajirat* (plural female migrants) has serious implications for policy and national security, and yet defected female migrants are typically disregarded: “When Shannon Conley, a white 19-year-old from Colorado, was convicted for conspiracy to support Daesh, her attorneys stressed that she was misled by falsities about the organization” (Loken and Zelenez 2017). The reference to Shannon Conley’s case is predictive of my intended use of her interview and surrounding case in my own study. Her case is unique because she goes against the stereotype of who we believe would be the typical recruit. The second part of the study’s hypothesis is that these *muhajirat* (plural female migrants) move to Syria and Iraq for largely the same reasons that male foreign fighters do: religious commitment, sense of community, perceived isolation, and a uniquely gendered form of anti-Muslim violence in the West (Loken and Zelenez 2017).

The method employed in this study is one that is important for furthering the understanding of social media interaction specifically, which my work intends to expand upon. The researchers test their theories by using an originally constructed dataset of social media activity from 17 Western *muhajirat* accounts operating between 2011–2015. The dataset includes 571 posts from 17 accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, and Kik where the author self-identifies as a migrant living in the Islamic State (Loken and Zelenez 2017). This method was selected in conjunction with a detailed study of already existing sets of female recruitment information and literature about the female role in the territory. The dataset is supplemented with multiple direct sources of official propaganda, unofficial propaganda, and existing research.

The choice to look directly at social media activity was a deliberate measure taken to include the true voices of these women and to be an accurate representation of their experiences.

While this research and many others throughout the literature mention social media usage, I aim to examine the type of role and power social media has and how it varies across cases.

The study concludes that notions asserting women are lured into the terror organization through romanticism and coercion do not hold much weight when looking at actual empirical data. There appears to not be any real downplay of the violence and conditions women will be met with once arriving in the Islamic State. This is an important finding and will be looked at throughout my thesis. The study concludes that female migrants are pulled to the Islamic State mainly by religious commitment and alienation in their home communities, much the same as male foreign fighters.

The data reflects that many women share they are fleeing persecution in their home countries for a safer and more pious environment to show their faith and commit to the cause: “They believe that Daesh offers them an authentic space for pure religious practice, and that they are courageously answering its call for true believers” (Loken and Zelenez 2017). The study points out flaws in the Western narrative about extreme Muslim women and how they should be factored into national security policy: “We suggest that this approach is theoretically flawed and contributes to the long empirical history of erasing women’s engagement in political violence. Further, this framework is ill suited to explain Western *muhajirat*” (Loken and Zelenez 2017). This conclusion prompts policy makers and scholars to pay close attention to rational, radicalized females in a serious way without the common narrative of coercion and romanticism.

A paramount contribution to the literature is *Terrorism in America After 9/11*, which provides a comprehensive and current source of accessible online information about terrorist activity in the United States from 9/11 until now (New America 2019). While the information is only pertaining to the US, the dataset notably includes females from the US that have migrated

or became radicalized. It provides invaluable information about their age, origin, and will allow me to more adequately answer the question of “who are these women?”. The source is a salient resource because it one of the few downloadable data sets available that could provide a quantitative element to an otherwise qualitative field. It provides information about how many women are known to be radicalized, where they are from, if they are citizens, age, and description of attack if there was one.

The data can be used to dispel typical stereotypes of radicalized individuals and will provide demographic data. According to the study, the average age of the radicalized woman in America is 21, and over 84% of the total cases were citizens at the time of arrest (New America 2019). The study also delves into policy recommendations and analysis. Notably, this study even dissects the policy of a “Travel Ban”, which is a controversial contemporary policy. It is discussed whether a travel ban would have been effective in deterring the individuals included in the data from carrying out their involved attacks or becoming radicalized. The overwhelming standpoint of the research is that a travel ban would not have done this, and so the question of policy recommendations is still relevant.

One of the most salient contributors to the study of female involvement in Islamic terrorism is Dr. Anne Speckhard. I have drawn inspiration and research from a multitude of her works that are paramount in shaping my method and theory. I plan on using a set of extensive interviews conducted by her with defective ISIS women to look more deeply into specific cases. Her study with Ardian Shajkovci, titled *10 Reasons Western Women Seek Jihad and Join Terror Groups*, is an important contribution to the study of female Western terrorists. This study features interviews of 101 ISIS returnees, defectors, and ISIS prison cadres conducted by the *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism* (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018).

The sentiment that is most foundational to the literature in this study is the idea that, with ISIS diminishing, there is a security dilemma in the phenomena of fighters returning to their home countries. Western countries predicted that there would be an influx of many weapons-trained, indoctrinated males returning to their home countries. However, it is women who are returning, or at least hoping to return home. Speckhard and Shajkovci explains, “From our research interviews with women who have managed to return, it’s clear that women faced more difficulties than men escaping ISIS as they rarely had access to funds, often had to have a male chaperone and could also fall subject to the sexual predation of the smugglers who were necessary to help them cross out of ISIS territory” (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). This reiterates the necessity of understanding the female role in terrorism and will be paramount in shaping both preventative policy and returnee policy.

The study analyzes the motivations of this faction of women and why they were interested in *jihad* and *muhajirat*. The findings of the study are ten distinct motivation sets derived from the interviews that provide rationale for joining violent extremist groups and what types of roles women are playing in these groups. The research in this study and most of the literature on the topic is done with the end-goal of improving prevention, rehabilitation efforts, and national terrorism policy.

According to Speckhard and Shajkovci, ISIS and al Qaeda have managed to attract hundreds of Western women from Europe, Canada, Australia, the Balkans, and North America (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). According to some estimates, 13% (4,761) of the total 41,490 travelers to the Islamic State were women (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018). The method used in this study is an analysis of 101 interviews of defected ISIS members, with 10% of the cases

being women. Even though only 10% of the cases are women, all cases share information about the female role and their experience with women in the Islamic State.

The women are the main focus in this particular work, using field research to look at what their motivations are, their reasons for migrating from comparatively liberal societies, and reasons for returning home for those in the cases that left the Islamic State. The interviews give a primary source voice to a female phenomenon that is not entirely understood by scholars and policy makers. This method is what I have found to be the most effective. To hear these women's stories from their own perspective is invaluable.

For the purposes of my research, I paid attention to the portion of the study that looked at what brought these Western women to radicalization and how social media propaganda may have played a specific role. Is the role of social media unique to ISIS? In what ways is social media used to craft a calculated message? The study finds that ISIS follows the pattern of most violent extremist groups by instilling strong gender roles that are at the forefront of their propaganda. Propaganda paints a picture of Western female Muslims that entices them to migrate by crafting a form of feminism that embodies a sense of conservative empowerment that a devoutly religious female may respond and relate to. Propaganda rhetoric villainizes the liberal and sexual societies of the West and simultaneously offers an alternative that they claim will empower these women to fill their respective roles in Muslim society without persecution.

Speckhard and Shajkovci, along with many other important researchers in the field, cite *Dabiq* magazine as a source of direct and unaltered social media propaganda accessible to English-speaking Westerners (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant 2016). The interviews show that these women have encountered the rhetoric of *Dabiq* and other forms of social media propaganda.

In the summary of the recruitment process derived from the interviews, it is noted that some Western women who joined ISIS communicated with the women of their country of origin through social media platforms to proclaim they were enjoying the material benefits of homes, money, and great power over others if they served in the ISIS *hisbah* (religious police). The conclusion of the case analysis is the production of 4 sufficient and necessary factors to radicalize: “These include the group, its ideology, social support for the group and its ideology, and individual vulnerabilities that break out by conflict zone and non-conflict zone” (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018).

The main output of the study is a table which identifies 10 categories of motivational and vulnerability concepts for females seeking Jihad. The table lists 10 taglines for the different types of motivations, and then goes on to describe them thoroughly. The work concludes with a final thought about the implications this migration must have on future policy and how understanding the phenomenon fully will aid in the creation of these policies: “Likewise, such countermeasures need to creatively redirect women to fulfill the needs that the ISIS claims to be fulfilling, while also discrediting and delegitimizing the group’s claims to be Islamic, pure, and able to deliver a utopian Caliphate” (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2018).

Anne Speckhard’s work with the *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism* has been an invaluable contribution to the understanding of female terrorists, what brings them to radicalize, and what their lives are like while in the Islamic State. Her work is continuously being updated, and therefore makes it an important and current source at the forefront of the literature. Another one of her works is titled *Beware the Women of ISIS: There Are Many, and They May Be More Dangerous Than the Men*, with Ardian Shajkovci (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2017). Speckhard and Shajkovci draw conclusions and provide rhetoric based on their long-term

project of conducting exhaustive interviews with dozens of women and men who have been involved with ISIS and defected. These interviews provide a rich first-hand look into the factors that put these women on the terrorist trajectory, and what kinds of lives they lived while in the Caliphate.

This work details the interview of Laura Passoni, who was a Muslim nineteen-year-old girl living in Brussels at the time of her radicalization and migration. Her interview speaks to the power and success of social media outreach and propaganda. Her case will be included in my thesis as an important and detailed account of a young Western woman who was radicalized entirely online. Her case provides information about the recruitment process by putting a personal element to otherwise impersonal data. When the father of Passoni's child left her and her toddler, she became a more devout Muslim and protruded as such on Facebook. She was then contacted by an ISIS recruiter and was told of all of the riches, rewards, and protection she would receive if she came to the Islamic State (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2017).

She was then given detailed instructions on how to get to Syria without detection, and she was married to an ISIS fighter. Upon her arrival, she realized that she would not be living the life that was painted for her by the recruiter. She was stripped of all of her rights, separated from her husband for the majority of the time, not given meaningful work like she was promised, and confined to her home while her son was taken off by the fighters. She feared for the future of her son because she saw how many of the young boys were being trained to be suicide bombers.

Similar sentiments as this are found in many of the interviews with defected ISIS females. The interviews showcase which feelings and circumstances recruiters exploited. I will be able to use these interviews to analyze my independent variable of social media and how it has played a role in radicalization and migration. These interviews will clearly show the effect of

my independent variable and will also provide insight on what other factors contribute to this. It will provide life experiences, thought processes, and push and pull factors. Specific commonalities across these cases are political outrage, graphic displays of real suffering of Muslims globally, psychological impact of disturbing images of suffering perpetrated by Western countries, discrimination in Western countries traditional Muslim garb, and the appeal of leaving their country in hopes of a more empowering life (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2017). This conclusion has immense implications for how home countries should handle situations of returned females, which is what I plan to explain in my results. It is not best practice to see these women as innocent victims, as this could be dangerous and naive (Speckhard and Shajkovci 2017).

Among the literature exists a niche repertoire that looks specifically at online radicalization, the methods of online radicalization, and its goals. Akil N Awan's work titled *Radicalization on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects* asserts that the internet is increasingly becoming jihadism's media of choice (Awan 2007). This work asserts that extremism online fora seeks to serve 4 key functions. These functions include news, propaganda, training, and expression. The work also discusses the concept of radicalization efficacy of online mediums that I find very relevant to my research. The author explains that much of the online material is produced as propaganda with intent to indoctrinate, and that many jihadist groups are acutely aware of the internet's powerful radicalizing efficacy by their concentrated focus on virtual recruitment above other methods (Awan 2007). There appears to be clear evidence of the role played by virtual extremism forums in radicalization derived from a limited number of cases (Awan 2007). The examples used in this work are the 2004 Madrid train bombings that came after the internet text *Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dangers* insinuated that

strategic bombings of trains would prompt Spain's withdraw from the US-run coalition in Iraq (Awan 2007).

Work by Daniel Koehler that explores the role of the internet in radicalization processes of German right-wing extremists adds generalizable findings that apply to the radicalizing role of the internet for other extremist movements (Koehler 2014). By interviewing 8 defected right-wing extremists in Germany, the researcher compiled his takes on how exactly the internet was a radicalization tool and what mechanisms it used to personally affect their decision to radicalize. The findings of this study are: the internet was a cheap and efficient way to communicate and organize, it provided a constraint-free space and anonymity, it can be used to share information that may have been banned, and it gives individuals the perception of critical mass within a movement that urges them to get more involved and more radical (Koehler 2014). These findings are then situated within the extant literature on online radicalization, further showing there is a connection between the internet and the individual level of radicalization (Koehler 2014). This study supports the proposed accelerating effects of the internet on personal radicalization by enabling more opportunities to radicalize, providing an echo chamber of opinions, and furthering the possibility for radicalization without physical contact that is so often the case with Western recruits (Koehler 2014).

Mia Bloom, a former professor of international studies at Penn State, has made contributions to the understanding of females involved in different terrorist movements globally. Her work with Charlie Winter, titled *How a Woman Joins ISIS*, uses specific cases in the last 10 years to demonstrate how ISIS routinely commodifies women and how women are invaluable assets to their goals (Bloom and Winter 2015). Looking at the atrocities committed after the Yazidis fled Mount Sinjar, we see the way ISIS has systematically exploited, bought, sold, and

traded women (Bloom and Winter 2015). Information from this treatment and the rhetoric put out in multiple studies shows that the organization commodifies women, especially those who migrate from the West (Bloom and Winter 2015). Women are used as insurance anchors for male fighters as a reaction to the theory that males will stay involved in terrorism with a family, a wife, a salary, and a child (Bloom and Winter 2015).

This study compiles research about how these females are recruited, specifically focusing on the instrument of social media. The research draws data from specific cases of recruitment through social media, looking at known female recruiters and what kind of rhetoric they put out that draws impressionable young girls in. The case of female recruiter Aqsa Mahmood is looked at because she has targeted females globally, such as three girls who disappeared from Bethal Green Academy in Europe (Bloom and Winter 2015). Hoda Muthana, a recruiter from Alabama, is also said to be luring American girls. This exemplifies the extensive network ISIS women have established to reach across a multitude of social media platforms (Bloom and Winter 2015). The study concludes that the four factors most pertinent to recruitment through social media are empowerment, participation, deliverance, and piety. These are similar sentiments concluded by other studies (Bloom and Winter 2015).

Among all of the propaganda that is discussed in the literature, I found the official propaganda disseminated by ISIS to be the most telling of their brand. In an article by Nicole Hensley for the *New York Daily News* in 2015, a leaked Islamic State Manifesto details the explicit role of women in the Caliphate that appears to align closely with the information provided through Anne Speckhard's interviews with defected females (Hensley 2015). The English translation was the main case in this study which looks into the importance of this document and what implications it has for female recruitment. The most telling aspect is that it

was never translated into English by ISIS itself, which in turn means that it is not directed towards a Western audience. This makes sense, however, because the contents of the document juxtapose the propaganda narrative often used to attract Western females (Hensley 2015). It is a 10,000-word manifesto published by the all-female Al-Khanssaa Brigade's media wing across popular online forums in 2015 (Hensley 2015).

The manifesto was only published in Arabic until translated by Charlie Winter, a researcher on jihadism in Syria and Iraq. The rhetoric in the manifesto is important to examine because it gives an actual description of what is expected by females in the Islamic State. This demonstrates that there is an understood difference between what motivates Western women and what motivates those closer to the conflict theatre. This is analyzed in the article: "Somebody will have made a decision not to circulate a manifesto like this in English because it contains uncomfortable ideas that may not sit well with the average Western girl looking to join the group" (Hensley 2015).

The sentiments and guidelines in the manifesto are highly repressive and concerning but speak to the intended audience of women in close proximity to the conflict. In the manifesto, women are regarded as the center of the house. However, they are given strict dress regulations, must end their education by 15 years old, insist that the minimum age to be married to an ISIS fighter is 9, and cannot leave the home unless deemed it is necessary. The study concludes that while this is highly repressive rhetoric, it would be very convincing for someone with pre-existing extreme values that is interested in the promised afterlife (Hensley 2015).

This has the important implication that the propaganda used to attract Western females outside of the conflict theater is designed to appeal to the Western audience. The existence of a difference between propaganda for Western women and women already in the conflict zone

demonstrates the potential for a social media propaganda difference that is important. In what ways is the message different for Western women? What does ISIS think will motivate these women, and what *does* motivate them?

Chapter 3 Theory

There is a specific and gendered attribute to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL) that is characterized by a hyper-visibility of women (Bloom 2009). The feminization of ISIS is a phenomenon that must be taken seriously by scholars and policymakers alike as a legitimate threat to security. I theorize that the Western women choosing to migrate to the Islamic State in support of ISIS are doing so as rational actors making a calculated choice to join the group in some capacity. This differs from the widely accepted notion in the West that females involved with the Islamic State are doing so because of coercion, deception, and force. It is a dangerous sentiment to rid the threat of these women as not credible.

Because radicalization takes place on multiple levels and for multiple reasons, the radicalization I am interested in is radicalization that leads to migration. I will be looking at cases that are attributed with migration or attempted migration in support of ISIS. This will be a necessary condition in case selection, as it provides a concrete aspect to be consistent across cases.

I am defining social media propaganda and social media interaction as both official ISIS propaganda and the unofficial decentralized media apparatus that is equally as important. Both official propaganda media sources and the individual accounts of radicalized people spreading their message and recruitment attempts are important to the unique online front of the war ISIS is

waging. According to Tarras-Wahlberg, the decentralized portion of ISIS media strategy is effective because it turns global followers into independent media wings as they post their own inspired content online (Tarras-Wahlberg 2016).

I hypothesize that radicalization leading to migration is a result of contact with centralized propaganda, decentralized propaganda, and social media influence that moves Western women to act on their radicalization and rationally choose to migrate to the Islamic State. The contact with social media propaganda and the interaction of pre-existing conditions and demographics of the women have an effect on their choice to migrate. I hypothesize that the commonality across the cases will be contact with propaganda and recruiters through social media. While social media interaction is common across the cases, its specific *type* and *usage* varies. By looking at this variance, it will be possible to draw conclusions about the different types of social media strategies employed by ISIS and their effectiveness on a Western female audience.

I hypothesize that **(H1)**: Western females that interacted with extremist ideology on social media platforms are more likely to migrate to the Islamic State. **(H2)**: Females that had a potential romantic interest in a male recruiter were more likely to radicalize and migrate to the Islamic State. **(H3)**: Female subjects recruited by female recruiters that made appeals to belonging and solidarity were more likely to radicalize and migrate to the Islamic State. **(H4)**: Female subjects self-radicalized on their own by seeking out radical material online and subsequently migrate to the Islamic State.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The method by which this phenomenon will be explored is through a qualitative case study examining 6 cases of known Western females that migrated or attempted to migrate to the Islamic State following their respective radicalization processes. Given that this realm of Western female foreign terrorist fighters is relatively lacking in understanding and concrete data, employing a quantitative analysis using the lacking data available would fall short of producing accurate results. Choosing to examine cases provides access to humanizing, intimate details of each female that allow for a more in-depth analysis.

According to a study published in *The Qualitative Report*, the benefit of choosing a qualitative case study to research is that it facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of lenses and data sources for posterity (Baxter 2008). The qualitative case study is best employed to cover cases when it is imperative to cover contextual conditions that you believe are relevant to the phenomenon (Baxter 2008). Using the lacking available quantitative data would fail to provide the context of the lives of each case which led them to their outcome of radicalization and migration.

Choosing to conduct a qualitative case study allows for an intensive venture into the background, life experiences, motivations, and outcomes of each female throughout the radicalization and migration process. Compiling and choosing these specific cases is a step in the direction of humanizing and understanding the choices of these women in a way that data fails to do. This project seeks to understand the specific dependent variable of radicalization and migration, and how exactly the main independent variable of social media interaction acts upon the subjects. Because the literature and mainstream media is at odds with the motivations and

methods of radicalization of Western women, diving into these specific cases seeks to add something substantial to the field that has room to be expanded upon in further research.

The process of case selection involved an intensive look at the available literature on known ISIS female recruits from Western countries. The initial criteria for being included in the broadest pool of cases was based on the sheer availability of information on the woman that would meet the minimum threshold of addressing each of the variables the study is interested in examining. Among this threshold is the availability of data on their background, citizenship, socioeconomic and home life identifiers, details of their radicalization process, motivations, and the outcome of their migration or attempted migration to the Islamic State. The case pool initially included nine females from Western countries, including both the United States and multiple European countries, that radicalized and attempted or actualized their desire to migrate to the Islamic State. The entire case pool will be presented to extend an overview of patterns present among these women from such different geographic and life spaces. This initial case selection step is presented in a chart located in the appendix for reference.

However, the 6 cases that will ultimately be discussed with a finer attention to detail were chosen by prioritizing the concept of variance among the variables. These cases represent an array of women that, although lived very different lives, found themselves on a similar trajectory. Among the cases, 2 of the women are converts to Islam while the others were raised within the religion. 2 of the women being examined are from America, while the other 4 are from different European countries to provide an array of geographical locations. All cases in the study represent a spread of Western females ages 15-28.

These 6 cases also prove to extend a varying display of social media usage and contact, as well as how social media was used once affiliated with the organization. This is especially

pertinent to my hypothesis that social media interaction is a salient identifier when examining whether a female is more likely to radicalize and migrate. These cases provide an array of this from the use of different social media platforms, varying levels of social media presence by the recruit, the availability of online sermons and propaganda that aids in a type of self-radicalization, and the use of social media for cases that result in the female becoming a recruiter themselves. The theme of social media use and the pattern that it creates throughout the cases will be examined in the final analysis.

The study will begin by creating the narrative for each case through relevant background information. Next, the study will begin to examine the possible motivations, radicalization, and actual recruitment of each woman. This will include the variables important to the study such as type of social media use and means of recruitment. Following that, an understanding of everyone's expectations and actual outcome once migrated or attempted to migrate will be examined. This will be used to understand who travels, what their lived experience is once traveled, how it compares to expectations, and what types of roles these women are serving once arrived in the Islamic State. By articulating each case's details, the result of the study will be able to analyze the sum of their backgrounds, motivations, expectations, social media role, and their actual outcome and reality experienced by each case. The analysis will assess these elements with the goal of providing a snapshot into the lived experiences of these women and how they ended up on the terrorist trajectory. The analysis will specifically look at the ways different forms of social media played a role in their radicalization.

Chapter 5

The Cases

Figure 1. Background of Cases

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Convert to Islam?</i>
Laura Passoni	19	Brussels, Belgium	Muslim	Yes
Shannon Conley	19	Colorado, USA	Muslim	Yes
Hoda Muthana	20	Alabama, USA	Muslim	No
Aqsa Mahmood	19	Glasgow, Scotland	Muslim	No
Nora el-Bathy	15	Avignon, France	Muslim	No
Emilie Koenig	28	Lorient, France	Muslim	Yes

I.Laura Passoni

The characteristics of Laura Passoni's upbringing lead her case to be of particular interest. She was raised in a Catholic home in the city of Charleroi, Belgium where she resided with her family. During her teenage years she had a close relationship with a friend who was Muslim, and she observed many of the Muslim holidays and celebrations with her friend's family (Cigainero 2016). This was Laura's introduction to the religion that eventually sparked her decision to convert from Catholicism to Islam when she was just 16. In an interview, Passoni said "The more I learned about Islam, the more I wanted to be a part of it" (Cigainero 2016). However, despite the conversion, her initial practice of her new religion was not exactly one

marked by devoutness. She ended up giving birth soon after her conversion to a son with her long-term boyfriend. A critical turning point in Laura's life and understanding of her religion is catalyzed by the abandonment by her boyfriend and father of her child.

II. Shannon Conley

The life of Shannon Conley is marked by the juxtaposition of the "all-American girl next door" and the young, unsuspectingly assertive and potentially violent recruit of the Islamic State (CBS Denver 2015). Shannon was a young girl, just 19, with no criminal record or violent history. She converted to Islam in her teens on her own accord, seemingly all from online interactions with sermons and her own personal reading of the Quran. She was described as an outcast schoolgirl and set off red flags to neighbors with her behavior so extreme that they were compelled to contact homeland security. Her actions were atypical, but not covert. A neighbor described instances of Conley walking around "staring at electrical boxes" and swinging alone at local parks (CBS Denver 2015).

III. Hoda Muthana

Ahmed Ali Muthana is a Yemeni foreign diplomat that had originally entered the United States in 1990 for a diplomatic posting (Hall 2019). As his posting came to a close, he petitioned the United States to grant his family permission to remain in the US due to their home country's state of turmoil due to the civil war. This permission was granted, and the family settled in Hoover, Alabama where his daughter Hoda Muthana was raised. Hoda was the youngest of 5 children and was brought up in a devoutly Muslim home that was a far stretch from extremist (Hall 2019). Ahmed Ali Muthana notes that he is deeply grateful for the United States for welcoming his family into their country, thus anti-American sentiments were not present in

Hoda's upbringing. Hoover is a quiet suburb town with a notably large Muslim community that Hoda grew up a member of. Hoda dressed conservatively and in traditional Muslim wear when out of the house, however this was the norm for many of the women in the community (Hall 2019).

IV. **Aqsa Mahmood**

In November of 2013, a 19-year-old girl said goodbye to the comforts of her privileged life in Glasgow, Scotland for the uncertainty and brutality of Syria. The Mahmood family is noted to be living the "immigrant dream" in Scotland (Shubert 2014). Aqsa's father, Muzaffar Mahmood, made the journey and permanent move from Pakistan to Glasgow, Scotland in the 1970's. Muzaffar became the first Pakistani cricket player for Scotland, and he and his wife Khalida went on to buy a home in an affluent neighborhood (Shubert 2014). They went on to have four children, one of which was Aqsa.

All four kids were given an abundance of opportunities, including enrollment at an extremely prestigious private school *Craigholme* near their residence. According to Aqsa's father, "She was the best daughter you could have. We just don't know what happened to her. She loved school. She was very friendly. I have never shouted at her all my life, all my life" (Shubert 2014). She was raised Muslim, but far from extremist. Her desk cluttered with colorful loom bands to make bracelets, jewelry strung everywhere, and Harry Potter and Hunger Games books. Her parents describe her temperament by saying she was reserved, kind, did not like shouting, and enjoyed listening to Coldplay and other modern pop bands just like many other girls her age (Shubert 2014). After graduating high school, Aqsa went on to enroll in Glasgow Caledonian University to study diagnostic radiology.

V. Nora el-Bathy

The el-Bathy family resided in the city of Avignon in the south of France. Nora was described as your ordinary 15-year old schoolgirl. She was young, ambitious, and stated she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up (Sherwood et al 2015). She grew up in a practicing Muslim household but was not overly strict. She wore jeans and trainers, normal and modern outfits fit for a young girl. She regularly attended and loved school, and according to her parents, always returned home right after to work on her homework. As unrest broke out in Syria, Nora had talked earnestly about helping the Syrian people, especially children. However, her family never suspected any radical beliefs or any possibility that she may be at risk of planning to join the ranks of females travelling to Syria (Sherwood et al 2015).

VI. Emilie Koenig

The life of Emilie Koenig is one with multiple salient hardships that shaped her trajectory. The Koenig family resided in Lorient, France where Emilie was born as 1 of 4 children to her mother and policeman father. In 1986, when Emilie was merely 2 years old, her father separated from her mother and left them. Emilie was raised Catholic and grew up in her mother's home among her siblings, receiving a standard education and seemingly enjoying an average and happy life (The Local 2015). As Emilie went through her young-adult years, her stability dwindled as she turned to drugs and a newfound relationship with a French-Algerian man. This relationship was the catalyst for Emilie to begin to convert to Islam. She went on to convert to Islam and give birth to two children by the French-Algerian man, who was deeply involved with drugs and had a troubling past of drug-trafficking. During her conversion, she

began to wear the full veil-- not common of the Muslim community in her small town. During this time, she changed her name to Samra and began learning the Arabic language (The Local 2015).

Motivations and Expectations

I. Laura Passoni

A major catalyst of Passoni's radicalization was the trauma that ensued after being abandoned by her boyfriend and father of her young son at the age of 19. This is reminiscent of her own father abandoning her at the age of 2. Following this, her motivations for moving towards extremism were defined by her need for stability and her hope for a faithful man that would never leave her the way that she has seen men in her life do (Cigainero 2016). Her pathway to finding a man that would honor her and honor the values of marriage and religion was to deepen her faith and the expression of that faith to the public and to social media (Cigainero 2016). She was largely motivated by this desire for a husband, and that desire was met with responses from an ISIS recruiter through Facebook after she increased her devout persona on the social media platform (Cigainero 2016). Her motivations were picked up upon almost immediately when she was contacted by a male ISIS recruiter through Facebook.

The recruiter preyed upon her troubled life and brokenness by promising her prospects for a man who would never leave her, a future home in Syria, thorough training as a nurse, and good schooling for her young child (Cigainero 2016). These promises met her motivations, and she expected all of these to be indefinitely fulfilled if she chose to migrate. She agreed to leave her home in Belgium and, with the direction of the recruiter, embarked on the journey that she hoped would bring her love and a future for herself and her son. She took herself and her toddler

to travel by land to Venice and embark on a cruise ship to Izmir, Turkey. It was on this cruise in which she travelled with her assigned husband, and she reflected on the journey as romantic.

II. Shannon Conley

For Conley, her motivations seem to encompass both an interest in finding a lover with similar ideology and also her fortified opinion about the need for jihad and the global persecution of Muslims. She repeatedly spoke about her support of jihad and how she desired to associate herself with terrorists with the intentions of helping them and those suffering in Syria and around the world (CBS Denver 2015). Her views on this became known through a series of interviews that were conducted after there were initial suspicions raised in the community about Conley's blatant obscure activity. Neighbors began to notice changes in her outward appearance and her behavior, stating that when she first moved into the neighborhood Conley would wear shorts and tee-shirts. However, she shifted to wearing a more conservative dress as well as the hijab (CBS Denver 2015).

Along with the change in appearance, there were also changes in her behavior patterns that alarmed neighbors. According to a neighbor who lives on the same street as Shannon, they deemed her creepy and that she had a habit of walking around the neighborhood staring at the electrical boxes. The neighbor also noted that she would be seen on the neighborhood playground swinging by herself. This activity prompted the neighbor to write an email to Homeland Security that would spark the investigation into Shannon's life and motivations (CBS Denver 2015). Shannon was a certified nurse's aide and also had an interest in the United States Military, receiving training about military tactics. Suspicions about Shannon began to emerge elsewhere in the community when she was noticed walking around Faith Bible Chapel in Arvada

and taking notes of the layout and locations surrounding the campus of the church. In an interview with the FBI, she was vocal that she was attending the church to learn about people of other faiths but noted “I hate those people” when asked about her experience at the church. (CBS Denver 2015)

She also voiced her discontent with Israel and the United States’ vocal support of Israel. This perceived persecution of those that she shared a faith with certainly motivated her, and her case is particularly unique because of her willingness to stand firm in her affinity to terrorists during multiple FBI interviews. As the surveillance of Shannon increased, she began to feel as though she was being treated as a terrorist without actually being one. She stated, “If they think I’m a terrorist, I’ll give them something to think I am”. As per her motivations, she vocalizes that it is fine to harm innocent people if it is collateral damage of a successful attack (CBS Denver 2015). Throughout her interviews, she shockingly and repeatedly refers to US military bases as viable targets for an attack on US soil. Her motivations to wage jihad and help those affected by global persecution and the conflict in Syria only grew increasingly aggressive and problematic throughout her numerous interviews with the FBI.

While her main motivation appears to be a sympathetic one looking to help Syrians in need and carry out attacks, there is also the element of love within her case. She met a Tunisian man online whose parents found her video chatting. The man asked Shannon’s parents for her hand in marriage, which they declined. Shannon voiced that she expected to be a housewife to the man and use her nursing skills to help those within the compounds. She also asserted that she did not want to actually partake in fighting, but absolutely would (CBS Denver 2015). Love and fulfilling a goal of finding a faith-filled husband appears to have aided her decision to migrate but does not appear to be her largest motivation in this case.

III. Hoda Muthana

Hoda's movement towards radicalization and the fuel to her motivations is multi-dimensional. Her upbringing was conservatively Muslim, with lots of emphasis on the role of a conservative Muslim woman. Like the other children in the Muthana family, the long-awaited gift of a cell phone upon high school graduation was an important life factor (Hall 2019). This is the graduation gift that opened the door for Hoda's self-expression and new understanding of herself and the sheltered life she lived thus far. She began to build an online presence with this newfound freedom; however, it was still very closely monitored by her father who felt he had a right to do so. In her case, we have a young woman who went from having no connection to social media, to a constant one filled with connection and a stream of information. She was a young woman caught between the life she lived and the online life she saw. A child frustrated by the restrictions placed on her that were more severe than the ones she saw placed on her brothers (Hall 2019).

Her motivations for migration stemmed from this feeling of oppression and her search for connections that her parents' rules made especially difficult (Hall 2019). She was motivated by searching for a place to belong, a greater purpose, and freedom to interact and make connections without being watched over by her parents. She presented herself on social media with these goals and desires in mind and found a community of young women with similar needs and opinions. She expected that by associating with these women online, and eventually in person by migrating, that she would self-fulfill her desire for belonging and adventure while remaining true to her faith (Hall 2019). In the year leading up to her decision to migrate, Muthana deepened her

faith through Islamic apps on her phone as she became more obsessed with her religion and the expression of her religion. However, this was something seen as positive by her parents and they did not find anything in her phone that was troubling for a long period of time.

IV. Aqsa Mahmood

According to Aqsa's father, growing up Aqsa did not have extremist beliefs, and none were perpetuated in their household. However, when the civil war broke out in Syria, her father states that she became increasingly aware of and troubled by the violence she was seeing (Fantz 2015). This sparked an increase in her devotion to prayer and reading the Quran right before she was to begin university. When she began schooling, she gave up her childhood trends of reading fiction and enjoying music. This newfound devotion to her faith and the call for Muslims to take up arms and live a holy life motivated her greatly in her transformation. She saw the rewards of Allah and the awards promised to her as more meaningful than the life she would be leaving behind. In a blog post she explains her perspective and her motivations: "The media at first used to claim that the ones running away to join Jihad as being unsuccessful, didn't have a future and from broken down families. But that is far from the truth" (Fantz 2015). She acknowledges that narrative, but her life dispels it. She enjoyed a privileged life with lots of access to prestigious education and opportunity but was still motivated by her faith to join those fighting in Syria.

V. Nora el-Bathy

According to Nora's family, she began to speak about helping the wounded in Syria and caring for the children affected by the conflicts. She also began to wear the full veil daily in the short time leading up to her decision to migrate. This desire to help those in need and deepen her

faith was met by the overflow of interactions she made online with the help of a second, secretive Facebook she created to speak with jihad recruiters and other *sisters* (Sherwood et al 2015). In Nora's case, she seemed to also be motivated by her peers which could be a testament to her young age. The el-Bathy family only became aware of Nora's decision to migrate when they confronted her closest school friends who clued them in to their daughter's decision to embark on a journey to Syria by way of Turkey (Sherwood et al 2015). She expected to be able to help those in need, and the contact with female recruiters in the Paris region and females that have already made *hijra* show her expectations for belonging and serving an important role upon arrival (Sherwood et al 2015).

VII. Emilie Koenig

Emilie's motivations for radicalization appear to be heavily reliant on her relationship with her husband, the Algerian man who was thought to be a practicing Muslim at the time of Emilie's conversion. While the actual motivation for her conversion to Islam is unclear, it was not long after this monumental decision that she became affiliated with the Islamic group *Forsane Alizza Nantes*, also known as the "knights of pride" (The Local 2015). This face to face connection is important and increased the severity of her radicalization and appears to be a large part of her motivation. As she affiliated with the group, she began to wear the full veil and take part in demonstrations organized by *Forsane Alizza Nante* (The Local 2015). This group was attributed by France to be a suspected terror group, and so it follows that Emilie's rapid radicalization is a product of this type of rhetoric. Emilie was seen frequently taking part in demonstrations and handing out information supporting jihad in Paris with the group. She felt that the discrimination she faced for being in the group was an example of the larger scale

persecution of Muslims globally, and that was also a large part of her motivations for migration (The Local 2015). She increased her social media presence by setting up multiple profiles that incited the need for Muslims to take up arms and wage violent jihad against persecution. Not long after, she initiated her plan to journey to the Islamic state in 2012 at the beginning of the ISIS phenomenon and reign (The Local 2015).

Role of Social Media and Mode of Radicalization

I. Laura Passoni

In an interview with Laura Passoni, she speaks of the way social media specifically facilitated her radicalization and how the type of radicalization affected her choices. After she was left with her heart broken at the abandonment of the father of her child, she created a Facebook profile under a fake name that featured multiple photos of women in burqas wielding Kalashnikovs (Cigainero 2016). While her initial motivation for utilizing social media was to find a way to regain strength after her breakup and be part of a community that shared her faith, her posts gained the attention of a male ISIS recruiter. She states: “He played on my weaknesses. He told me that I could help the Syrian people, that I could be a nurse and be useful. It was really important for me to restart my life from zero because I was so depressed” (Cigainero 2016).

Her recruitment and radicalization were facilitated entirely online and at the aid and discretion of male recruiters. The recruiter primarily offered her love, a new life with men who would never leave her and honor their word and shared faith values. She noted that her recruiter showed her multiple romanticized videos about life in Syria and what she would be able to do while there. No video he ever showed featured any of the realities of violence or war, only picturesque notions of jihadists as brave and loyal men who would fight and take care of herself

and her young son (Cigainero 2016). With these videos and the rhetoric of the male recruiter, her decision to migrate came after a Tunisian man living in Belgium contacted her on Facebook. All of the arrangements for her marriage to this man and her journey to Islamic state were arranged over Facebook.

II. Shannon Conley

There is an element to Shannon's story that features a great deal of self-radicalization. It is believed that most of her radical beliefs and understandings of Islam, her new religion, came from watching online sermons from extremist preachers. However, her means of radicalization to the point of migration comes from her interactions and love affair with a man she met online. While it is unclear how she came in contact with the man, her suitor was a 32-year-old Tunisian man whom she frequently used the video chatting application Skype to communicate with (CBS Denver 2015). Her suitor asked Shannon's father for his permission to marry his daughter, to which he justly declined. Shannon claims that he is a fighter for ISIS who she plans to marry upon arrival in Syria and live with him in a home near the Turkish border. She explains that her airline ticket and travel expenses were already purchased for her. It is this connection to a man through Skype that her radicalization was facilitated to a point that surpassed the threshold necessary to decide to migrate (CBS Denver 2015).

III. Hoda Muthana

The prevalence of social media and the new world that the gift of a phone offers a young woman are defining features of Hoda's radicalization and choice to migrate. She found herself creating a persona online, on the platform Twitter, that depicted who she wanted to be in real

life. She yearned to be strong, to belong, and to dissociate from the confines of her childhood rules. Her tweets personified who she wanted to be, creating a performance-like portrayal that was optimized for the unforgiving seduction of social media (Hall 2019). Her Twitter account was her secret, as she did not allow her siblings to follow it. The choice to use Twitter was strategic in that her father did not let Hoda or her siblings create Facebook accounts. Technology and Twitter gave Hoda a platform to form connections that her family's rules hindered her from making.

In an interview, Hoda acknowledged that her decision to migrate to the Islamic State was directly tied to her use of Twitter and the connections she formed on the platform (Hall 2019). It was the realization that one of her female Twitter connections successfully made it to Syria that formed her conviction to migrate as well. Without this social media push and inspiration, the motive to migrate may not have been as strong or realistic. Even as she began her own journey to Syria, social media platforms continued to play a large role in her life as a form of diary-like documentation. Her frequent tweets of her life served as a link between her new reality and other women on Twitter who she urged to take the same *hijrah* (Hall 2019).

IV. Aqsa Mahmood

While Aqsa's exact tipping point is unclear, it is clear that her radicalization was in part facilitated through online social media platforms, which she frequently updated throughout her migration and eventual new life in Syria. Aqsa's radicalization is characterized by an element of self-radicalization that stemmed from watching extremist sermons online that she would have otherwise not had access to. It is known that she also met people online, specifically the platform Tumblr, that increased her interest in extremism and pushed her to eventually migrate. In her

case, there is not so much a specific recruiter but rather a coming together of self-radicalization met with an echo-chamber of extremist beliefs reiterated by people she met online. Aqsa's beliefs, roles in the Islamic State, and her whereabouts are documented in her personal Tumblr blog *Diary of a Muhajirah*.

V. Nora el-Bathy

At just 15 years old, Nora was young and impressionable to the online world of her peers and the way in which it connected her to information and people that led to her radicalization. It was not discovered until after her disappearance that she was the owner of a second Facebook page, unbeknown to her family. Along with the discovery of the Facebook page was the discovery that Nora also was in possession of a second cell phone that she used to communicate with the *sisters* (Sherwood et al 2015). The Facebook page was used to communicate with female jihadist recruiters in the Paris region where she lived. This element of proximity and possible face to face connection is a key factor in her radicalization timeline.

Being able to see examples of women in her community, through Facebook, that were able to migrate is a push towards radicalization. She was recruited by females through an online medium and was in contact with these recruiters through the means of a second cell phone (Sherwood et al 2015). Being so young, the acceptance from her peers is also a push factor towards radicalization. After her disappearance, the ultimate truth of her whereabouts is discovered once her school friends are questioned. This leads to the idea that they were well aware of her secret online persona and interactions with recruiters, as well as aware of her plans to move to Syria in support of ISIS (Sherwood et al 2015).

VII. Emilie Koenig

Emilie's main mode of radicalization is certainly through human interaction, more specifically with her first husband and with her affiliation with *Forsane Alizza*. Her conversion to Islam, presumably because of her first husband, was a rapid one that was marked by her choice to wear to the full-face covering veil. Shortly after this conversion, she became extremely active with *Forsane Alizza*, "The Knights of Pride", which is a local Islamic group in the Paris region. The group became well known in 2010 for its stark opposition to the French government's decision to ban full-face veils in public (The Local 2015).

This sparked public protests that fed off the perceived religious discrimination of the government. The group became known for its extremist stances as well as its extremist members. Members of the group were known jihadis or linked to jihadist acts within the region. In 2010, Emilie Koenig was seen handing out pamphlets promoting jihadist propaganda near her mosque (The Local 2015). While most of her radicalization appears to be rooted in face to face interaction, she still ran multiple Facebook pages that promoted her extremist beliefs and pushed for women to take up their role in the Islamic State. These were later used as her own means to recruit young Western girls when she eventually was given that role upon migration to Syria (The Local 2015).

Chapter 6

Outcomes of Each Case

I. Laura Passoni

Passoni's reality upon arrival in Syria was far from what she imagined and even further from what she was promised. She was immediately confined to a communal women's home with extremely strict rules to follow while her new husband was sent off to training. In her time living with these women and under the constant watch of guards, she realized that she would not be getting the chance to help people in the way she was promised. In an interview Passoni states: "I quickly opened my eyes that it was all a lie. I was just there to procreate for the Islamic State. Entering is easy. Leaving is not. From that moment I did everything to try to leave so that my son wouldn't become a terrorist" (Cigainero 2016).

She was notably blinded by the promises of the male recruiter, who excessively prayed on her desire for a faith-driven relationship and a need for a new life. Her son was no longer considered just hers, as he was taken by the fighters whenever they pleased to go to the mosque and begin his indoctrination. During this time, she was able to remain in contact with her family and delivered the sentiment that she made a huge misjudgment in her decision to support the group as none of her expectations came to fruition. While in Syria, Passoni became pregnant which increased the urgency she felt to escape. It took her two attempts to successfully escape the firm grasp of the group, and the successful attempt occurred when she convinced her husband to accompany her and help her (Cigainero 2016).

The outcome of their escape is a 4-year prison sentence for her husband that is being served in Belgium, and an abbreviated sentence for Laura after judges decided she did in fact not know the true nature of ISIS at the time of her departure (Cigainero 2016). While she is not

incarcerated, she is closely monitored by police and probation officers, is prohibited from leaving the country, and cannot use social media to contact anyone she knows in Syria (Cigainero 2016). She is also not allowed to communicate with her husband while he is serving his prison sentence. She went on to write a memoir about her time in Syria titled *In the Heart of Daesh with my Son* that detailed her recruitment and her life while in Syria, as well as her immense regret and lack of fulfilled promises (Cigainero 2016).

II. Shannon Conley

Shannon Conley attempted to board a flight to Turkey at the age of 19 at Denver International Airport with intentions of crossing into Syria but was stopped on the runway by authorities (CBS Denver 2015). Her attempt was unsuccessful and thus does not have an account of her reality in the Islamic State or the carrying out of promises made to her by her male recruiter. The arrest of Conley on the runway came after several interviews with authorities where she detailed her plans and extremist views, and authorities detailed their future actions should she act on her plans. The FBI insisted they took extraordinary measures to persuade Conley to rethink her plans by visiting her often, suggesting alternatives to express her beliefs, and asked her parents to talk her out of it (CBS Denver 2015).

Ultimately, Conley pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization in court where she faced a maximum 5-year sentence. Her trial resulted in a 4-year prison sentence, and Conley expressed her regret and misjudgment of the reality of the terror group to the court. Her parents also composed a letter to the country and government asserting that their daughter was misguided and is not a threat to the country, as well as

articulating their belief that their daughter's prison sentence was an overreaction used to instill fear in the American people (CBS Denver 2015).

III. Hoda Muthana

American-born Hoda Muthana has expressed that she deeply regrets joining the organization that she left her Alabama home for in 2014 (Holpuch 2019). During her time in Syria, she was a prominent social media recruiter for a global jihadist audience and married three separate ISIS fighters who eventually died in combat. However, years later she made appeals to return to the United States on the grounds that she was reformed and now denouncing the brutality of the Islamic State. She has stated that she is willing to take punishment for her crimes in the United States legal system (Holpuch 2019). However, this puts the United States in a position to make a monumental choice that will set the precedent for future cases of defected terrorist affiliates. Hoda's case is unique, however, as there is discrepancy over whether Hoda is a US citizen in the first place.

Her case was brought to the forefront of American awareness as Donald Trump sent out a tweet in 2019 stating: "I have instructed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and he fully agrees, not to allow Hoda Muthana back into the Country!" (Holpuch 2019). Ultimately, the US barred Hoda's reentry into the United States on the basis that she was not a US citizen, that she had no valid US passport, and no Visa to travel to the United States (Holpuch 2019). Muthana was captured by Kurdish forces during the seizure of some of the last parts of ISIS controlled territory and remains in al-Hawl refugee camp in northern Syria (Holpuch 2019). She has spoken out to reporters about her repentance of her choices and asserts she was brainwashed by the group. She remains in the camp.

IV. Aqsa Mahmood

On Aqsa's Tumblr blog she quotes an American-born Muslim scholar, cleric and militant who acted as spokesman for al Qaeda, Anwar al-Awlaki: "Change, always in history, depends on the youth" (Fantz 2015). Aqsa remains in Syria and appears to have not changed her stance on the righteousness and necessity of the militant group. She served as a recruiter of other Western females, and details on her blog that although she misses her family and the life she left behind, she believes that to be devout you must leave that life behind in order to live in the manner Muslims are called to live (Fantz 2015). She explains on the blog that parents may assume their child is going through a phase, and that there are parents of women she knows that still believe they will return even years after choosing to migrate (Fantz 2015). This leaves the impression that she has no intentions of returning, despite her parents pleading for her to do so. Aqsa's recruiting efforts have been linked to more cases of young Western female recruitment. She has even promoted and possibly partaken in violence, as she posts photos of AK-47s and of executions carried out by ISIS fighters (Fantz 2015).

V. Nora el-Bathy

In early communication with her family, Nora asserted that she enjoyed where she was and had no intentions of leaving. That sentiment was reiterated when Nora's family was contacted by a man claiming to be in charge of the French fighters in Syria. He stated that Nora was not being held against her will and that she was free to leave if she chose to (Sherwood et al 2015). It was not until Nora's brother attempted to go to Syria to rescue her that Nora's reality was discovered. At his first attempt, he made it to Turkey and was turned away at the Syrian

border. He received a call from Nora that she was learning to shoot but would not be partaking in fighting. On his second attempt to retrieve her, he was successful. She claimed that she made the biggest mistake of her life. Upon his arrival, Nora's brother stated "She was thin and sick. She never sees any light. With other women she has to look after young children, orphans, but she lives surrounded by armed men" (Sherwood et al 2015). She remains in Syria; however, the family is taking legal action for her kidnap from the group.

VII. Emilie Koenig

Emilie Koenig was notably put on the United Nations list of the most dangerous fighters, and later appeared on a terrorist watch list distributed by the United States. She was responsible in the Islamic State for recruiting new fighters into the militant group, and also took part in violence and the promotion of violent propaganda. In 2018, she was arrested by Kurdish forces in Syria and is being held in a Kurdish camp where she is being "interrogated and tortured", according to her mother (Agence France-Presse 2018). She was 33 at the time of the arrest, and remains in the camp with her children, 3 of which were born under ISIS controlled territory. According to Koenig's mother, she wants to return to France and seek forgiveness for her role in the Islamic State (Agence France-Presse 2018).

Chapter 7

Analysis and Results

The summation of these cases represents the vastly different types of young Western women from an array of different upbringings and lived experiences that can be placed on the terrorist trajectory. These cases explore the variables of social media and type of recruitment that is effective in order to understand who ultimately leaves their home country in support of ISIS. By utilizing the case study approach, it was possible to sift through each woman's case with a closer attention to detail that aided in personifying their life prior to their radicalization, the process of their radicalization, and the outcome of their migration or attempted migration. It is invaluable to observe each case as a narrative in order to identify patterns among cases that can potentially be used in forthcoming cases and to identify females that may be at risk or targeted for recruitment.

The most salient findings of this study are that social media interaction across different platforms is a critical component of radicalization for Western females outside of the conflict theater, female and male recruiters are effective in different scenarios, and that face to face contact with like-minded peers or extremist recruiters may still be a critical mode of radicalization and could make a recruit more likely to partake in violence. This study also dispels the traditional notion in the literature that women are manipulated into joining a romanticized notion of jihad. While that may be the case of Laura Passoni or Nora el-Bathy, overwhelmingly so there is an element of free-will and autonomy that these women are exercising when choosing to migrate.

We see this display of autonomy in the cases where there is an element of self-radicalization, such as Shannon Conley and Aqsa Mahmood who sought out extremist religious sermons online. When reaching out for extremist material, these women are met with an echo-chamber of extremist ideology without any dissenting opinions. The internet functions in this way on many social media platforms, regurgitating many of the same sentiments that a user is personally reflecting. The cases which were heavily active on social media sites during their radicalization, such as Hoda Muthana, demonstrate the way in which the online community you partake in is entirely built by your own choices and input. For Hoda, seeing so many of her peers and online friends reiterating the glory associated with migration and the Islamic State without any opposition was the catalyst that she needed.

One of the main findings of these cases is that there is still strength in the idea of face to face interaction and communication when it comes to who radicalizes and who does not. There also seems to be a connection between those who had face to face radicalization and the women that were more likely to partake in violence in support of ISIS. This is interesting in that most of the literature, and particularly the literature that fueled this study, specifically looks at social media and its effects. It is notable to understand that while social media is effective and plays a role in radicalization, we must not dispel the strength of face to face interaction.

This is particularly seen in the case of Emilie Koenig who's journey to extremism, while paired with eventual social media accounts, is mostly a product of interaction with both her first husband and her involvement with a local extremist group in Paris. Her conversion to Islam and her radicalization process is notably the most rapid process observed in this study and within the broader pool of case selection. The speed may be attributed to her relationship to her first husband and his own extremist views, which were then amplified by membership with the local

Islamic group. Membership in the group provided Emilie with an abundance of personal, first-hand connections with people whose beliefs were notoriously extremist. There may be a powerful combination in Emilie's case of both face to face interaction and the power of group membership.

This study also examines the variance of a male recruiter and a female recruiter, and how they make different appeals that may increase the likelihood of a Western female radicalizing. In the case of Laura Passoni and Shannon Conley, their radicalization process was distinctly marked by the influence of a male recruiter and the prospect of a possible romantic interest. Passoni was at a low point of her life where she was seeking a new beginning and a man who would never leave her. In the midst of this, she created a new Facebook profile that depicted herself more devoutly that was met with a message from a male ISIS recruiter. His promises of love, loyalty, and faithfulness push Passoni towards radicalization and migration. Shannon Conley similarly chose to act on her extremist views once she began an online relationship with an ISIS fighter she would be set to marry once she arrived in the Islamic State. In these cases, the variable of a male recruiter was the push that these women needed that would lead to their migration or attempted migration.

In the cases of Aqsa Mahmood, Hoda Muthana, and Nora el-Bathy, the introduction of female recruiters was the tipping point of their radicalization. In these cases, it was not love that the female recruiters were offering, but rather belonging and sisterhood. These ideals were echoed through the online community that these women became a part of, especially in the case of Hoda Muthana. She found herself with connections and online friends that she was unable to have within the confines of her strict home. It was the sense of sisterhood that she craved, and as she saw her online friends successfully making it to the Islamic State, she ultimately decided to

migrate and join them. The female recruiters play on the needs of women to feel a sense of belonging, to have a community, and to be understood in their faith that is oftentimes persecuted in Western countries.

There is also an element of self-radicalization taking place that could also be a key component in a female's decision to migrate and fight for ISIS. We see that in the cases of Shannon Conley and Aqsa Mahmood. Shannon is known to have begun watching extremist sermons online, which pushed her to convert to Islam as a teenager. There is this element of actively seeking out extremist ideology that does seem to be important. It pushes the narrative that women are capable of actively seeking out extremist material and can choose to radicalize and migrate on their own. There is a large part of the literature that belittles female fighters to be brainwashed by the militant group. While in some cases that may be true, the cases of Shannon Conley and Aqsa Mahmood demonstrate that self-radicalization and seeking radical rhetoric is a choice. Within 5 out of the 6 cases there is this profound exercise of autonomy and free-will to radicalize exhibited by each of the women at least one point, regardless of whether they defected or not.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

This case study sought to be a useful tool to further understand the possible connection between social media and radicalization of Western females outside of the conflict theatre. The subjects were six females from America or Europe that radicalized and either migrated to Syria or attempted to migrate. This study found support for the main hypothesis that females that

interacted with extremist ideology on social media platforms are more likely to migrate to the Islamic State. While the interaction varied among cases, it is evident that social media and the internet played a critical role in the women's indoctrination and materialization of efforts to migrate to Syria in support of ISIS.

There is also support in these particular cases for the hypotheses regarding the gender of the recruiter and the effectiveness of their recruitment ability. The women introduced to a male recruiter as a romantic interest in this study were more likely to migrate. The women introduced to a female recruiter in this study that made appeals to belonging were more likely to migrate. However, while I was attempting to heavily link the consumption of social media material and online communication with radicalization, there still appears to be a salience of face to face connection. The subjects that had a direct human connection with a recruiter or a personal relationship with a subject already radicalized were more likely to radicalize. It is also possible that those with this added element of face to face connection were likely to radicalize much faster and also have a higher likelihood to participate in actual violence rather than an auxiliary role.

Understanding the process by which individuals outside of the conflict subscribe to extremist ideology is important in the creation of preventive measures that could identify those at risk of radicalization. It is imperative the women and their radicalization process are thoroughly understood and not kept out of the mainstream policy considerations. Using this method that focuses on the intimate narrative of women known to have attempted migration is an invaluable tool that could provide insight that quantitative data otherwise fails to capture.

Appendix

Case Selection Table

Name	Age	Residency	Religion	Convert	Social Media Contact	Description of Social Media Use/Contact	Female/Male Recruiter	Motivations
Laura Passoni**	19	Brussels, Belgium	Islam	Yes	yes	-put up a more devout Facebook profile -contacted through Facebook by a recruiter	Male contacted her through Facebook	-abandoned by the father of her young son -looking for a man to keep their commitments -influenced by traumatic life experiences
Shannon Conley**	19	America	Islam	yes	yes	-significant self-radicalization -watched extremist lectures online -contacted by potential husband -fell in love -changed the way she dressed (full Muslim garb)	male recruiter -spoke over skype	-believed that Muslims were under attack -Was very overt in her intentions of violent jihad -believed she needed to travel to Syria and marry -
Hoda Muthana**	19	America (Alabama)	Islam	no	yes	-radicalized through social media -combined with strict Muslim household -First cell phone after grad of high school -Uses twitter/posts on her twitter after radicalization -changes her name on twitter to "Umm Jihad" -used Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr to spread Jihad messages	-created a separate devout Twitter to participate more in Muslim twitter -detailed her growing fascination with ISIS -admitted that seeing a twitter friend make it to Syria is what inspired her to migrate -possible female recruiter (Aqsa Mahmood)	-child of strict immigrants -frustrated by the restrictions placed on her while her brothers had freedoms -searching for connections her parents rules made it hard to form -search for belonging
Shamima Begum	15	London, England	Islam	no	yes	-inspired to join ISIL by videos of fighters beheading hostages and also of "the good life" under the group	not clear	-went with 2 other young school friends -attempting to follow in their friend's footsteps who left 2 weeks earlier
Aqsa Mahmood**	20	Glasgow, Scotland	Islam	no	yes	-watched extremist sermons and contacted people online -used tumblr blog		-concerned when violence broke out in Syria -believes it is what Muslims are meant to do
Nora el-Bathiy**	15	France	Islam	No	yes	-opened a second Facebook account on which she had said she had plans to make Hijra -ad a second phone, which she had used to talk to "sisters"	-contact with female jihad recruiters in the Paris area	
Yusra Ismail	19	St. Paul MN	Islam	no	yes	-deleted Facebook 7 months prior to leaving -may have been active elsewhere on social media	-unsure Federal investigators say more than 20 young people have left Minnesota for Syria and Iraq to join violent extremists	"It's people in Minnesota talking each other into going combined with the pull of social media; people that have successfully traveled that are communicating back to people here saying, 'It's great,'"
Emilie Koenig**	28	Paris, France	Islam	Yes	Yes	-seems to be the face to face interaction that led to her radicalization -her husband and local extremist group (Forsane Alizza)	contact with Forsane Alizza	-joined an extremist group in France called the "Knights of Pride" who were recognized for their protests against the French government's decision to ban the "niqab" -her father left her at age 2 -married a French-Algerian man who she converted to Islam for and began her path to extremism
Samra Kesinovic	16	Vienna, Austria	Islam	no	yes	-broadcast propaganda online	-male Mirsad O., an Islamic preacher from Bosnia living in Vienna, using the name 'Ebu Tejma'	-wanted to freely practice their religion -to serve/die for Allah -left with friend (face to face radicalization)

Changes in Behavior?	Promises	Travel	Reality	Outcome
	-A faithful husband -A home in syria -training as a nurse -Good school for her toddler	Yes	Did not meet expectations -stayed in a "sisters house" while her husband was training and fighting -invited to serve as an internet seductress -invited to serve as morality police (hisbah) -no nurse training/money -her son was often left unsupervised because she was confined to home	-Became pregnant -feared for the fate of her son -attempted to escape (1st time) and was returned by ISIS police -Convinced husband to escape with her and made way back to Belgium -Husband is serving prison time and Passoni is released conditionally -Children are back in her custody -Now lectures to young Belgians about the dangers of joining ISIS
-Began dressing more conservatively		no (attempted)	Not applicable -planned to be her suitor's housewife and provide the camp with medical services and training	-Was arrested attempting to fly out of Colorado airport -sentenced to 4 years in prison with community service/monitoring -claims to have changed her beliefs but actions/statements do not necessarily support that
-Began dressing more conservatively in the year leading up to departure	-personal life meaning -sense of belonging	yes	Did not meet expectations, attempting to return home	-as the Islamic State began to fall, she fled and was taken into custody by Kurdish forces where she remains -her father is attempting to get her to return to the US but Trump made a statement that she will not be allowed -attempting to say she is not a US citizen (even though she she has a US passport)
Shamima's family said she had voiced a desire to help suffering Syrians		yes	Attempting to come home but "not sorry she came"	-still remains in refugee camp, legal battle to decide if she will be allowed back into the country -Britain trying to strip her of citizenship
-dropped other interests to become more devout -although, parents did not consider this alarming	a house with free electricity and water provided to you due to the Khilafah (the caliphate or state) and no rent included."	yes	Remains -serves as a recruiter, runs a blog trying to persuade young recruits to join the cause -believed to have influenced the school girls from London (Begum)	The media at first used to claim that the ones running away to join the Jihad as being unsuccessful, didn't have a future and from broke down families etc. But that is far from the truth."
been talking about helping the wounded in Syria, particularly children, nobody in the family had imagined she was planning to run away -started wearing hijab few months before leaving		yes	Remains, but expressed she would like to leave	-learned to shoot, but told her brother she would not be fighting -proclaimed she was happy and well taken care of -A man in charge of the French fighters in Syria called her brother and stated that she is not there against her will -Brother came and she expressed she made a mistake/sick/never sees sunlight -attempting to come home, parents are saying she was brainwashed
-more fixated on memorizing the Quran -stopped doing family activities -switched Mosques to have few distractions	unclear	yes	unconfirmed, suspected to be in Syria	-in a phone call to family said she was happy and living with other girls from around the world -did not regret decision
-learned arabic -changed her name to Samra -started wearing the veil		Yes	served as a recruiter, attempting to come back to France -trained in weapons and violence	-put on the United Nations list of the most dangerous fighters -appeared in several propaganda videos inciting violence -arrested by Kurdish forces in Syria -her mother says she wants to return to France and seek forgiveness
-family did not suspect anything		yes	Remains, believed to have died while there -friends said she was sickened by the brutality and attempted to leave several times	-used as sex slave, for fighters as a "present" -served as "poster girl" for ISIS propaganda for Western women -believed to have been beaten to death after trying to escape

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ACADEMIC VITA

JULIA C. BARBON

Juliabarbon22@gmail.com

Reading, Pa 19607

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University
Bachelor of Arts in International Politics
Minor: Sociology

University Park PA
Graduation Date: May 2020

International Studies Institute
International Politics and General Studies

Florence, Italy
Spring 2019

Schreyer Honors College

University Park, PA
September 2016- Present

Paterno Fellows Program

University Park, PA
September 2016- Present

WORK EXPERIENCE

Berks County District Attorney's Office
District Attorney Intern

Reading, PA
May 2019- August 2019

LEADERSHIP AND ACTIVITIES

Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity, Beta Phi Chapter
Alternative Fundraising Chair

University Park, PA
January 2018- Present

Penn State Dance Marathon, Dancer Relations Committee
Committee Member

University Park, PA
October 2018- May 2019

Penn State Mock Trial Team
Team Member

University Park, PA
September 2016- May 2017