

Lina Kolesnikova asks what drives women to extremist groups like ISIS and calls for more effective and better-targeted counter-radicalisation efforts

WOMEN AND EX



©Getty Images

Frontline fighters: female member of the PKK symbolise both pragmatism and liberalism within the extremist group

In May 2014, Russian social networks Facebook and Vkontakte (“In Contact”) were full of reposts of the cry for help from family of a run-away girl. For his own reasons, the father of the 19-year old teenager suspected that his daughter flew to Turkey to join ISIS in Syria. This case stood out among plenty of similar incidents, and attracted a lot of attention from mass media and general public. For the first time, a girl from a middle-class Muscovite family, who was also a student of the prestigious Moscow University, had chosen to try to join ISIS. Fortunately, however, she was captured near Turkey’s border with Syria in June and safely transported back home. This case illustrated that ISIS propaganda had become more successful, and served as a warning that the promise of adventure and a “new meaningful life” by ISIS could touch young women far who were neither from traditional Muslim families nor married converts.

Strangely enough, the world mass media presents the issue of women who leave Western countries for ISIS as a new phenomenon. But history shows many examples of men and women who have left their home countries for religious or political motives. They moved to the New World, Africa or, during the 20th century, to the Soviet

Union – often falling for utopian ideals.

The fact that ISIS is known for its barbaric atrocities does not change much for such people. There is a societal myth that mothers (women) do not kill. Another myth says that women could not be attracted by violence and the terror rhetoric, although it is a well-known fact that Hitler was particular popular among women. Both women and men are vulnerable to coercion to participate in conflict for a variety of reasons unrelated to gender. The increasing role of females in terrorist groups may be driven by a shortage of men within the organization – for instance due to participants being captured or killed, or because insufficient men are willing to participate.

It is true that terrorism is male-dominated (women’s presence in terrorist groups varies from 0 per cent to 30 per cent), and that women are rarely in leadership positions. But women often play significant roles in armed conflicts, terrorism and violent extremism, including in direct combat roles as perpetrators, commanders, suicide bombers and human shields, as well as in support roles such as domestic servants and sex slaves. In the 20th and 21st Centuries we have seen increasing numbers of women in many terrorist groups

XTREMISM



– from the Tamil Tigers' female militants to Chechen black widows.

The message varies. In some terrorist organisations, female combatants serve as a symbol of women's liberation, and feminist ideals are used to attract women to the organisation. In some 19th century Russian terrorist organisations, for example, the presence of women was a symbol of gender equality. In Chechen terrorist groups or Sri Lanka, however, their presence was driven instead by pure pragmatism, whether to bolster numbers or to avoid the attention of the security forces. Kurdish women in the PKK, meanwhile, symbolise both phenomena – pragmatism and liberalisation.

Another aspect of ISIS's relative success is that the group actually controls a great deal of land – it is not an underground organisation which must hide from the security forces. It is a quasi-state, which offers not only material welfare but also a promise of the sinless life and the paradise afterlife. So it has become in some way an outlet for adventure and heroism of social pariahs of the Western countries.

The simplicity of ISIS's message permits its easy consumption by those who are inclined to follow it. The

short and clear name – Islamic State is the synonym to the caliphate – exploits the belief in the "golden age" of the Muslim history and drops all pretences of geographic boundaries. It positions itself as a movement driven by a pure idea (or rather a belief). The idea of the caliphate – an Islamic state under the rule of a community of religious scholars guided by a supreme leader, the caliph or khalifah – is quite precise and looks very attractive not only for men but also for women from all over the world.

In the lower ranks of ISIS, women are tasked primarily with serving the sexual needs of ISIS's male members, maintaining a household and producing future fighters. In addition, in the territories that ISIS controls, there are women who work for the religious police (Al-Khansaa Brigade), for example, controlling obedience of other women to the ISIS's strict religious and social standards. There are female spies there to make sure other women stay in line. And there are still others who facilitate a sex slave trade (Kurdish or other minorities), assessing other women or arranging temporary marriages for them.

This new age of terrorism has also opened up new roles for women. According to several intelligence sources, women in ISIS train other women – that is, they serve as instructors. Women are also used for making bombs, hijackings, and as saboteurs. Women are perfect for reconnaissance as well. There are women successfully employed by ISIS as instigators and seducers on the Internet. Finally, women serve well as translators (particularly into European languages) and even ideologists, with some of them writing for the ISIS journal Dabiq.

Radicalisation is a very individualized process; there are many reasons why people sympathise, support or join ISIS. Of those that travel alone, three primary reasons have been identified: grievances, decisions and personal motivations. There are documented cases of Western fighters bringing entire families with them to the ISIS-controlled territory, including young children and wives. Like their men, the women who migrate to the ISIS territory often share an opinion about the oppression of Muslims throughout the world. They point to perceived attacks on the Ummah around the world, and post distressing images of violence against Muslims on their Twitter profiles and blogs. These different conflicts across the world are presented as part of a larger war led by non-believers against Islam. I need not point out that similar belief-driven movement have been seen before.

We have to remember that most Muslim extremists are not nationalists or individualists. Their identity is formed primarily by their religion. For Western converts, on the other hand, Islam gives answers which they could not get from Western individualism and consumerism. Young people are particularly vulnerable to the black-and-white worldview – to youth maximalism. Within this schema, terrorism is presented as heroism, a defence of home, community and values held sacred. Islamic State positions itself as a place of refuge, where Muslim fantasies can come to a glorious realisation, where domination and power can be reclaimed. This works through one of the

WOMEN AND EXTREMISM

most powerful and most dangerous resources in the history: youthful idealism, which is driven towards the exhilarating goal of building a “new and perfect” society.

It seems that ISIS understands and uses this image of the unstoppable power and passionate commitment as a key to the rebellious souls of the young people. State-of-the-art cyber technologies offer an excellent propaganda platform. A young mass audience from around the world is online and can be reached without major investment of funds and time. A well-developed narrative and varied communications media facilitate the “message” reaching its target audience.

Western media pays significant attention to ISIS and its associated problems but, when doing so, the journalists often miss the point and the target audience. They concentrate on Muslim runaway women from the Western cultural perspective. The main refrain of publications and TV programmes is asking why women, who may enjoy all the freedom of the Western society, prefer to join cruel middle age barbarians. The truth is that most of women who leave are very home-bound. For a variety of reasons, they do not profit from the same level of (social) life as their compatriots, and the Internet is the only access to the world for many of them. They interacted and looked for acceptance of their lifestyle in the virtual world. In the real world, however, most of these girls and women were alone and alienated. Friends of the Russian run-away girl said that before Syria, the girl tried to join a Nazi group because she felt uneasy with her university classmates. She was looking for a group which would accept her the way she is. In some way, those running to Syria are enacting a form of a social protest. That’s the point – future movers are mainly those who do not integrate well into individualistic Western society.

In contrast, much of Western media, which seeks to promote Western values, fails to reach its audience. The relevant target population is not watching TV and not navigating “boring” and “selfish” Western media sites. Information pushed by the Western media does not reach this audience in a format that will be consumed by the relevant people, or in a way that addresses their motivation and vulnerabilities.

Many of those who moved to IS (mentally or physically) are quite active in social networks. They need to get their piece of fame, recognition and approval. One of these women wrote: “If jihad is a crime, the world shall know that I’m a criminal.” Nearly all of those who join ISIS today have previously endorsed ISIS ideology, ideologues or actual ISIS sites on their Facebook or other social media accounts, and posted about their new extremist beliefs. This indicates how important identity is to those who begin to take on the ISIS worldview. New beliefs are so important to them that they feel a need to declare them via the social media – a fact that makes it possible to identify at least some of them prior to and after the actual move.

Jeff Weyers, a policeman from Canada (and consultant at BRABO) did just that. He tracked English speaking Facebook and Twitter users who endorsed terrorist groups. Gleaning what he could about them, he then



used the Inventory of Vulnerable Persons guidance tool to rate how likely they were to becoming violent extremists. Weyers found that 300 of his sample of 3,000 people from around the world fell into the dangerous category. He alerted law enforcement in various concerned countries. When investigations were made, explosives, guns and nefarious plots were indeed discovered and arrests were made. Clearly, nowadays many of those who enter the terrorist trajectory and follow ISIS leave clear tracks on social media and can be tracked by researchers or even by automated computer programmes to alert law enforcement about cases (or people) that may warrant further investigation – before a terrorist plot is enacted.

There are many questions Western leaders should ask themselves about the growing number of women flocking to ISIS. The main one is about failures of our educational systems, whether in the UK, France, Russia or Belgium. Why have young people have become such easy targets of terrorists? Why are barbaric acts glorified instead of provoking disgust? Why is secular education being lost in the 21st Century?

The media often portrays the radicalised more sympathetically than they should – for example by naming these women as brides. Such image only helps the propagandists to recruit yet more women and girls. Where is counter-propaganda on the Internet? Girls and women who join ISIS do not watch news programmes on TV, so all efforts of communicating via traditional channels are largely wasted. A good illustration of the misunderstanding (or lack of knowledge) of ISIS can be seen in the story of three Russian teenage boys – two homosexuals and one transgender – who ran away to Syria. They considered that ISIS would accept all who could not find their own place in their native countries. The fate of all three boys is still unclear.

The media must employ specialists in communicating with young people and women. Given that this sector (advertising to generation Y) is well developed, it should be possible to derive ideas and establish processes for the distribution of information to the younger population. Only in this way will be effectively counter ISIS’s insidious message.

Female Palestinian suicide bombers have been lauded as “martyrs” in Iran for their attacks on Israeli targets

Lina Kolesnikova is a Russian-born, Brussels-based Fellow of ICPEM. Lina provides consultancy in the area of security, risk and crisis management to number of organisations within both the private and public sectors. She is a member of the advisory board for Crisis Response Journal and CBRNE-Terrorism Newsletter.