

“If men were men then women would be women”: ISIL’s construction of masculinity and femininity

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News

The Center for Terror Analysis (CTA), a special unit in the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), stated in two reports published on 28 April 2016 that Denmark is under the threat of terrorism, and that Islamic State is the primary source of this danger.

Summary

The Center for Terror Analysis (CTA) in Copenhagen presented a number of reasons why some young Danish Muslim men and women are attracted to Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). Among the reasons given, CTA emphasizes the marginalization and exclusion of some young Muslims from society, which allegedly makes them vulnerable to ISIL’s propaganda and ideology. This article presents critically different explanations of ISIL’s attraction and presents in brief a particular research approach which has not yet attracted much attention among scholars, pundits and security officials. This relatively new approach sees Islamic radical youth groups as countercultural movements reacting against, among other things, the gender relations and the sexual morals in late modern societies.

Key Words

Radicalism, ISIL, masculinity, femininity

About the Author

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Analysis:

"The terror threat to Denmark remains significant. This means that there are individuals with intent and capacity to commit terrorist attacks in Denmark", writes the Center for Terror Analysis (CTA), a special unit in the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), in one of its recently published reports (CTA 2016a: 1). CTA states that the terror threat is primarily posed by "militant Islamism", and that the key factor affecting the threat picture is ISIL (CTA 2016a: 1).

According to CTA's assessment, a minimum of 135 persons have left Denmark for Syria or Iraq to fight for ISIL since the summer of 2012. CTA assesses that up to ten percent of the travellers are female. The percentage of females has risen since the summer of 2014 as compared to prior years. CTA assesses that just below half of the travellers are currently in Denmark. Just under 25 percent still remain in the conflict zone and an equivalent part is assumed to have been killed.

If we look toward Europe as a whole we see a similar picture. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalism (ICSR) estimated in the beginning of 2015 that the number of foreigners that have joined Sunni militant organizations in the Syria/Iraq conflict from Western European countries has risen to almost 4,000 (Neumann 2015). This is nearly double the figure they presented in December 2013.

The largest European countries – France, the UK and Germany – also produce the largest number of fighters, respectively 1,200, 500-600 and 500-600 persons. Relative to the population size, the most heavily affected countries are Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, respectively 40, 27 and 19 individuals per million population (Neumann 2015).

What attracts them?

The question then is why these young men and women leave democratic and affluent societies to take on a risky journey to Syria in order to fight and serve an extremely dangerous and brutal organization. What is it in ISIL's ideology which attracts them? Why do they migrate to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq despite the high risks involved?

Scholars, journalists and security authorities have put forward a number of explanations as to why they choose to leave apparently comfortable lives in order to live in war zones with incessant engagements, air raids, bloodshed and executions. Among other factors, they point to the role of ideology and religion, to the aesthetic and affective qualities of ISIL and to the exclusion of Muslim youth from the mainstream of liberal democratic Western societies.

According to social scientist Petter Nesser, senior research fellow with the Norwegian Defence Research establishment, the academic literature on the growing jihadi terrorism in Europe is "scarce" (2016: 3). He states that the existing body of academic literature on jihadism in Europe has tended to stress societal explanations such as "immigration policies and failed integration" (Ibid.: 3). Nesser concedes that there is some truth in these explanations and failed integration is clearly a factor in individual radicalization. However, he believes scholars need to identify how factors such as failed integration interplay with factors such as "extremist group dynamics" (Ibid.: 3).

Two approaches: Structure and Agency

One can see the contours of a schism in explanations for why young people become attracted to jihadist ideology. The first group of explanations focuses on structural factors, emphasizing a number of negative aspects of the society the potentially radicalized Muslim lives in, such as marginalization and exclusion from the labor market. The Danish CTA's exploration of militant Islamic radicalization is primarily based on this framework. Its assessment is that ISIL's propaganda increasingly resonates among "socially marginalised young people who are prone to use violence and are searching for an identity as well as status" (CTA 2016b: 1). Due to social marginalisation and a low degree of inclusion in the job market, the person thus becomes vulnerable to the propaganda of ISIL and other terrorist groups. The concepts of "marginalization" and "vulnerability" are used respectively 4 and 13 times in the 7-page report entitled "Militant Islamist radicalization" (CTA 2016b). "Marginalization" leading to "vulnerability" plays an important role in CTA's explanation, and this sequence of argumentation is repeated several times in the relatively short text.

Commenting on the British debate on reasons for radicalization the British sociologist Frank Furedi (2015) calls this way of reasoning "the myth of vulnerability" and asserts that people who join ISIL should not be treated as victims of the society or ISIL propaganda, but on the contrary as active agents, who show a capacity for planning, dissimulation, inventiveness and, above all, initiative. He stresses that the term "vulnerability" suggests "passivity, powerlessness and gullibility" and a lack of "the intellectual resources necessary to cope with challenges" (Ibid.). He concedes that there are some "weak and confused" individuals drawn towards the jihadist subculture, but maintains that "most people who travel to Syria . . . do so because they are inspired by a cause they believe is worth fighting for" (Ibid.).

Thus, one can now see the contours of the second group of explanations, which stress the agency of the young people who sympathize with or participate in ISIL's actions in Europe or in the Middle East. Furedi's interpretation of why some young Muslims get radicalized is an example of the conglomeration of explanations which stress the

individual's own ideas, desires, tendencies and fascination. He criticizes accounts which stress social marginalization and exclusion by the majority within a society and the claim that the young people in question are "seduced by perfidious groomers", i.e. radical Islamists on- or off-line. Instead of terms such as "vulnerability" and "young victims", Furedi proposes the concepts of "alienation" and "estrangement", which according to him express more accurately the sentiments and behaviors associated with radicalism. He maintains that the embrace of radical Islamist ideology is preceded by a rejection of "Western culture", and there emerges a cultural chasm that separates the world of many young Muslims from mainstream society. Since this rejection also includes the behavior and way of life of their parents, it can be described as a "generational reaction", a phenomenon which can be observed among many youngsters, not only among Muslims.

One problem with Furedi's explanation is that he does not specify which parts of the "Western culture" create so much revulsion in the minds of some young Muslims that they prefer to live in ISIL's caliphate or commit terrorism in its name. He observes that ISIL recruitment videos seek to appeal to "young macho men". He notes "This is why they feature lots of guys doing press-ups and shooting at targets, while expressing ISIS's case through the narrative of mobilization" (Furedi 2014).

Idealized and romanticized masculinity and femininity

He thus points at the way IS constructs masculinity to attract young men to its ranks. In his analysis of how the reactions against egalitarian gender roles and women's rights in late modern societies play a role in the alienation and estrangement of young Muslim men, the Persian-French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar wrote: "Islam restores the family and social bonds on a sane basis, according to men's needs. According to the Koran, a man has the right to marry up to four wives, on condition of being 'just' toward them; he can impose, in the name of Allah, 'modesty' on women and exert his authority toward children within a patriarchal family. In the Jihadists' minds, this dimension is connected to another, the rejection of Western sexual and, more generally, gender values" (Khosrokhavar 2009: 234).

The American sociologist Dallin Van Leuven and his associates (Van Leuven et al. 2016) have started to conduct research on ISIL's "highly gendered narratives", which promise the potential recruits a life under the Caliphate, in which they can fulfill the idealized roles as "real men" and "real women" (see also Frenett & Silverman 2016 and Weimann 2016; Mazurana et al. 2015; Hoyle et al. 2015; Salman et al. 2015). They privilege gender in their analyses of ISIL recruitment strategies and narratives targeting especially European Muslims. They contend that an essential part of understanding ISIL requires analyzing "the gendered dynamics, motivations and strategies" (Van

Leuven et al.: 98) ISIL uses to mobilise supporters. They observe that ISIL shapes and manipulates masculinity to draw in male foreign, i.e. non-Syrian or Iraqi, fighters and places emphasis on traditional and rigid feminine roles in supporting "real men" in ISIL. In the "ideal society" Muslim men and women can practice idealized masculine (the fighter/husband/father/protector) and feminine (the wife/mother/protected) gender roles (Ibid.: 102).

Van Leuven et al. (2016) have especially studied ISIL's media output and have observed that its media presence is largely structured and calculated to draw young men as recruits by employing "hyper-militarised, hyper-masculinised and particularly violent motifs to portray its fighters as the epitome of 'real men'" (Ibid.: 107). They can see this in ISIL's "slickly edited videos, with fighters choreographed, slow-motion combat and posing on captured vehicles or over the corpses of defeated enemies" (Ibid.: 107). Fantasies of glories and excitement of being involved in apocalyptic battles between good and evil can be particularly appealing to young men who feel unmanly, who have lost control over women and their own lives. ISIL recruiters and media outlets "identify and feed this desire for violent and 'righteous' male domination and empowerment" over women and infidel men (Ibid.: 108).

The traditional Islamic reaction against late modern gender ideology and sexual morals can also be seen in a manifesto entitled *Women of the Islamic State*, which was uploaded in 2015 by the all-female Al-Khanssaa Brigade, a women's activist group in Raqqa, ISIL's capital. According to this manifesto, Muslim women cannot realize their inner and authentic femininity because Muslim men are emasculated both in the westernized Muslim countries and in the West itself. This unacceptable situation is due to "Western civilisation" and universal human rights such as gender equality. They write: "The problem today is that women are not fulfilling their fundamental roles, the role that is consistent with their deepest nature, for an important reason, that women are not presented with a true picture of man and, because of the rise in the number of emasculated men who do not shoulder the responsibility allocated to them towards their ummah, religion or people, and not even towards their houses or their sons . . ." (Al-Khanssaa 2015: 17). After a lengthy rebuttal of "Western civilisation" and universal human rights such as gender equality, they conclude emphatically and concisely: "If men were men then women would be women" (Ibid. 17).

This manifesto may lead us to think that young women who choose to leave their homelands and families choose voluntary slavery in ISIL's caliphate. However, the picture sometimes gets blurred. The International Crisis Group (2015: 12) observes the paradoxical situation that some women may choose to leave their homelands and husbands behind to be free, to be able to recast marital and family relationships and to have a better life in the Caliphate, where they are revered as wives and mothers.

According to Van Leuven et al. (2016: 102) ISIL has actively sought to engage women in jihad by pointing out that jihad is not a "man-only duty". However, ISIL has largely excluded women from actual fighting – often by citing other religious norms than obligation to take part in jihad, such as prohibition on women travelling without the guardianship of a male relative (Ibid.: 102).

Van Leuven et al. (2016) have observed that there are some important differences in the way ISIL recruits females from Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries, and from Western countries. It recruits women and girls in Muslim-majority countries using a rhetoric that emphasizes traditional gender roles and women's alleged inner need for sedentary life. Alternatively, girls in Western countries are recruited using the themes of "adventure and excitement" (p. 105). Young women in both contexts are also lured with promises of romance and marriage to ISIL fighters (Ibid.: 107). It seems that it is critical to ISIL to recruit females as wives and future mothers within the Islamic state, but not as fighters. An ISIL publication entitled *Sister's Role in Jihad* suggests that the most important way women can contribute to ISIL is by indoctrinating children with the group's values and raising "jihadi babies" (Cited in Weimann 2016).

Conclusion

There are different explanations for why Muslim young men and women are attracted by ISIL propaganda. All of the explanations probably contain a kernel of truth, and all of them contribute to understanding a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Explanations focusing on sociocultural aspects, especially the chasm between the principle of gender equality in late modern societies and the idealised and rigid "real Muslim" gender roles, seem to be a welcome contribution to research on radicalization.

One theoretical consequence of stressing gender relations is the necessity to put a question mark beside the claim that radical young Muslims are merely reacting against the policies of exclusion and marginalization practiced against them in liberal democratic societies. We can also question claims that they are reacting against secularism, loss of the authority of religion and the parents, caricatures about Mohammad or satire directed against Islam. Their estrangement and alienation is much more profound. They react also against gender equality and the sexual morals in late modern societies. As Furedi (2014: 29) puts it, seeing them only as people reacting against marginalization and exclusion may lead to conceptualizing them as victims, but taking into account their reaction against fundamental liberal democratic values, such as gender equality, will help us to see them as active agents attempting – albeit misguidedly - to exercise a measure of control over their lives.

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