



2015

The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media

Lisa Blaker

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Blak3@umbc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/mca>

 Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blaker, Lisa (2015) "The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media," *Military Cyber Affairs*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2378-0789.1.1.1004>

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/mca/vol1/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Military Cyber Affairs* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media

LISA BLAKER, University of Maryland, Baltimore County

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has made great use of the Internet and online social media sites to spread its message and encourage others, particularly young people, to support the organization, to travel to the Middle East to engage in combat—fighting side-by-side with other jihadists, or to join the group by playing a supporting role—which is often the role carved out for young women who are persuaded to join ISIS. The terrorist group has even directed sympathizers to commit acts of violence wherever they are when traveling to the Middle East isn't possible. ISIS propaganda is now more frequently aimed at Westerners and more specifically aimed at the “Millennial generation.”

Clearly, social media has proven to be an extremely valuable tool for the terrorist organization and is perfectly suited for the very audience it's intending to target. According to Pew Research Center's Social Networking Fact Sheet, 89% of adults aged 18 - 29 use social media”¹ Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and even YouTube, allow ISIS propaganda to reach across the globe in real time. Increasingly, ISIS' posts to Internet sites include sophisticated, production-quality video and images that incorporate visual effects.

What messages from jihadists induce young Westerners to become involved with the terrorist group? What convinces young people from Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States—many who are technically runaways, still in their teens—to leave their homelands to join ISIS on the battlefield? What risks does a home country face when its nationals communicate and establish relationships with members of ISIS? Can the jihadist social network propaganda machine be shut down, and weighing all factors, is stopping ISIS rhetoric on the Internet the best course of action? This paper explores these and other questions related to terrorist groups' utilization of social media.

2. A PERVASIVE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Just this past February, former National Security Council staffer Hillary Mann Leverett said that each day, 90,000 pro-ISIS messages were posted on social media. Reporting for the *Tampa Bay Times*, Jon Greenberg did further research on that figure—90,000—wondering how exactly that number was arrived at and concluded it was probably not unreasonable.

While the exact source of that figure is a bit unclear, one independent researcher has data that point to a much higher number. There could be as many as 200,000 pro-ISIS tweets a day. That includes re-tweets and some generated by computer programs.²

¹ Pew Research Center, “Social Networking Fact Sheet,” January 2014. Accessed April 23, 2015.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>

² Jon Greenberg, “Does the Islamic State Post 90,000 Social Media Messages Each Day?” *Tampa Bay Times*, February 19, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015.
<http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/feb/19/hillary-mann-leverett/cnn-expert-islamic-state-posts-90000-social-media-/>

Recently the CEO of Twitter and other Twitter employees reported receiving death threats from ISIS. These threats resulted from Twitter revoking accounts that were used by the terrorist organization to spread their views and encourage violence against Westerners.³ Because these threats were publicized just this past fall, Twitter's efforts to thwart ISIS by taking down accounts may seem like a fairly recent development. Actually, though, Twitter had been shutting down accounts tied to terrorists for more than a year.

In September 2013, at least 4 militants of Al-Shabaab, a Somalia al-Qaeda ally, attacked an upscale shopping mall in Nairobi. Shortly after the gunmen stormed the mall—shooting civilians and reportedly using grenades—the terrorists began “live-tweeting the carnage” from within the mall.⁴ Twitter quickly shut down that account, but almost immediately another Twitter account opened which purportedly was also operated by the militants. This happened repeatedly for days—with a new Twitter account being opened by the group (or someone posing as their spokesperson) as soon as the one before was shut down. At the time, Twitter declined to discuss its specific reasoning for deactivating the Twitter accounts.

While committed to providing a forum for free speech, Twitter Rules⁵ currently include the following restrictions:

- **Violence and Threats:** You may not publish or post threats of violence against others or promote violence against others.
- **Unlawful Use:** You may not use our service for any unlawful purposes or in furtherance of illegal activities. International users agree to comply with all local laws regarding online conduct and acceptable content.

Clearly terrorist activity violates these terms.

Even if Twitter itself didn't take down accounts associated with ISIS and other terrorist organizations, it's possible that Anonymous, the loosely organized hacking group, would. In February of 2015, Anonymous took credit for shutting down 800 ISIS accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Though Anonymous took credit, when the supposed hacked accounts were accessed, a message was displayed indicating that they were suspended or unavailable. It's possible that Anonymous reported the noncompliant content to Twitter and Facebook, and the social media sites took action to deactivate the accounts on their own. “They often rely on complaints from others...”⁶ Some speculate that Twitter's going public in November 2013 put additional pressure on the firm to remove accounts of suspected terrorist organizations because, as a publicly traded company, it must answer to its shareholders.

³ Annabel Grossman, “Twitter CEO Reveals ISIS Has Threatened to Kill Him After the Site Shut Down Jihadist Accounts,” *DailyMail.com*, October 10, 2014. Accessed April 17, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2787735/twitter-ceo-reveals-isis-threatened-kill-site-shut-jihadist-accounts.html#ixzz3XaWERpVB>

⁴ Brian Reis, “Twitter's Terrorist Policy,” *The Daily Beast*, September 24, 2013. Accessed April 16, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/09/24/twitter-s-terrorist-policy.html>

⁵ “The Twitter Rules,” n.d. Accessed April 17, 2015. <https://support.twitter.com/articles/18311-the-twitter-rules#>

⁶ Alanna Petroff, “Hundreds of ISIS Social Media Accounts Shut Down,” *CNN Money*, February 10, 2015. Accessed April 16, 2015. <http://money.cnn.com/2015/02/10/technology/anonymous-isis-hack-twitter/>

3. MASTERFUL SELF-PROMOTION

The ISIS propaganda wing, al-Hayat, continues to mass-produce slick videos that mimic Hollywood action films and music videos and are obviously targeted to young Westerners. The videos often include music with lyrics translated into English and a number of European languages. More recent videos feature English-speaking jihadists. Notes Sean Heuston, a professor of English and film studies at The Citadel who has written about extremist video propaganda, "It's actually surprising how contemporary and hip-looking some of these things are, especially considering the fact that the messages that they are promoting are essentially medieval."⁷ It's quite evident that the audiences these images are intended to appeal to are Millennials from the West.

Some believe that a German national and former rapper, Denis Cuspert, is a main contributor to the production of these videos as he would have been exposed to high-end production techniques during his music career as rapper, Deso Dogg. Leaving his music career after converting to Islam, Cuspert joined ISIS in 2012. The U.S. State Department declared Cuspert to be an international terrorist, "...Cuspert is 'emblematic of the type of foreign recruit' ISIS seeks, has been a 'willing pitchman' for the organization's 'atrocities' and as such been officially designated as a 'foreign terrorist fighter and operative'..."⁸

Some Twitter postings may seem at first glance to be nonthreatening and perhaps could even be considered constructive. For example, one Twitter posting announced the opening of schools in the city of Raqqa, Syria (considered the capital of the Islamic State) for English speaking children; these schools promised education for both boys and girls. Opportunities for full- and part-time teachers were available at the schools as well. The ISIS flag prominently pictured on the announcement along with the heading "ATTENTION ENGLISH SPEAKING MUHAJIROON!" however, make the message far more ominous. For school children 6 to 14 years old, "...lessons taught in English are Aqedah, Hadith, Seerah, Fiqh, Thabiyyah, Jihadiyyah, Maths and English Language."⁹

4. THE SPOILS OF RECRUITMENT

Estimates are that more than 3,000 nationals from Western nations have migrated to ISIS-controlled territory in support of the extremists. The Internet and, more specifically, social media have allowed ISIS, despite the distance, to connect with thousands of people throughout the world. Associations established on social networks can progress to one-on-one communication using other "chat" services such as ChatSecure, TextSecure, and Redphone.¹⁰

⁷ Bruce Wallace, "ISIS Has Mastered High-end Video Production in Its New Propaganda Wing," *PRI's World*, September 11, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-11/isis-has-mastered-high-end-video-production-its-new-propaganda-wing/>

⁸ Andy Eckardt, "Denis Cuspert, AKA 'Deso Dog,' Named by U.S. as ISIS Terrorist," *NBCNews*, February 10, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/denis-cuspert-aka-deso-dogg-named-u-s-isis-terrorist-n303456>

⁹ "[Now, Islamic State Opens Two English Schools in Syria's Raqqa.](http://www.in.com/news/ipl/now-islamic-state-opens-two-english-schools-in-syrias-raqqa-53123741-in-1.html)" *In.com*. Last updated February 24, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://www.in.com/news/ipl/now-islamic-state-opens-two-english-schools-in-syrias-raqqa-53123741-in-1.html>

¹⁰ "[ISIS Follower On Twitter Warns Against Using Kik Messenger Service 'When Chatting About Sensitive Jihadi Stuff,' Recommends Other Technologies.](http://cjlaboratory.org/lab-projects/tracking-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/isis-follower-on-twitter-warns-against-using-kik-messenger-service-when-chatting-about-sensitive-jihadi-stuff-recommends-other-technologies/)" *The Cyber and Jihad Lab*, November 4, 2014. Accessed May 5, 2015. <http://cjlaboratory.org/lab-projects/tracking-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/isis-follower-on-twitter-warns-against-using-kik-messenger-service-when-chatting-about-sensitive-jihadi-stuff-recommends-other-technologies/>

It's important to bear in mind, too, that even when citizens do not leave for the Syria-Iraq border presently controlled by ISIS, their support of extremist organizations threatens the security of the nation because terrorist objectives can be carried out within one's own borders. The attack in Paris just this past January at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical weekly magazine, in which 12 people were killed is clear evidence of the potential danger!

5. THE ATTRACTION TO ISIS

Husna Haq, a correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor*, identified four (4) reasons why American teens, in particular, are lured into joining the terrorists of the Islamic State:¹¹

First, these groups can provide youth with a sense of identity. "ISIS typically preys on Western youth who are disillusioned and have no sense of purpose or belonging."¹² This is similar to how urban gangs draw in disaffected, aimless youth, offering them a sense of family and purpose. "The general picture provided by foreign fighters...suggests camaraderie, good morale and purposeful activity, all mixed in with a sense of understated heroism, designed to attract their friends as well as to boost their own self-esteem."¹³

Secondly, ISIS operates a sophisticated propaganda machine.¹⁴ Robert Hannigan, UK surveillance chief, stated that, "ISIS and other extremist groups use platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to reach their target audience in a language it understands. Their methods include exploiting popular hashtags to disseminate their message."¹⁵ The group's use of social media allows for quick distribution of propaganda and invites a widespread following.

Yasir Qadhi, a Muslim cleric in the U.S. and professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, agrees that radicalization occurs not in mosques, but rather online, in secret. He relates that "...most parents are comfortable with a quieter Islam that tends to shy away from controversial matters, such as American policy in Muslim lands."¹⁶ Consequently, there is a communication gap between the generations. And aside from the communication gap, the technology and social media sites that adolescents use daily can be confusing and unfamiliar to parents. There is an absence, Qadhi says, "...of genuine dialogue that could be tempered with some elderly wisdom."¹⁷

¹¹ Husna Haq, "ISIS Excels at Recruiting American Teens: Here Are Four Reasons Why," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1022/ISIS-excels-at-recruiting-American-teens-Here-are-four-reasons-why-video>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Barrett, Foreign Fighters in Syria [White paper], The Soufan Group, June 2014. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>

¹⁴ Haq, "ISIS Excels at Recruiting American Teens: Here Are Four Reasons Why."

¹⁵ Jethro Mullen, J. (2015, Feb. 25). "What is ISIS' Appeal for Young People?" *CNN*, February 25, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/25/middleeast/isis-kids-propaganda/>

¹⁶ Janet Reitman, "The Children of ISIS," *Rolling Stone*, March 25, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/teenage-jihad-inside-the-world-of-american-kids-seduced-by-isis-20150325>

¹⁷ Ibid.

A sense of religious obligation, the third reason Haq gives for why American teens are lured by ISIS,¹⁸ can often be a persuasive approach to convince young people to join the extremist group. The militants appeal to Muslims throughout the world to protect and defend fellow Muslims from attack.

With the declaration of its “caliphate” in July 2014, ISIS began to enhance and amplify themes relating to the society it wanted to create, providing a new answer to the question: “Why join?” In his first speech as putative caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reflected this new focus, calling on Muslims everywhere to make *hijra* “to the land of Islam” as a religious obligation.¹⁹

And fourth, Haq believes that ISIS’ female-targeted recruitment draws in American adolescent girls.²⁰ This premise seems reasonable particularly for young female American-Muslims who may feel isolated and removed from their non-Muslim peers. Being brought up in a strict Muslim home, for girls, often means living with a number of restrictions. While these restrictions would still be compelled in the Islamic State—“ISIS women do not leave their homes without a mahram, a male family member who acts as their guardian, or without permission from their husbands, in which case they travel in groups”²¹—Western girls may anticipate a welcoming Muslim community offering companionship, likeminded friends their own age, and the fulfillment and gratification of feeling valued.

The blog entry, “Girl Talk” asserted the following:

The increased social media recruitment efforts of women in the Islamic State to get higher numbers of women to move to Syria indicate an agenda beyond militaristic goals. As such female-run social media accounts describe a purposeful life in Syria while also providing information explaining how to enter the state, it is clear that women view themselves not only as educators of the Islamic State’s youth, but also as crucial agents in adding to its population.²²

Often the most effective ISIS recruiters of women are women. Umm Ubaydah is one such recruiter. Ubaydah, who herself left Europe for Syria early in 2014, posts a blog that encourages other women to make hijra, or migrate, to join the Islamic State. The posts include information about what to bring, how to dress, how much money will be required (which is linked to how long one plans to stay in Turkey), and what to expect once there—what daily life is like in Syria for women who make hijra. Other posts offer support, relating the difficulty, yet necessity, of leaving one’s family. Erin Marie Saltman, a Senior Counter Extremism Researcher for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), affirmed that women are quite successful as recruiters of other women because there’s a level of comfort established when conversing with another woman. Communicating with a woman can ease a

¹⁸ Haq, “ISIS Excels at Recruiting American Teens: Here Are Four Reasons Why.”

¹⁹ J. M. Berger and Jessica Stern. “Why Are Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS?” *Defense One*, March 8, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/03/why-are-foreign-fighters-joining-isis/106962/>

²⁰ Haq, “ISIS Excels at Recruiting American Teens: Here Are Four Reasons Why.”

²¹ Reitman, “The Children of ISIS.”

²² “[Girl Talk: Calling Western Women to Syria.](http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/4406-girl-talk-calling-western-women-to-syria)” [INSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism]. Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/4406-girl-talk-calling-western-women-to-syria>

potential recruit's apprehension about leaving her family.²³ According to a CNN report, TRAC—the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium, estimates that nearly 1 in 6 ISIS foreign recruits are women.²⁴

6. THOSE WHO FALL PREY

6.1 GREAT BRITAIN

The details of the case of three schoolgirls in London illustrate the power of social media to induce vulnerable young people to join ISIS. In February of this year, Amira Abase, just 15 years old, and her friends, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Shamima Begum, 15, took a bus to Gatwick Airport and boarded a flight to Istanbul. From there they took a bus to Turkey's border with Syria where they were met by ISIS operatives who took the girls by car into Syria.²⁵

The three girls were students at Bethnal Green Academy in East London. After a fellow classmate from the Academy left in December 2014 for Syria, police spoke to the three girls, "but concluded they were not being groomed by ISIS."²⁶ The school, Bethnal Green Academy, was reportedly criticized at first for seemingly supporting an environment where radicalization of youngsters could take hold. The Academy defended itself, however, pointing at social media as the medium for radicalization and maintaining that the Academy had instituted safeguards by disallowing students to access either Facebook or Twitter from the school's computers.²⁷ The Academy's position is further supported by accounts of Amira Abase's life leading up to her departure. One friend reported that as early as age 11, Amira had a smartphone and later a computer and that "she was on them all the time."²⁸

Investigators believe that Shamima, one of the three London schoolgirls, connected online via Twitter with Aqsa Mahmood. In November 2013, Aqsa Mahmood (now known as Umm Layth) left her own moderate Muslim family and their affluent home in Glasgow, Scotland, and made her way to Syria. She was 19 years old at the time. Mahmood's family believes that Aqsa was also likely radicalized online, making contacts online with others who persuaded her to join the extremists in Syria.²⁹

²³ Katie Zavadski, "Meet the Female Recruiters of ISIS," *Daily Intelligencer*, September 4, 2014. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/09/meet-the-female-recruiters-of-isis.html>

²⁴ "ISIS Lures Teenagers to Join Fight" [Video file], CNN, February 20, 2015. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/02/20/tsr-dnt-sciutto-isis-girls-to-syria.cnn>

²⁵ Sue Reid, "From Joker to Jihadi Bride: Exclusive Pictures of the London Schoolgirl Who Ran Off to Join ISIS," *Daily Mail*, Last updated March 4, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2978248/From-joker-jihadi-bride-exclusive-pictures-goofs-like-typical-London-schoolgirl-reveal-poisoned-mind-15-year-old-s-run-join-ISIS.html>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Holly Yan and Nima Elbagir, "Authorities Scramble to Find Teen Girls Before They Join ISIS" [Video file], CNN, February 23, 2015. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/23/europe/uk-syria-missing-girls/index.html?sr=tw022315isismissinggirls830aVODtopPhotos>

²⁸ Reid, "From Joker to Jihadi Bride."

²⁹ Pamela Engel, "This Scottish Teenager Went from Reading Harry Potter to Recruiting for ISIS in Syria," *Business Insider*, February 26, 2015. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-aqsa-mahmood-ended-up-recruiting-for-isis-in-syria-2015-2>

6.2 AUSTRALIA

In Australia, too, supporters of the Islamic State connect via social media with ISIS operatives and other likeminded advocates of the extremist group. Users calling themselves “al-Australi” or “al-Astrali” (meaning “from Australia”)—a surname often adopted by those who are connecting with the terrorist group from within Australia in order to hide their identity—are rampant on Facebook. “Strangers from all over the world are now meeting...to fight for a caliphate—a monotheistic Sharia Law state that they hope has its beginnings in Iraq and Syria, and will then overrun the world.”³⁰

In Australia, fears are heightened that teens in particular are being targeted by ISIS especially after, barely a month ago, two brothers—one aged 16, the other 17—were apprehended at the airport in Sydney. The pair were attempting to board a flight to the Middle East with the intent of ultimately fighting alongside ISIS militants. Items in their luggage included “extremist paraphernalia” as well as instructions for formulating a story to avoid suspicion from authorities as they left the country.³¹ The fact that the two brothers were so young and that they were native Australians stunned many. “The boys had become radicalised jihadists over the Internet and officials said their parents were ‘as shocked as any of us would be’ when they were told their children planned to join the violent terrorist group.”³²

Although Australian law enforcement has reportedly revoked 100 passports due to security concerns related to the specific individuals, recent reports indicate about 100 Australians have left the country to join the Islamic State militants. “The latest figures come as an Australian ISIS fighter in Syria resurfaced on Twitter to mentor prospective jihadists on how to join the death cult.”³³ Connecting with potential recruits via social media, “mentoring” involves linking young Westerners who support ISIS to the financial means to travel to the Middle East and providing them with contacts in Turkey—a key point of entry into Syria for foreign fighters.

6.3 UNITED STATES

Young people in the United States are not beyond the reach of ISIS either. In January 2015, a 19-year old American girl from Colorado, Shannon Maureen Conley, was sentenced to four years in prison for conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization. According to her family, Shannon had learned everything she knew about Islam from the Internet. While her family was aware that Shannon had converted to Islam, they were taken completely by surprise when they learned she was involved with jihadists. Conley’s father had found an air ticket for his daughter to fly to Turkey and contacted authorities. Conley was arrested in April 2014 at

³⁰ “Facebook Riddled with Australian Muslims Supporting ISIS,” *www.news.com.au*, August 24, 2014. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.news.com.au/technology/online/facebook-riddled-with-australian-muslims-supporting-isis/story-fnjwmwrh-1227034437804>

³¹ Jane Onyanga-Omara, “Teens Stopped at Sydney Airport on Suspicion of Trying to Join ISIL,” *USA Today*, March 8, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/03/08/teens-stopped-islamic-state/24601625/>

³² Lucy Clarke-Billings, “ISIS Targets Australian Teenagers to Join ‘Death Cult’ Amid Fears They Will Be Used as Cannon Fodder,” *The Independent*, March 9, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-targets-australian-teenagers-to-join-death-cult-amid-fears-they-will-be-used-as-cannon-fodder-10095342.html>

³³ “More Australians Joining ISIS with 30 Deaths Confirmed,” *www.news.com.au*, April 18, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.news.com.au/national/more-australians-joining-isis-with-30-deaths-confirmed/story-fncynjr2-1227308688607>

Denver International Airport where she was attempting to board a flight to Frankfurt, Germany; she had planned to fly to Turkey from there. Conley apparently told authorities she was meeting a suitor she'd met on the Internet, a 32-year old Tunisian man who was an ISIS soldier. Conley, a certified nurse's aide, expressed her intent to marry this man and "become a nurse in an ISIS camp."³⁴ During their investigation, agents uncovered al-Qaeda materials and DVDs of Anwar al-Aulaqi (an American-born Islamic cleric who was involved with al-Qaeda and a number of terrorist attacks) in Conley's home. At her sentencing, Conley insisted she understood now that the extremist views of those she'd planned to unite with abroad were twisted interpretations of the Quran. However, statements that Conley allegedly made even while she was in jail awaiting trial demonstrated continued support of violence and jihad.

Recently, *Rolling Stone* magazine featured a story about three teenagers from the same suburban-Chicago Muslim family who were detained at O'Hare International Airport early in October, 2014. Authorities did not disclose how their suspicions were raised about these three siblings, but authorities were on the lookout that day, specifically looking for the three at the airport. The oldest of the three, Hamzah Khan, aged 19, was arrested for "...'knowingly attempting to provide material support and resources' to a foreign terrorist organization in the form of personnel — namely, himself."³⁵ Because Hamzah's siblings were younger—his sister was 17 and his brother just 16—they have not yet been charged with a crime, but it's likely in time they will be.

The story of these Midwestern suburban teenagers highlights the difficulties of growing up Muslim in the United States, particularly in this post-9/11 era. Many Muslims in the U.S. feel that they have lived under a constant veil of fear and suspicion. Many feel they have been unfairly harassed, having been pulled aside at the airport by TSA as they traveled, or at the very least, being on the receiving end of nervous, distrustful stares. "Many Muslim families [know] of at least one child who'd been teased and called 'Osama' or 'terrorist' on the playground."³⁶ Furthermore, for the whole of these teenagers' lives, the United States has been involved in wars in predominantly Muslim countries—Afghanistan and Iraq. American-Muslims often feel as though they don't belong—a dangerous state of mind for impressionable young people who are looking to fit in.

Growing up, the three Khan children did not attend their local suburban public school. They were instead educated at an Islamic primary school and, when they were older, an Islamic day school. At age 10, Hamzah left school for more than two years to become a hafiz. (A hafiz is someone who has memorized the Quran.) "It's not uncommon in highly religious Muslim families, particularly those from the South Asian community, to put their kids through this program, which is both a sign of piety and great prestige."³⁷ Hamzah's sister also became a hafiz and was home-schooled during the three year process; these were her middle school years. After completing the hafiz program, Hamzah's sister did not feel comfortable returning to school and attending, at that point, high school. Instead she continued her studies through a correspondence program. According to Ahmed Rehab, executive director of the Chicago branch of the Council on American Islamic Relations, this type of upbringing can "cocoon" children and "parents run the risk of setting them up for profound isolation."³⁸

³⁴ Michael Martinez, Ana Cabrera and Sara Weisfeldt, "Colorado Woman Gets 4 Years for Wanting to Join ISIS," *CNN*, January 24, 2015. Accessed April 25, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/23/us/colorado-woman-isis-sentencing/>

³⁵ Reitman, "The Children of ISIS."

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

It's apparent that American culture does not always align with Muslim norms and values. Particularly for young women, the style of dress that is expected in traditional Muslim families is far more modest. Dating in a conventional American sense—a teenage boy and girl going out together on their own to a movie, for instance—would not be permitted in a family that strictly adheres to Islamic laws and customs. The dichotomy that exists between the American and Muslim cultures can cause Muslim teenagers in the United States to feel isolated and disconnected from their peers.

On the reverse, though, adolescents living in Western cultures have virtually *no* restrictions as to whom they connect and interact with when communicating over the Internet—and this is true for both Muslim and non-Muslim teens alike. Parents often have little, if any, knowledge of the contacts and associations their teens are making privately from their own computers and smartphones. For teenage girls raised in strict Muslim households who may perhaps live decidedly sheltered lives, behavior that would be prohibited in their daily lives—communicating one-on-one with a young man without another male family member accompanying, for example—is completely feasible when the interaction occurs over the Internet.

7. CONCLUSION

The grooming process used by ISIS in recruiting teenage girls over the Internet is analogous to the tactics used by online predators. A pedophile gains the trust of the victim over time and persuades the victim to keep the relationship secret. “When the time is right he convinces the child to leave her family and join him. The process is identical in radicalization by ISIS.”³⁹ With the rising number of young people being lured into joining the extremists, Anwar argues that the problem should be regarded as a child protection issue.⁴⁰

This approach seems quite reasonable. For the most part, officials have not disclosed how they've come to identify many of the would-be ISIS recruits—stopping them at airports as they're attempting to leave the country. It's probable, though, that authorities are tracking communications between ISIS and the foreigners who are “following” them, and perhaps even more likely, posing as ISIS members or ISIS supporters in order to draw in followers. This “impersonation” tactic is similar to the *Dateline NBC* feature, “To Catch A Predator,” in which child sex predators were rooted out on the Internet by authorities who—in online chat rooms—pretended to be underage girls or boys who had agreed to meet adults (the suspected predators) for sex.

It's a losing battle to shut down every Twitter account operated by suspected terrorists, delete their Facebook accounts, or take down YouTube videos posted by ISIS—unless the content specifically violates the Terms of Service for those sites. Reis likened the prospect to a game of “Whac-a-Mole”—as soon as one account is shut down, there's another popping up.⁴¹ Not to mention that freedom of expression is a basic tenet of the U.S. Constitution, and suspending Twitter or Facebook accounts willy-nilly because we disagree with others' views is completely contrary to this ideology.

The better option is to use the social media platforms ISIS uses to advance our own objectives—to track the terrorist group and its operatives and to identify the at-risk populations ISIS attempts to connect with. In addition, following ISIS on social media allows the U.S. and other Western nations to understand the reasons that young citizens are drawn to extremist groups, as well as to learn how to better combat ISIS recruitment efforts—whether the purpose of recruitment is to induce prospective “foreign fighters” to travel overseas or to persuade sympathizers to carry out terrorist attacks inside the borders of their own countries.

³⁹ Aamer Anwar, “How ISIS's \$2B Budget Helps It Recruit Western Teenagers to Terrorism,” *CNN*, March 27, 2015. Accessed April 21, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/27/opinions/aamer-isis-recruiting-western-teenagers/>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Reis, “Twitter's Terrorist Policy.”