Disengagement Is Not an Option: Why Repatriation of ISIS Brides Must Contain a De-radicalization Component

Abstract

The relationship between a state and non-state actors can be a complicated one, even more so, when the non-state actor is allegedly affiliated with an unprecedented terrorist organization abroad. 2020 marks six years since the rise and fall of the Islamist group Islamic State (or *Daesh*) "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria. A 2018 study done by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) found that 41,490 citizens from 80 countries had gone to Iraq and Syria to join the terrorist organization. Of that number, researchers found that 4,640 were women. With the fall of the Caliphate, many of those women ended up in camps and are now requesting leniency and repatriation from their home countries. This paper argues that should countries choose to repatriate their female ISIS citizens (and subsequently their children), then imbued in the repatriation process ought to be a framework for de-radicalization or attitudinal modification rather than disengagement (behavioral modification).

Keywords: De-radicalization, disengagement, attitudinal modification, behavioral modification, terrorism, Islamic State, female Jihadi, ISIS brides, repatriation strategies

With the fall of the Islamic State's (also known as ISIS or IS) self-declared caliphate in 2019, governments from around the world are confronted with a new dilemma—the ISIS returnee question. The question of what to do with their citizens who had gone abroad to join the Islamist group and live under ISIS' caliphate. The responses from policymakers in regard to next steps have been to either leave their citizens in detainment camps and prisons in Iraq and Syria, repatriate them or evade the issue. When leaders do engage in discussions and dialogue about the ISIS returnee question, it appears that the main focus is on actions surrounding what to do with the outright and obvious symbol: the male Jihadi fighter. Effectively overlooking and adding to the invisibility of the ISIS brides and their children, and, one could argue, amassing a potential security risk in the future.

The foreign ISIS bride as a subject is one shrouded in a penumbra. It is difficult for many to understand their motives or rationale for leaving nations in the West and joining ISIS. Because of this policymakers have been unclear as to how to proceed in regards to them and their reintroduction into society. It is easy to rally support for prosecution or some form of punitive repercussion to the ISIS male fighter as the world has seen their abhorrent acts proudly displayed through their propaganda. In ISIS propaganda, the tasks of the women surround the house, she is to be a pious Muslim, and a dutiful wife and mother. The brides who wish to be repatriated like UK-born Shamima Begum, and American native Hoda Muthana among others, also maintain that their role within the terror group never included violent acts, *eo ipso*, making them not a threat (Drury 2019, Francis & Longman 2019). As a Canadian ISIS bride argued, "I don't believe I did anything wrong. I didn't kill nobody. I didn't do any harm to anybody" (CTV, 2017).

These claims contrast starkly with the images of ISIS brides as part of the morality police, carrying guns to enforce the rules. Or of their complicity in the systematic and precise exploitation and genocide of the Yazidi peoples. Magboula Bajo, a Yazidi survivor paints another picture of the ISIS brides and their actions, "They are also the wives of ISIS members. They treated us worse than their husbands did to us. Those ISIS women were holding Yazidi girls for their husbands to rape them and torture them" (Longman, 2020). The case of Jennifer W in Germany also highlights the cruelness and brutality of the brides.

The role of the ISIS bride, however, has been obfuscating and it is unclear as to how to conceive and reconcile the two narratives of the ISIS bride and translate that into a coherent policy. What is clear is that strategies and policies geared towards the repatriation of ISIS brides

ought to include some element of a de-radicalization program and not one with the goal merely of dis-engagement. The point of this paper is not to argue the pros and cons of repatriation, merely, it is to illustrate the distinction between "de-radicalization" and "disengagement" and the objectives of each process, then apply them to the case of the ISIS brides particularly those from Western nations.

Foreign ISIS brides, often young women, have undergone the process of radicalization; Doosje et al (2016) and Darcy M.E. Noricks (2009) purports that the method to undo the radicalization process is not necessarily to put the radicalized individual through the process in reverse. Radicalization results in individuals becoming progressively motivated or willing to use violent measures against members of an "out-group or symbolic target" (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 79). In the case of ISIS, the out-group consists of people in the West, and non-Muslims living in the Middle East. The Yazidis a minority group have been the predominant victim of ISIS facing genocide, ethnic cleansing, and various crimes against humanity from the terrorist group whom deems the Yazidis as "infidels" and "devil worshippers" (Jalabi, 2014). The goal of using violence against members of an "outgroup" is to enact behavioral changes (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 79) and accomplish or have their political goals realized (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 79).

There are three phases to the radicalization process: Sensitivity to a radical ideology, Group Membership, and Action (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 79). In the first phase, the radical group appeals to individuals by offering them a sense of purpose, identity, and community, reinstating into the individual feelings of "belonging, respect, heroism, status, and the notion to fight for a holy cause" (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 81). In addition, the group sets out and provides clearly its values and norms (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 81). ISIS uses a strict interpretation and reading of Islamic texts to lay out norms, values, and the procedures for governance, bureaucracy, and tasks found in day-to-day life, such as how to dress. Oftentimes, those who fall under the influence of radicalization are facing personal uncertainty (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 81) or instability. Ambiguity and uncertainty in life and of the future appears to be a motivating factor, one that opens vulnerable individuals to be influenced and accept radicalized ideologies.

In the second phase—group membership—there is a reciprocation of commitment made between the individual and the group (Doosje et al., 2016). In other words, "the person feels attached or fused with the group, and the group is fused with the individual" (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 81). In this stage, the individual is seeking and motivated to demonstrate their loyalty to the group (Doosje et al., 2016), and is more open to following and practicing the group's

norms and values (Doosje et al., 2016). An example of demonstrating loyalty can be seen on the social media accounts of ISIS brides who express a desire or readiness to leave their country to make *hijira* or "the act of leaving one's land and family to take up jihad in the name of establishing an 'Islamic State'" (Perešin, 2015, p. 22). In this phase, individuals are encouraged to break ties with family and friends who do not belong to the group (Doosje et al., 2016). After traveling to Turkey, Hoda Muthana, an ISIS bride from Alabama, had told her father that she had married an ISIS fighter. When questioned as to how she could get married without her father's permission she replied in an interview with BuzzFeed Media that she did not need "the traditional permission of her father because he was against ISIS" (Counter Extremism Project). This distancing and breaking ties with family and friends serve two purposes, firstly, it isolates the person from their familial supports, and secondly, it strengthens the bond and fraternity between the individual and the group.

The third phase of radicalization is action (Doosje et al., 2016). In this phase, the individual is influenced by the radical group to employ and manifest violence on others (Doosje et al., 2016). This is done by dehumanizing and "stressing the non-human" characteristics of the "other" or out-group (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 82). At this stage, the radicalized person is prepared to not only employ violence but also willing to lose their life in action (Doosje et al., 2016). Again using Hoda Muthana as an example, when her husband was killed she expressed on social media how "jealous" and envious she was of him because he had died waging jihad and was now a martyr (Hall, 2019). Zehra Duman an ISIS bride from Australia tweeted out a picture of five women dressed in black burkas armed with weapons with the caption, "US + Australia, how does it feel that all 5 of us were born n raised in your lands, & now here thirsty for ur blood?" (Hall, 2019).

As a mechanism to prevent individuals from backing down from committing violence, radical groups often have the individuals prove that they are committed to action and the cause (Doosje et al., 2016). Usually, these are done by written or videotaped testament pledging allegiance to the cause and reaffirming their loyalty and commitment to the ideology. During the phases of radicalization, a "shield of resistance" is built up making it more difficult for anti-radical messages from those outside their group to be heard or found persuasive (Doosje et al., 2016).

Piercing that shield of resistance and working to reverse the effects of radicalization can take place in the form of deradicalization or dis-engagement. Doosje et al. (2016) describe de-

radicalization as a process in which individuals reject the ideology they once ascribed to. Omar Ashour (2008) defines de-radicalization or attitudinal modification (Horgan 2008) as a process that guides an individual to alter or reconsider his position and attitudes about violence particularly violence against civilians (Ashour 2008; Norick 2009). The goal of this method is to enact a change in belief from the radicalized individual or group.

In contrast, the goal of disengagement or behavioral modification is to prompt a transformation or alteration in actions (Norick, 2009). The distinction between the two is key; the purpose of disengagement is to stop the individual from executing or manifesting violent acts of terror against civilians. These processes do not reconcile or persuade the individual to abandon the radicalized ideology, just to not commit violence in the name of pursuing the groups' political goals and demands. De-radicalization however, works to actively change the individuals' attitudes and to persuade them to reject the radical ideology not just the use of violence.

According to Horgan (2008) from a counterterrorism point of view, behavioral modification is viewed at a higher priority than ideological modification due to the fact that disengagement can occur without having to undergo a de-radicalization process (Horgan 2008; Norvick, 2009). This may be the case when it comes to the actual ISIS fighters where their role involved them using violence. When viewing the profile and role of the ISIS bride, however, this argument does not apply. Instead, the primary method for the ISIS brides ought to be an attitudinal modification.

The actions and motivations of the foreign ISIS brides are relatively unknown and incomprehensible. According to Anita Perešin (2015) due to the diversity of the ISIS brides, it is very difficult to synthesize an accurate portrait of women most vulnerable to the radical ideology (p. 22). The data she found suggests that these women and girls are often second of third generation Muslim immigrants, and there is a considerable amount of those who have converted to Islam who have joined ISIS (Perešin, 2015). The age range of those who attempted to travel to Syria range between 16 and 24 years old, and there have been some cases of girls younger trying to migrate to ISIS' caliphate (Perešin, 2015). What is interesting about the background of ISIS brides particularly from Western countries is that they have come from "well-established, moderate and non-radicalized families" (Perešin, 2015). Some of the older brides are well-educated like Aqsa Mahmood, who was a radiologist in Britain (Perešin, 2015). More research has to be conducted to examine and explain the factors that made women and

girls with this average, ordinary profile, vulnerable to radicalization. After speaking to an ISIS bride in a Syrian camp, James Longman reflects on the puzzling nature of the ISIS brides writing, "[s]he may be an arch manipulator, or genuinely repentant. But I confess I don't understand how someone so obviously bright could have been lured so easily to a place like Syria" (Longman, 2020).

The women in ISIS territory are not terrorists in the sense of fighters like the male jihadists. They were not there to support the state with guns or bullets against the "outgroup" or enemy, but rather, they had two purposes; the first was to give legitimacy to the group and their initiative. With the women and children there, the caliphate, according to Rukmini Callimachi in an interview with *CBC's The Current,* "became a state rather than just a terrorist organization that was interested in killing people" (Moran, 2019). Their second purpose was propagandists and recruiters. Social media such as Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and "encrypted audio-visual communications apps like Skype, Viber, Kik and Wickr" (Himel, 2016) were the main mediums through which they used to promulgate their message and bringing more people to ISIS from the West (Moran, 2019).

These online campaigns were so successful that the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) estimates that in 2014 the number of foreigners from Western Europe who went to join ISIS was almost 4,000 (Neumann, 2015). ICSR also reported that the largest numbers of European foreigners came from France (1,200), the United Kingdom (500-600), and Germany (500-600) (Neumann, 2015). In that same year, 100 Canadians, and 100 Americans had gone abroad to join ISIS (Neumann, 2015). Estimates for the worldwide total of foreigners who traveled to ISIS territory was at 20,730 people in 2014 (Neumann, 2015). As the Centre notes, this total exceeds the number of foreign fighters involved in the Afghanistan conflict making it "the largest mobilization of foreigner fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945" (Neumann, 2015).

Shamima Begum was seen as the "poster girl" for ISIS (Drury, 2019) and as a key recruiter and propagandist. Hoda Muthana also had a social media presence promoting the group's ideology. For one account she called herself the "Umm Jihad" or the "Mother of Jihad" (Hall, 2019). In an exposé for *Buzzfeed News*, Ellie Hall (2019) presented a catalog in which she had been saving tweets allegedly from Muthana. In these tweets Muthana writes to encourage others to join by traveling to ISIS territory or to conduct violent acts against civilians for the group:

> "There are people that made it here while they were on their bail back in their hometowns. Don't wait to come when you're "safe"" (Hall, 2019).
>
> "…there are soooo many Aussies and Brits here but where are the Americans, wake up u cowards" (Hall, 2019).
>
> "If you can't come here then terrorize the kuffar at home. Form and expand the Khilafah where you are" (Hall, 2019).
>
> "Americans wake up ! Men and women altogether. You have much to do while you live under our greatest enemy, enough of your sleeping ! Veterans, Patriot, Memorial Day parades..go on drive by's + spill all of their blood or rent a big truck n drive all over them. Kill them" (Hall, 2019).
>
> "For those who plan on coming may Allah grant you makhrija, as for those who wish to remain, what's wrong w/ u that u choose the kuffar over us. U know that one day we will storm into the west and not be responsible for those who have chosen to reside w/ the kuffar" (Hall, 2019).

Muthana's tweets are a tiny sample and an example of the way Twitter was used to encourage and spread ISIS ideology and agenda.

While physically committing violence against the "outgroup" was not initially in the description of the ISIS bride would be playing, ISIS brides supported and participated in violence against Yazidis:

> "One of the most disturbing aspects of what women did — ISIS wives — is they were involved in the Yazidi sex trafficking…These are the women from the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq, who were abducted by the Islamic state, and were forced into a system of sexual slavery" (Moran, 2019).

It needs to be stressed that just because their main purpose was to stay home did not mean that they did not actively support or engage. One example is the on-going case in Germany of Jennifer W., an ISIS bride returnee. In the summer of 2015 Jennifer W. and her husband (an ISIS fighter), bought a five-year-old girl "from a group of prisoners of war and kept her in their home as a slave" (Eddy, 2019). During her trial, German prosecutors relayed to the court that the young Yazidi girl had fallen ill and wet her mattress, the defendant's husband responded by

chaining the young girl outside in the heat, "leaving her in great agony to die of thirst…The defendant let her husband do as he liked, and took no action to save the girl" (Eddy, 2019).

Nations that are seeking to repatriate their citizens who became ISIS brides should not rely on dis-engagement or behavioral modification tactics; they do not go far enough. A disengagement strategy may persuade the ISIS brides to cease recruiting or promulgating propaganda via social media however, it does not prevent or stop them from passing on the radical ideology to their children who may take up the cause and engage in violence. Thus, creating a new generation of fighters and ISIS loyalists and a new wave of individuals to persuade to cease their actions. The only option is to have returning ISIS brides and their children go through de-radicalization programs, because as Longman writes "any radicalization that may have been a problem when ISIS finally fell a year ago is only deeper now" (Longman 2020).

A key point in the construction of the ISIS bride is that she is a carrier and purveyor of ISIS' radical ideology. That was one of her functions and purpose for the Islamic State: to learn ISIS' way of thinking to pass it on not only to others outside her circle but to the next generation. As Perešin (2015) explains "women talk about joining the *state* [ISIS], not as a terrorist group, and expect to be given an important role in creating the new, ideologically pure state, where they could live 'honorably' under a strict interpretation of *Shariah* law" (p. 24). With the brides playing a pivotal role in ISIS—and have as a requirement to play that role—immersed themselves in the violent, militant ideology.

While there is debate about what is needed for a de-radicalization program or how to measure its success, it could be argued that there are certain elements that the West could adopt in its program. Borrowing from de-radicalization programs from the Middle East, the first thing may be to not frame the program as a de-radicalization program. In the case of the Saudi Arabian government's program, they employ the term "rehabilitation" (Horgan, 2008). An interviewee for Horgan's research told him that he prefers the term 'reforming', saying that "if there is nothing wrong with 'radicalization', then it is offensive and misleading to speak of "de-radicalization'" (Horgan 2008, p. 6). From the perspective of the individual who has become radicalized and joined the terrorist group, there is nothing evil or wrong with being radicalized. With that starting point claiming to help them by "de-radicalizing them" you are implying there is a problem with them and that you are superior to them. It could also work to further isolate them and make it hard to pierce the shield of resistance.

De-radicalization programs should also include a restorative and rehabilitation aspect. One that includes the participation of the family and community of the individual. The de-radicalization effort and its success can be determined by the acceptance of society and societal attitudes (Abuza 2009; Norick 2009). Many of the brides whom Longman (2020) interviewed expressed a desire to be accepted back into society and to not be treated as an outcast. The participation can help to rebuild the bonds to their community thus making them less dependent on their support network that was presented by the radical group. Perešin (2015) notes that in the cases of individual ISIS brides who migrated there is no evidence to suggest that their families supported their move or radicalization (Perešin, 2015). In some cases, family members pleaded with them to return home, and others traveled to Turkey to bring the ISIS bride back home Perešin (2015). The overall reaction from most of the families was shock and anger at the distortion of Islam (Perešin, 2015). These families are key to the de-radicalization process and with countering ideological support for terrorism (Perešin, 2015; Ranstop & Herd, 2007).

What is clear from the literature and after an examination of the role played by the ISIS bride is that should they be repatriated; the brides must be enrolled in a de-radicalization program tailored to them to undo the effects of radicalization. Ignoring this poses a security risk that could manifest more violence in the future. Disengagement strategies may work in ceasing the violence and those who commit violence. Nevertheless, this does not stop those who spread the ideology and promote violent means. ISIS brides ought to go through an ideological modification (de-radicalization) program, not only to understand that advocating for violence is harmful and abhorrent, but so that they realize the ideology they were radicalized with is dangerous and does not spread it to others. Nations in the West especially have the resources to design rehabilitation and de-radicalization to help the returnees, and more importantly, the children who were born in ISIS territory who have been exposed to ISIS ideology.

Emily A. Singh

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