Social Media and the Islamic State: Understanding the Motivations for Jihadi Brides

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Defence and Security Studies

at Massey University, New Zealand

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2020

Abstract

This thesis examines the motivations of women who joined the Islamic State after engaging with the terrorist organisation and their supporters on social media. Public social media posts made by Aqsa Mahmood and Hoda Muthana, two western women who joined the Islamic State in 2013 and 2014, are analysed through the theoretical framework of social identity theory to determine the factors that drove them to depart for Syria to become wives and mothers for the Islamic State. From here, these common trends are considered in terms of contemporary countermeasures designed to counter terrorist recruitment on social media, to consider how effective these might have been in preventing the Islamic State's recruitment of women online.

Acknowledgements

I would like to first express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Nick Nelson, for his expertise and guidance throughout this research process. This thesis would not have been possible without his patience, enthusiasm, and encouragement. His experience and knowledge have truly shaped this thesis in ways that have helped me to really explore a new and exciting area of academia. I would also like to express my appreciation to the staff of the Centre for Defence and Security Studies, who have provided an incredible level of support throughout my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, which has enabled me to complete this thesis.

I would also like to show my gratitude to my family. Firstly, to my mother, who has always encouraged and exemplified the importance of pursuing one's passions and remained an unwavering source of emotional support throughout the writing process. Second, to my stepfather, who fostered an interest in the world and current affairs and has never been afraid to challenge my assumptions. Next, to my sister, who continually inspires me and pushes me to perform at my best. And to my Oma, who has been a source of inspiration and a driving force behind my academic journey. I would lastly like to thank my friends, who have provided frank encouragement and understanding throughout this process. To those friends who have imparted their experiences, proofreading skills, and provided advice and encouragement, I have appreciated it all.

Contents

Chapter I: Introduction

In February 2015, just eight months after the Islamic State declared a *Caliphate*, it was reported that 90,000 pro-Islamic State social media posts were produced on a daily basis.[1] Not only were the Islamic State able to coordinate the dissemination of their content across the internet, but they also seemed to be at least somewhat successful in efforts to use social media to recruit members internationally. An effective social media presence formed a core component of their communication and recruitment strategy and became a platform where the Islamic State were proficient in the widespread distribution of terrorist material and recruitment of local and foreign fighters.[2] Coupled with its embrace of social media platforms was its unique approach to female recruits. While most *Salafist Jihadi* terror groups have used local women in a variety of roles, the Islamic State have used social media to target and recruit women from abroad.[3]

There have been substantially fewer female terrorists than males, though precise figures vary between organisations.[4] The status of female combatants in terrorist organisations with Islamist ideologies has been contentious, and women have most often occupied traditional, non-combatant roles in the private space.[5] These roles were predominantly filled by local women and, as such, recruitment was not directed toward those outside of the space in which a terrorist organisation physically operated. The Islamic State considered mothers and wives important to the survival of the group and its ideology through raising the next generation of *jihadis* and looked internationally to recruit sufficient numbers, thus, ensuring the permanence of the society the Islamic State endeavoured to construct.[6] Women were, therefore, targeted by Islamic State recruiters online, both through their recruitment material and in direct conversations with them.

As more western women travelled to Syria and Iraq, it became apparent the Islamic State were able to influence individuals, many of whom were well-educated, to relocate to a warzone through purely online interactions and without in-person contact. The process of radicalisation and recruitment online often took place in private, with families and friends of the recruit completely

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[1] Lisa Blaker, "The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media," *Military Cyber Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1, https://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2378-0789.1.1.1004.
[2] Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media," *Social Science and Public Policy* 54 (2017): 138-139, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0.
[3] Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz, "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 1 (2018): 47, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.13.
[4] Cyndi Banks, "Introduction: Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Gendering Terrorism," *Women and Criminal Justice* 29 (2019): 181-182, https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2019.1633612.
[5] Devorah Margolin, "The Changing Roles of Women in Violence Islamist Groups," in *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender and Violent Extremism*, ed. Audrey Alexander (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, 2019): 41.
[6] Anita Perešin, "Why Women from the West are Joining ISIS," *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 33.

unaware of their intentions until they had already departed for Syria and Iraq.[7] This environment appears to have become permissive for recruiters online to control the narrative vulnerable individuals were exposed to and reduce the opportunities for radicalisation to be disrupted. However, these interactions were not devoid of agency on the part of women recruited into the Islamic State, who were active online across social media, eventually contributing to the recruitment of other women while being radicalised themselves.[8]

This then raises the question of what drove women to participate in the Islamic State online and to eventually relocate from the comfort of their westernised lifestyles into a conflict zone. Their recruiters appear to have had a level of influence on the women they engaged with, but this was contingent on continued responses in an environment where there are fewer consequences of disengaging with undesirable individuals than there are in face-to-face social interactions. Furthermore, the escalation from online participation to violence represents a radical shift in behaviour that stems from a shift in an individual's psychological state, whereby they are prepared to engage in, or at the very least support, violence in the name of their newfound belief system.

This thesis sets out to understand the motivations for western women who joined the Islamic State as a result of their recruitment via social media. What is understood about this process is based on the experiences of individuals and, therefore, it can be difficult to determine a formula for recruitment. That being said, there are commonalities in the motivations based on the shared viewpoints they develop and the experiences that are used to facilitate the radicalisation process. Based on the understanding gained of the motivations that drove western women to join the Islamic State, this thesis will seek to identify countermeasures that may be effective in the mitigation of these drivers.

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[7] John Simpson, "ISIS Brides: Parents had no Idea of Bethnal Green Girls' Plan to Wage Jihad," *The Times*, February 13, 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-brides-parents-had-no-idea-of-bethnal-green-girls-plan-to-wage-jihad-3m2362h6s.
[8] Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad after the Caliphate," Lowy Institute, accessed March 26, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/behind-veil-women-jihad-after-caliphate.

Chapter II: Literature Review

In spite of an abundance of research, no general theory of terrorism exists to explain its causes or why individuals choose to undertake terrorist activities. In part, this is due to the lack of an agreed definition of terrorism; however, it is also due to the heavily politicised discourse on the subject.[9] Despite the fact that no general theory exists, there are a number of theories that explore the topic from a variety of perspectives and identify several partly overlapping causes and risk factors that contribute to terrorism. Broadly, terrorism can be understood at three levels: individual, organisational, and systemic. Understanding these levels is important for developing strategies to counter terrorism recruitment. This review will provide an overview of the various factors at each level, with a focus on one of the organisational level theories, social identity theory, which will be utilised as a framework for understanding the recruitment of jihadi brides on social media. It will then examine literature on female terrorists, their motivations, and the role of social media in terrorist recruitment.

There are several theories that seek to explain elements of terrorism, including its effectiveness, origins, operations, and outcomes.[10] These theories can be categorised into three levels, based on the approach taken to the problem-set: individual, organisational, and structural or systemic. Theories focused on the individual often attempt to define the characteristics of a terrorist, which creates a problematically broad definition to capture a wide spectrum of individuals.[11] Several theoretical frameworks have been applied at the individual level, including psychological and sociological approaches used in an attempt to answer why people become terrorists.[12] Attempts to produce a psychological profile of a terrorist have proven unsuccessful.[13] Instead, terrorists have been found to be mostly clinically normal and with a broad range of personality factors.[14] Despite this, individual theories have, nonetheless, proven a popular approach within the literature, as a means to identify the motivations that drive terrorists to violence.

At an organisational level, it is recognised that institutions impact on individual behaviour. This approach looks to the needs and aspirations of the organisation to develop an understanding of

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[9] Jacqueline S. Hodgson and Victor Tadros, "The Impossibility of Defining Terrorism," *New Criminal Law Review* 16, no. 3 (2013): 495, https://doi.org/10.1525/nclr.2013.16.3.494.

[10] Bradley McAllister and Alex P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 201.

[11] Walter Laqueur, "Interpretations of Terrorism: Fact, Fiction and Political Science," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12 (1977): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200947701200101.

[12] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies,* 214.

[13] Randy Borum, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa: University of South Florida, 2004), 36.

[14] Andrew Silke, "Cheshire-cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in psychological Research," *Crime and Law* 4, no. 1 (1998): 67, https://10.1080/10683169808 401747.

the impact it will have on individual behaviours.[15] Various theoretical frameworks have been applied to understand the impact an organisation has on an individual, including organisational process, social identity, and communications theories.[16] These theories are focused on the relationships between individuals and their organisations, as well as individuals within organisations. As such, they provide insight into the social dimensions of terrorist activities, and how these social interactions motivate individuals in their beliefs, behaviours, and actions. These interactions can be observed under a number of circumstances, and more recently, have been demonstrated across several social media platforms where users interact with and influence one another as part of an organisational structure. Although theories at this level have limitations, they offer considerable potential for understanding behaviour that individual or systematic theories do not.

At an even broader level, there have been attempts across the literature to characterise the systemic drivers of terrorism.[17] Examples of these include structural inequalities that marginalise particular groups, perceived or actual injustices, and political systems created from opposing beliefs. In spite of expectations that terrorism is rooted in adverse structural conditions, this is once again too general, with terrorist organisations emerging and thriving in a variety of environments.[18] Systemic level approaches to terrorism studies are best placed to answer questions about the ideological position of an organisation and the way in which a broad issue impacts upon its members motivations. However, as a broader theoretical framework, it often lacks the depth to understand the different ways these drivers have an impact upon individuals and organisations.

At all levels of analysis, it has been determined that a single, general theory to explain terrorism does not work, as terrorist organisations (and the individuals within them) are diverse in their makeup.[19] An increased emphasis on individualistic experience, but within the context of broader social relationships, as a driver for participation in a terrorist group gives strength to the use of social psychology as a lens for such studies. Social psychology is the study of social interactions, particularly how psychological variables are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others.[20] Though self-radicalisation cannot be discounted as a viable means of participation, including where individuals are inspired to undertake an act of terror based on material they have consumed online, the majority of interactions on social media appear to be

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[15] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies*, 226.
[16] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies,* 226.
[17] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies*, 248.
[18] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies*, 248-249.
[19] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies*, 228.
[20] "Understanding Social Psychology," American Psychological Association, accessed January 15, 2020, https://www.apa.org/action/science/social/

social in nature. To answer the research question at hand, being the factors that motivate women on social media to join the Islamic State, this study will draw upon social identity theory, which was initially proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979.[21]

Social identity theory posits that the groups to which people belong determine their identity.[22] Existential motives can drive a person to seek out a group, including, but not limited to, meaning, connectedness, empowerment, and morality.[23] Group membership is important for a person's concept of self, seen to be derived partly from their participation.[24] As such, where the group changes, the part of one's self emotionally attached to or derived from the group is seen to change in line with group expectations. Social identity theory is seen, therefore, as a framework through which individual changes can be understood and predicted dependent on the social behaviours of the group.

Groups can be used to divide one's world into "us" and "them", otherwise known as ingroups and outgroups. Social identity theory proposes that members of the ingroup will discriminate against members of the outgroup to improve their own social image by seeking out negative aspects of an outgroup.[25] Said otherwise, there is a tendency to view one's ingroup as more successful or superior when compared to an outgroup. This further entrenches the sense of belonging within a group. Antagonism toward an outgroup can have adverse consequences. For example, racism may be the product of tensions between ingroups and outgroups, and in its most radical format, can lead to genocide.[26] Individuals can develop a sense of empowerment through their participation in a group where they feel a sense of superiority over outgroup members.

Tajfel and Turner proposed three mental processes are involved in the evaluation of ingroups and outgroups. The first of these is social categorisation. One categorises people, including oneself,

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[21] Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Montery, CA: Brooks-Cole, 1979).
[22] Henri Tajfel, "Individuals and Groups in Social Psychology," *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 18 (1979): 183-185.
[23] Blake E. Ashforth and Fred Mael, "Social Identity Theory and Organisation," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, No. 1 (January 1989): 22.
[24] John C. Turner and Penelope J. Oakes, "The Significance of the Social Identity Concept for Social Psychology with Reference to Individualism, Interactionism and Social Influence," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 25 (1986): 240-241.
[25] Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," in *Understanding Peace and Conflict through Social Identity Theory,* ed. Shelley McKeown, Reeshma Haji and Neil Ferguson (Switzerland: Spring International Publishing, 2016): 5.
[26] Omar Shahabudin McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (2012): 123, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00100.

to understand the social environment.[27] Social categories may include ethnicity, nationality, religion, occupation, and gender among other things, all of which are useful to how one makes sense of their environment and the functions of the people who exist within it.[28] In the process of categorisation, one detects inherent similarities or imposes a structure on their social world.[29] It is also possible both approaches to categorisation will be used simultaneously, whereby one uses these inherent similarities as the basis for this structure. This process promotes ingroup favouritism as well as perceptions that outgroups are homogenous and, therefore, its members are broadly considered to constitute similar types of people.

The second process proposed is social identification. This is the mental process where the individual adopts the identity of the group they have categorised themselves to belong to.[30] This is the point where individuals begin to behave as they believe is expected of them to conform with the group's norms and are more committed to the group.[31] There is also an emotional significance to this identification, which is intrinsically linked to one's self-esteem.[32] The final mental process proposed by Tajfel and Turner is social comparison. This occurs as one compares their group to others around them.[33] To ensure groups are able to maintain self-esteem, they need to compare favourably to other groups around them.[34] This is not to say that all members will agree entirely with the decisions and expectations of groups in which they are members. Individuals may disagree with overarching elements of the organisation, such as its values, strategy, and system of authority. However, overall, they are expected to conform with the group's overarching expectations to maintain membership.

As the processes of social identity unfold, there is an opportunity for influence to be exercised to shape the behaviours and actions of members. The nature of this power evolves with the group. There are several ways in which this power can be exercised as the power relationships between the influencer and their subject are dynamic, and power may be used interchangeably dependent

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[27] J. Krueger, "Social Categorization," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (The Netherlands: Elsevier Limited, 2001): 14219-14223.

[28] Krueger, "Social Categorization," 14219-14223.

[29] Krueger, "Social Categorization," 14219-14223.

[30] Nick Hopkins, "Identity and Identification," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (The Netherlands: Elsevier Limited, 2015): 526-531.

[31] Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 226.

[32] James E. Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," *Self and Identity* 3 (2004): 242, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000047

[33] Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identification, Self-Categorization and Social Influence," *European Review of Social Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1990): 198, https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779108401862.

[34] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.

on the required context.[35] In a group context, such power can be exerted to influence individuals to join a group, to maintain control, and to use members to undertake activities in furtherance of the group, such as terrorist activities.

Social identity theory can be used to understand how terrorists like the Islamic State recruit members to further the objectives of the group. This is achieved through understanding and influencing how people categorise themselves, creating an ingroup and outgroup, and increasing the marginalisation of both sides. This increased perception of "us" and "them" exacerbates tensions and justifies the use of violence. The ingroup's membership can then be influenced as their identity and sense of self remains intrinsically linked to the group itself, and therefore, they are personally invested in and personally experience the successes and failures of such an organisation.

The question of *what makes a terrorist* has been considered across several disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Broadly, the literature is in consensus that there is no one motivation for an individual to become a terrorist but, rather, that the specific environmental factors that may drive someone to terrorism are individualistic and contextual.[36] More common factors have been identified across several studies, which include the social, economic, cultural and psychological circumstances and experiences prior to and throughout their participation in a terrorist organisation.[37] However, these are not universal in and of themselves. For instance, some economic approaches to the subject have attempted to frame one's socioeconomic position as predictive of the risk they will join a terrorist organisation, with the expectation that poverty is a motivator for terrorist activity.[38] Nevertheless, the majority of impoverished people never become terrorists, and wealthier individuals may join for other reasons than their socioeconomic position. That is not to say that poverty cannot be a driver, but rather, that the literature has not determined a singular reason as to what motivates a terrorist in any field of study.

The strategic model of terrorism posits that terrorists are rational actors.[39] Said otherwise, this means that these individuals are not impaired in such a way that their capacity to make

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[35] John R. P. French, Jr., and Bertram Raven, *The Bases of Social Power* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959): 151.
[36] Kim Cragin, *Understanding Terrorist Motivations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 3.
[37] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Recruiter's Dilemma: Signalling and Rebel Recruitment Tactics," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 1 (2012): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343312452287.
[38] Loken and Zelenz, "Explaining Extremism," 48; Eric Mietz, *What About the Women? Understanding the Addressing the Problem of ISIS Female Recruitment in the Western Balkans* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2016), 6.
[39] Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 78.

reasonable decisions is diminished. Though the act of joining a terrorist organisation is considered a rational choice, organisational process theory stipulates that groups need to provide incentives for individuals to join.[40] These are tailored to appeal to a variety of individual needs, including belonging to a group, status, and reputation.[41] However, the receptiveness of an individual to such an approach depends on several contextual factors that can increase the likelihood of recruitment by either lowering the costs or raising the benefits of participation, while the personal preferences of an individual determine the extent to which each of these factors influence their cost-benefit analysis.[42]

Terrorist recruiters often appeal to particular shared experiences that may make an individual more vulnerable to recruitment. Terrorist organisations are often constructed around a shared political grievance the organisation seeks to rectify through violent means.[43] The impact of this common grievance on an individual can be used to develop a sense of solidarity for the objectives of a terrorist organisation and overcome the risks associated with their participation.[44] Even where a shared identity is constructed and collective goal is identified, the impact the grievance itself has, either directly or indirectly, is once again individualistic. Other contextual factors, therefore, determine the depth to which an individual is vulnerable to rhetoric derived from a particular issue, which also indicates a multitude of factors, as opposed to just one, often motivates terrorist membership. It ought to be said that as terrorism is rooted in personal experiences, there will always be exceptions to broader generalisations and theories about their characteristics.

One of the problems with the identification of particular mental or personality traits is rooted in the definitional issue of terrorism itself. Where an individual undertakes an attack in the name of a particular ideological position, but are found to suffer from a psychological condition, their terroristic motives are often discounted as fanatical and insincere. For instance, Mert Ney killed a woman and proceeded to attempt to attack members of the public in central Sydney in 2019.[45] In spite of ideological views maintained by Ney, his mental health history meant that he was not considered to be a terrorist.[46] The determination of who is a terrorist—as well as the factors that

[40] Martha Crenshaw, "Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): 19-20, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398708437313.
[41] Crenshaw, "Instrumental and Organizational Approaches," 19.
[42] Edgar Jones, "The Reception of Broadcast Terrorism: Recruitment and Radicalisation," *International Review of* Psychiatry 29, no. 4 (2017): 320-324, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2017.1343529.
[43] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 383.
[44] Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563-595.
[45] Tim Elfrink, "'Significantly Brave' Bystanders Use Chairs and a Milk Crate to Trap Man on Stabbing Rampage in Sydney," *The Washington Post,* August 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/08/13/sydney-stabbing-video-bystanders-chair-milk-crate/
[46] Elfrink, "Man on Stabbing Rampage in Sydney."

mitigate such a label from being applied—can, therefore, impact upon the capacity to collect and analyse data that contributes to the individual picture of who a terrorist is.

From an organisational perspective, the recruitment of terrorists can be divided into two phases. First, a terrorist organisation seeks to recruit mass numbers.[47] Recruits need not be qualified, as they make up the lower ranks of the group, where quantity is considered more important than quality in this phase.[48] Violence which takes place may be unsophisticated or require a smaller number of skilled members to coordinate. The second phase focuses on the recruitment of expertise to sustain and grow the group.[49] This can be drawn from both within and outside of the organisation. The Islamic State are known to have created recruitment campaigns which targeted specialised skillsets, such as doctors and educators.[50] Social media has been identified as a tool that made it easier to identify people with the appropriate skills, and subsequently target them for recruitment.[51] This has simplified the role of the recruiter and simultaneously provided them with a substantially larger pool of individuals with whom they can engage.[52]

With the rise of social media, the question of what makes a terrorist *in the internet era* has increasingly preoccupied recent literature on terrorist recruitment. Social media is viewed not as a driver but an enabler in the recruitment process.[53] It has the capacity to connect recruiters to vulnerable individuals and, in some instances, it has been found that the makeup of social media platforms actively promotes interaction between recruiters and disaffected individuals, such as the 'suggested friends' feature on Facebook.[54] Terrorists have seen social media as an opportunity to engage with those outside of their physical spaces with greater ease.[55] Several organisations have also been fairly competent in their use of social media. For example, in 2013, al-Shabaab provided live updates on a terrorist attack they orchestrated via Twitter.[56] The Islamic

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[47] Mia Bloom, "Constructing Expertise: Terrorist Recruitment and "Talent Spotting" in the PIRA, Al Qaeda and ISIS," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 605. https://doi.org/10.1020/1057610X.2016.127219.

[48] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 605.

[49] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 605-606.

[50] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 616.

[51] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 606.

[52] Gregory Water and Robert Postings, *Spiders of the Caliphate: Mapping the Islamic State's Global Support Network on Facebook* (Counter Extremism Project, 2018), 78.

[53] Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Stijn Sieckelinck, Hennie Boeije and Micha de Winter, "Participant Recruitment through Social Media: Lessons Learned from a Qualitative Radicalization Study Using Facebook," *Field Methods* 29, no. 2 (2017): 131, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X16663146.

[54] Water and Postings, *Spiders of the Caliphate*, 8.

[55] Marie-Helen Maras, "Social Media Platforms: Targeting the 'Found Space' of Terrorists," *Journal of Internet Law* 21, no. 2 (2017): 3.

[56] David Mair, "#Westgate: A Case Study: How al-Shabaab used Twitter during an Ongoing Attack," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no.1 (2017): 24, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X_2016.1157404.

State became infamous for their calculated recruitment campaign across social media, disseminating information broadly which saw interested people, motivated by any number of personal factors, become members of the group from across the world.[57]

Al-Qa'ida have traditionally been cautious in their recruitment of foreign fighters, something which has been reflected in their use of online spaces for recruitment purposes.[58] Forums were established by al-Qa'ida, but never saw the same reach of the mainstream social media accounts operated by the Islamic State and their supporters.[59] The Islamic State needed to recruit a greater volume of people to sustain their territory and replenish their losses. As such, their threshold for entry was relatively low. In spite of expectations that members would adhere to a radical interpretation of Islam, several recruits were found to have newfound and rudimentary knowledge of the religion.[60] This indicates that even in an ideological sense, the Islamic State were initially more interested in numbers than devout followers, which aligns with the phases of recruitment outlined by Bloom.[61] Several members also converted to Islam as part of the recruitment process, which indicates their initial attraction to the group may not have been solely based on its religious appeal.

The understanding of terrorist motivations across the literature predominantly centres on the male experience, with most studies focussed on male terrorist recruits. This is not unjustified, as men represent the majority of terrorists, although women have participated in various roles across various terrorist organisations.[62] One example is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), where women have participated as fully as their male counterparts in militant roles.[63] Women have also come to play a greater role in radical Islamist terrorist organisations since the early 2000s, including as suicide bombers for al-Qa'ida and Hamas.[64] While the roles women have played in Islamist terrorism have become more active, their primary responsibilities have

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[57] James P. Farwell, "The Media Strategy of ISIS," *Survival* 56, no. 6 (2014): 49, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.985436.

[58] Pamela Engel, "Here's the manual that al Qaeda and now ISIS use to brainwash people online," *Business Insider Australia*, July 3, 2015, https://www.businessinsider.com.au/the-manual-al-qaeda-and-now-isis-use-to-brainwash-people-online-2015-7?r=US&IR=T.

[59] Evan F. Kohlmann, "Al-Qa'ida's 'MySpace': Terrorist Recruitment on the Internet," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 2 (2008): 6-8.

[60] Lauren R. Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras, "Women's Radicalization to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42 (2019): 88, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513694.

[61] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 606.

[62] Banks, "Introduction: Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Gendering Terrorism," 181-182.

[63] Sofia Patel and Jacqueline Westermann, "Women and Islamic-State Terrorism: An Assessment of How Gender Perspectives are Integrated in Countering Violent Extremism Policy and Practices," *Security Challenges* 14, no. 2 (2018): 54.

[64] Amanda N. Spencer, "The Hidden Faces of Terrorism: An Analysis of Women in Islamic State," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, No. 3 (2016): 77, https://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.9.3.1549.

predominantly been in support of men in their participation in *jihad* and to raise the next generation of *jihadis*.[65] As such, women are typically seen to occupy non-combatant roles within a Salafi Jihadist terrorist organisation, and as such, are relegated to private support positions.[66]

Traditional gender roles are an important component of this ideology, as it ensures family, support and education roles are fulfilled, particularly to ensure the organisation's intergenerational survival.[67] This characterisation of women within Salafist Jihadi terrorist organisations means their activities are often obscured, as is reflected in the limited literature available on the role women played as supporters of such terrorist organisations. As the majority of the women who filled these roles were local to the terror groups themselves, there was little need for terrorist organisations to publicise or recruit for such position which, once again, minimised the role that women played as supporters in the public domain.

The role of women within the Islamic State was, however, elevated to a substantially more public space through their activities across social media platforms. The recruitment of foreign women was prioritised, even though the role was similar to other Salafist Jihadi organisations.[68] One notable new dimension of a woman's role within the Islamic State was as recruiters, operating online to target and recruit other women on social media.[69] This attracted interest across news media and academia as a trend that was distinct from other Salafist Jihadi organisations. Also of interest was the attraction western women had to such an organisation, which seemed to be a more novel idea than male foreign fighters.

Women were also able to occupy more active and violent roles within the Islamic State, distinct from their female counterparts in other Salafist Jihadi organisations. Some women participated in a female police unit within Syria, known as al-Khanssaa Brigade, where they would act as enforcers of a strict moral code for other women.[70] This provided a sense of autonomy and

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[65] Jessica Davis, "Women and Radical Islamic Terrorism: Planners, Perpetrators, Patrons," *Strategic Datalink* 136 (2006): 2-3.
[66] Margolin, "The Changing Roles of Women in Violence Islamist Groups," 41.
[67] The Carter Center, *The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda* (Atlanta: The Carter Center, 2017), 7.
[68] Galit M. Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story via Tumblr Analytics: Europe's Young Muslim Female Attraction to ISIS," *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 62, https://doi.org/10.1017/cri.2018.6.
[69] Counter Extremism Project, *ISIS's Persecution of Women* (New York: Counter Extremism Project, 2017), 6.
[70] Ariel I. Ahram, "Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS," *Survival* 53, no. 3 (2015): 69, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1047251.

independence for many women who were otherwise relegated to the home.[71] When the Islamic State began to lose territory, their messaging evolved to encourage women to participate in acts of violence.[72] This represented a radical shift for a terrorist organisation that had become renowned for their deeply conservative views of women. The role of women with respect to the Islamic State has been explored in greater depth in academia, in particular, due to several high-profile cases of western women who have travelled to the Islamic State to become *jihadi* brides and the nature of atrocities committed toward women in Syria and Iraq. This has contributed to a greater coverage of female terrorist recruits in an attempt to understand their motivations.

Since 2013, thousands of women have travelled from their home countries to join the Islamic State. The cases of several young western women were captured by news media outlets and garnered international attention.[73] One example of this was the media that surrounded the Bethnal Green Trio, three British teens who travelled to Syria via Turkey in 2015.[74] Their journeys, known as a *hijrah* (migration), were often documented on social media in an effort to inspire other women to undertake the same act.[75] From 2014 to 2017, the main source of literature on these women and their social media use was in the form of news media articles. Several journalists were able to establish relationships with women inside of the Islamic State.[76] Though their relationships were often volatile, as the women would often threaten the journalists and be critical of their publications, they also provided valuable first-hand access to life inside the Islamic State.

The reliability of news media depends on the publication itself. Several media outlets, such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun,* framed stories of *jihadi* brides in a salacious tone.[77] Many articles

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[71] Elizabeth Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choundry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad," *Policy and Internet 8,* no. 1 (2015): 20.

[72] Lizzie Dearden, "ISIS calls on women to fight and launch terror attacks for the first time," *The Independent*, October 6, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-war-syria-iraq-women-call-to-arms-islamic-state-terror-attacks-propaganda-change-ban-frontline-a7986986.html

[73] Nabeelah Jaffer, "The Secret World of ISIS Brides," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/isis-brides-secret-world-jihad-western-women-syria.

[74] Simpson, "ISIS brides: Parents had no idea of Bethnal Green Girls' plans to wage jihad."

[75] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 66.

[76] Elise Potaka, "Exclusive: We Spoke with Aussie Zehra Duman about Why She Joined Islamic State," *SBS*, March 7, 2019, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/exclusive-we-spoke-with-aussie-zehra-duman-about-why-she-joined-islamic-state; Ellie Hall, "An Alabama 'ISIS Bride' Wants to Come Home. Can We Forgive Her Horrifying Social Media Posts," *Buzzfeed News*, May 4, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/hoda-muthana-isis-instagram-twitter-tumblr-alabama.

[77] Adam McCleery, "Jihadi Bride, 26, who ran away to the Middle East to marry an ISIS 'playboy' has her citizenship stripped leaving her two children 'stateless'," *The Daily Mail Australia*, October 8, 2019, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7546421/Jihadi-bride-married-ISIS-playboy-citizenship-STRIPPED-leaving-children-stateless.html; Brittany Vonow, "ISIS Bride Shamima Begum shows off Diamante Nose Stud and Union Flag as She Moans that She Has Done 'Nothing

provided little analysis and made generalisations that undermined their credibility. In response to the public interest, news media produced greater volumes of content on women recruited into the group to improve their readership. For example, the term 'Bethnal Green Girls' returns nearly 700,000 search results in Google, as of October 2019. These articles were also often short and do not contribute the same nuance and perspective as academia. However, academia often drew on these articles for case studies due to the lack of alternative primary source material. Constraints around the contact of women who had journeyed to Syria and Iraq meant that journalists often had direct access to these individuals that was unmatched in the academic space. This means that a substantial volume of the literature is derived from sources that do not have the same credibility and rigour as academia.

In the early days of the Islamic State, many women who travelled from the west to Syria and Iraq were framed as victims, as opposed to perpetrators or terrorists.[78] Instances where women published threats directed toward the west would be the exception but, even then, their recruitment was often seen to have been a product of coercion and manipulation.[79] Media outlets have often reiterated the ideological foundations for Islamist terrorist organisations to encompass values which dictate the societal roles and behaviours of its members, especially those who are female.[80] As such, women are expected to abide by strict codes of conduct, which were seen to limit their operational capacity in the coordination of violence.[81] This has subsequently influenced how violent females are often characterised as anomalies by the media, even where there are a multitude of examples.

Since early 2019, the approach the media has taken toward women who became *jihadi* brides has shifted to a noticeably more hostile tone. As the final territorial footholds of the Islamic State fell, several western women who had joined the Islamic State were located by journalists in al-Hol refugee camp in Syria.[82] Shamima Begum, one of the Bethnal Green Girls, recaptured

Wrong'," *The Sun*, February 17, 2020, https://www.thesun.ie/news/5105871/isis-bride-shamima-begum-pictured-for-first-time-without-burka-whinges-life-fell-apart-when-stripped-of-citizenship/

[78] Mah-Rukh Ali, *ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015), 22.

[79] Ali, *ISIS and Propaganda*, 22.

[80] Lizzie Dearden, "How ISIS attracts Women and Girls from Europe with False Offer of 'Empowerment'," *The Independent*. August 5, 2017. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/isis-jihadi-brides-islamic-state-women-girls-europe-british-radicalisation-recruitment-report-research-rusi-syria-iraq-a7878681.html

[81] Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (2015): 27-28.

[82] Josie Ensor, "Inside al-Hol, the 'toxic' ISIL Prison Camp where Radicalised Women have taken Control," *The Telegraph*, November 13, 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/10/inside-al-hol-timebomb-isil-prison-camp-threatening-crack-open/.

international media attention in her appeal to return to the United Kingdom.[83] Prospective returnees have prompted policy makers to question how, and if, they will manage their reintegration to western society, and whether they continue to pose a security risk.[84] Critics have questioned the sincerity of remorse by women who claimed the victimhood narrative that had previously been driven by the media. At the very least, women are now seen to have been complicit in atrocities which took place.[85] Their overall intent, including the possibility they will act as perpetrators of violence at a later date, has been questioned extensively by news media.

The dichotomy of how female recruits are portrayed persists across academic literature, with women viewed as either victims or brutal participants in the organisation. When framed as victims, the recruitment of women is seen as a deliberate method by the Islamic State for the sole purpose of exploitation by male combatants.[86] This narrative was frequently adopted by media outlets, who often explain recruitment as either the abuse of women by a patriarchal organisation or as a naïve decision to pursue an ideal of femininity sold by Islamic State recruiters.[87] As one of the primary sources for academia, the way women were perceived and their information captured in news media may have also been influential in their portrayal in the academic space. This body of literature is often simplistic in its treatment of female recruits and holds onto propaganda material produced by the Islamic State which supports this narrative. For example, the use of kittens in posts by recruiters has been highlighted as a mechanism which attracted women to the organisation, without further analysis of additional messaging, subsequently over-simplifying the issue.[88]

This view is contradicted by Kneip, who examined how women who joined the Islamic State felt empowered by their decision.[89] Indeed, more recent literature on the topic of female recruitment has considered the diverse roles women have played within the Islamic State, including those who were core members of al-Khanssaa Brigade, an all-female police unit infamous for their

[83] Kelly McLaughlin, "ISIS Bride Shamima Begum wants to return to the UK to go to Therapy," *Insider*, September 27, 2019, https://www.insider.com/isis-bride-shamima-begum-repeats-request-to-return-to-uk-2019-9.

[84] Hillary Leung, "The Family of Shamima Begum Is Appealing the UK Government's Decision to Revoke Her Citizenship," *Time*, March 21, 2019, https://time.com/5555620/shamima-begum-british-schoolgirl-isis-citizenship/.

[85] Al Jazeera, "Women under ISIL: The Torturers," *Al Jazeera*, November 27, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/women-isil-torturers-191124095032690.html.

[86] Ali, *ISIS and Propaganda*, 17-19.

[87] Alice Martini, "Making women terrorists into "jihadi brides": an analysis of media narratives of women joining ISIS," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): 465-466, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1448204.

[88] Amanda Taub, "No CNN, women are not joining ISIS because of Kittens and Nutella"," *Vox*, February 18, 2015, https://www.vox.com/2014/10/20/6987673/isis-women.

[89] Katharina Kneip, "Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS," *Politikon: IAPSS Political Science Journal* 29 (2016): 89, https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.29.5.

cruelty toward other women.[90] Women have also been used as a 'last resort' tactic where cities have been retaken from the Islamic State, with women found with suicide vests in the final days of the Battle of Mosul.[91] With more recent Islamic State propaganda encouraging women to prepare for battle, women may play a considerable role in the future of the Islamic State. The participation of women until the end of the conflict, where they had no other option but imprisonment, is seen by some as indicative of their commitment to the organisation as well as the agency they had in their own decisions.[92]

The majority of literature which focuses on the recruitment of women does so specifically with the adoption of a feminist perspective. As part of this perspective, it is assumed that there must be something that appeals to women in addition to or distinct from the qualities which appeal to men. Buril justifies this approach by citing previous studies on the gender gap in risk taking, which indicate women are less likely to take risks than men.[93] Kneip notes that recent literature has identified numerous 'extra' factors which entice women to join the Islamic State, such as religious obligation, empowerment, emancipation, self-discovery and identity.[94] These factors are considered to be in conjunction with other values promoted by recruiters to both men and women, including the promises of excitement and freedom.[95] The identification of the 'extra' factors that make women want to travel to Iraq and Syria has been the objective of much literature on female recruitment, with the view that the targeted recruitment of women is a relatively new phenomena for an Islamist terrorist organisation.

Literature on the recruitment of female terrorists tends to examine the role of gender in greater depth than literature which focuses on male recruits. Based on the standard membership of a terrorist organisation, it can be inferred that a woman would be an atypical recruit and, therefore, there must be some motivation tied to a gender-based appeal. Studies of Islamic State propaganda targeted at women observe the use of material that answers concerns they may have about their participation, such as child welfare and healthcare.[96] Amidst this material,

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[90] Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry," 20.
[91] BBC, "Battle of Mosul: Fierce Clashes and IS uses suicide bombers," *BBC,* July 4, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40489816
[92] Kanisha D. Bond, Kate Cronin-Furman, Meredith Loken, Milli Lake, Sarah E. Parkinson, and Anna Zelenz, "The West Needs to Take the Politics of Women in ISIS Seriously," *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/04/the-west-needs-to-take-the-politics-of-women-in-isis-seriously/
[93] Fernanda Buril, "Changing God's Expectations and Women's Consequent Behaviors – How ISIS Manipulates "*Divine Commandments*" to Influence Women's Role in Jihad," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 8, no. 3 (October 2017): 1-2.
[94] Kneip, "Female Jihad," 92.
[95] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 63.
[96] Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation): 26.

expectations for women are more explicitly stated. In a simplistic form, this is characterised as men as martyrs and women as wives and mothers.[97] It was observed that women were told explicitly prior to their travel to Syria that they were not there to fight, but rather to marry and procreate.[98] It is apparent that there are gendered elements to the recruitment process, which consequently have influenced the way in which it has been studied.

Western women feature predominantly in case studies within academia. This is a result of the coverage within news media and availability of information on these case studies. The interest in these cases often appears to stem from the above question of what 'extra' element attracts women to travel from the West to join a terrorist organisation noted as particularly oppressive toward women.[99] Women who travel from nations where radical Islam is more prominent, and where the political system is more conservative in its treatment of women, such as the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, are underrepresented in the literature on recruitment, despite representing the majority of women recruited.[100] The assumption within the literature is that as these women were from societies where radical Islam is more readily spread and adopted, travel to the Islamic State to participate in the self-proclaimed Caliphate was a less peculiar phenomenon.

The literature which has most broadly captured the international scale of female recruitment are reports produced by governmental and non-governmental agencies on the topic.[101] The objective of such reports was to establish the extent of the issue in an informative format for a strategic audience, including policy makers and counterterrorism practitioners. As such, a substantial portion of this literature was dedicated to assessments and recommendations for the future of female terrorist recruitment by the likes of the Islamic State. The basis of these analyses was rooted in empirical data, namely statistics, coupled with the historic context captured on the Islamic State. Such statistics add value for their factual nature, but given the fluidity of the situation, it is often difficult to evaluate their accuracy. Assessments where precise numbers are unknown are always undermined by their own inevitable uncertainty, though where this is acknowledged, these sources still provide one of the most valuable strategic overviews of the situation internationally in terms of recruitment but offer limited utility in understanding why women decide to join terrorist organisations.

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[97] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 66.
[98] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 66.
[99] Martini, "Making women terrorists into "jihadi brides"," 465-466.
[100] Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora'," 14.
[101] Water and Postings, *Spiders of the Caliphate*; The Carter Center, *The Women in Daesh*; Counter Extremism Project, *ISIS's Persecution of Women*; Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora'*; Sebastian L. Gorka and Katharine C. Gorka, *ISIS: The Threat to the United States* (Threat Knowledge Group, 2015).

One issue within the existing literature is the tendency to group women and minors together. There were several instances where women travelled with their children. For example, Sally Jones travelled to Syria with her son in late 2013 to join the Islamic State.[102] Women were also often believed to have been deceived by their husbands into travelling as a family to join the Islamic State.[103] However, there was a lack of distinction between women who joined alone and those who joined with young children. The grouping of women and children together also undermined the agency many women had in their decision to join the Islamic State. The collection of statistics internationally was dependent upon the reporting country, with variations in the quality of data noted by Cook and Vale.[104] The focus of this literature was less so on recruitment via social media, and more on general recruitment itself. Statistics for those who were recruited online can be more difficult to obtain, particularly as social media sites have increased their vigilance around privacy, and content is often deleted by social media platforms where terrorist activity is flagged.

There is consensus within the literature that social media afforded the Islamic State the opportunity to interact directly with their supporters in a way that had only been seen before in face-to-face interactions. Social media provides a platform for public and private communications that transcends geographic boundaries. Behaviours online can be less constrained than in face-to-face social interactions and in spite of the vastness of the internet, users can become entrenched in echo chambers that represent a radical subset of a particular perspective. Overall, the Islamic State were seen as transformative in the way they approached terrorist recruitment, with consensus that this is likely to be influential on future terrorist recruitment efforts by both the Islamic State and other groups. Their use of the social media space exploited the very nature of social media itself, in that it connected recruiters with persons who could be easily identified as sympathetic to Islamic State ideological positions, allowed privacy in interactions, and provided a level of operational security for recruiters and recruits to conceal their identities and avoid suspicion from authorities.

Even as content was removed by social media companies, the Islamic State were able to recruit foreign fighters internationally, thousands of whom travelled to the self-proclaimed *Caliphate* in

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[102] Matthew Weaver, "Sally Jones: UK Punk Singer Who Became Leading ISIS Recruiter," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/12/sally-jones-the-uk-punk-singer-who-became-isiss-white-widow

[103] Livia Albeck-Ripka, "Does Australia Have to Bring its Women and Children Home from Syria's Camps," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/world/australia/syria-isis-camps.html

[104] Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to Diaspora," 11-13.

Iraq and Syria.[105] As social media platforms evicted the Islamic State, they found homes on more private social media sites, including Telegram. Several western individuals became notorious for their roles within the Islamic State. This was not just restricted to men, but women too, who became prevalent online recruiters and fulfilled several roles within the organisation, beyond what had previously been seen in other radical Islamic terrorist organisations.[106] Women who had joined the Islamic State became a curiosity within western media, as they seldom fit the model for a traditional terrorist. Many seemed to have been raised in moderate families, with access to advanced education.[107] Social media use was seen as a common trend amongst western recruits, with women being active supporters online, both before and after they travelled to Iraq and Syria.[108]

Social media is a tool for interconnectivity, irrespective of the physical spaces that might exist between its users. However, social media is not a motivator for terrorist activity in itself. This fundamental concept served to connect recruiters with prospective recruits, even with substantial distances between them.[109] The Islamic State were able to use social media on a scale that had never been demonstrated by a terrorist organisation.[110] These platforms, with the correct search terms, were used to disseminate propaganda in an effort to recruit members and inspire 'lone wolf' style terror attacks.[111] In conjunction with this phenomena, the majority of literature on the subject of terrorist recruitment on social media followed the rise of the Islamic State and used them as a case study. This builds upon a small body of literature that examined terrorist recruitment in the early 2000s, which started to explore the role online forums played in al-Qa'ida recruitment.[112]

The Islamic State not only used social media to their advantage, in a manner that could be seen as pioneering for other terrorist organisations recruiting online, but also targeted female recruits for roles traditionally occupied by local women in radical Islamist terrorist organisations. These women formed an important online community that assisted in further recruitment campaigns and propaganda for the Islamic State, using the female voice to counter allegations of extreme brutality and violence. This research, therefore, seeks to use the theoretical framework of social

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[105] Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to Diaspora," 11-13.
[106] Leah Windsor, "The Language of Radicalization: Female Internet Recruitment to Participation in ISIS Activities," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 3 (2018): 506-507, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.13855457
[107] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 61.
[108] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 72.
[109] Maras, "Targeting the "Found Space" of Terrorists," 3-4.
[110] Blaker, "The Islamic State's Use of Online Social Media," 1-4.
[111] Ahmad Shehabat and Teodor Mitew, "Black-boxing the Black Flag Anonymous Sharing Platforms and ISIS Content Distribution Tactics," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 84.
[112] Kohlmann, "Al-Qa'ida's 'MySpace'," 6-7.

identity theory to understand the ways in which social media is used to influence and recruit female members of the Islamic State online, looking at the women involved as actors in the conflict, and not victims of coercion.

Chapter III: Methodology and Method

There has come to be a greater body of literature on the recruitment of women in light of the activities of the Islamic State, as well as the implications social media has for social interactions and psychology. These issues are most commonly approached from within the social sciences as subjective and deeply contextual interactions between individuals and their environment, both real and virtual. The objective of this research is to understand the factors that drove women to travel to Iraq and Syria in order to participate in the Islamic State. As such, this chapter will draw upon existing literature to outline the methodology and method used in the conduct of this thesis to answer the research question.

It has become apparent from the literature that interactions between a recruiter and a recruit— both men and women—are dependent on factors at the individual, organisational and structural level.[113] The responses of prospective recruits are, therefore, their own unique experiences but linked to their relationships with recruiters and likeminded peers. As such, the qualitative approach was determined to be most appropriate approach to answer the research question at hand. Qualitative research allows for a level of nuance and interpretation about experiences that can be highly individualistic and subjective. Given terrorist recruitment is a personal experience, the more refined scope necessitated by qualitative research allows for greater depth in the research.

This depth does, however, come at the expense of the breadth of the data that can be collected and analysed. The adverse effect of such a narrow focus is that the research will not necessarily capture universal trends, but a more selective sample of such themes. Qualitative research is often perceived as being less generalisable than quantitative research, as empirical data captures a broader dataset, and therefore, can be used to identify overall trends and themes. However, quantitative data points do not reveal motivations and individual experiences. Observation of qualitative data can also provide insight and establish a basis for further research. On this basis, as a study of experiential motivations, with an eye to critical theory, a qualitative approach was determined to be best suited to answer the research question.

Case studies were selected as the methodology for this research, to best cover the individualised aspects of the radicalisation and recruitment process online. A benefit of case studies was that they provided the opportunity for an in-depth examination of issues at an individual level. This allowed greater scope to explore the context of each case and examine the environment in which their radicalisation and recruitment took place. There were multiple case studies which became well documented with the rise of the Islamic State. In particular, selected posts made on social

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[113] McAllister and Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Studies,* 201.

media accounts were attributed, archived, and made readily available online. The availability of attributed and verified data also eliminated the need for interaction with the cases, several of whom were found to be either deceased or detained. This best enabled access to the kind of data needed to understand the individual motivations of women recruited across social media.

Social identity theory will be used as the theoretical framework through which the interactions between case studies and the organisation will be examined. This will be used to contextualise the psychological drivers experienced by the case studies in terms of the social rewards they achieved for their participation and activity online. Social identity theory is rooted in the social constructivist tradition. Social constructionism is an epistemological position that examines how understandings of the world are constructed collectively to form the foundation of common assumptions about reality.[114] It is based on the belief that meanings are not developed in an individual and separate fashion, but rather in coordination with one another.[115] As such, these social constructs are intrinsically linked to the society in which they are developed, and therefore, can differ broadly between societies.

Social interactions are considered by Berger and Luckmann as the basis for all knowledge.[116] Radicalisation does not take place in a vacuum, even self-radicalisation requires vulnerable people to consume material and ideas created and disseminated by others, be they individuals or groups. It can, therefore, be assumed that social interactions are an important element in how recruitment takes place to influence the identity of prospective recruits as it pertains to the beliefs they maintain. This influence is a result of individual, organisational and systematic pressures and interactions that motivate an individual to participate in a terrorist organisation. These social interactions can be analysed in terms of the stages of social identity theory, social identification, categorisation, and comparison, to understand the psychological impact these have had on an individual and how this is transformative for behaviours in accordance with group expectations and ideals.

Prior to the data collection phase, two case studies were selected. To ensure comparative analysis could be undertaken at a later stage to identify common trends, these case studies needed to satisfy three criteria. First, they needed to be born in a western country; second, they needed to be female; and finally, they needed to have had a social media presence prior to their departure to Syria or Iraq which could be captured in data collection. Research across news

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[114] Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, "Social Construction of Reality," in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 891.
[115] Leeds-Hurwitz, "Social Construction of Reality," 891.
[116] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

media sites identified several individuals who matched these criteria and the subsequent selection of Aqsa Mahmood and Hoda Muthana as case studies was based on the volume of credible information on their social media presence and access to original posts. The researcher also identified that the women did not appear to know one another, having come from separate geographic locations, and therefore, it was expected there would be sufficient differences to capture overarching themes more broadly.

All the data collected for this thesis was obtained from open sources and was readily accessible to the public, either via news media or archives of public social media accounts. First, social media accounts were identified for both case studies, based on details made available and captured across news media. Social media handles were cross-referenced across sources and public details available on these accounts, such as the geographic location, age, and photos, were used to attribute the user as either Aqsa Mahmood or Hoda Muthana. Some of the posts made from these accounts were captured and reported in news media, while others were located via the Internet Archive. The Internet Archive is a site which captures public webpages across various dates.[117] This was particularly useful for the social media site Tumblr, which hosts each user's content on its own webpage. The majority of social media posts dated to between 2013 and 2015, the time in which both Mahmood and Muthana were recruited into the Islamic State.

Though both women are reported to have used other forms of social media, this data was not obtained unless it had been made available for public consumption on a news media site. Though this content would have been made available to those connected to the social media sites of both women, it was not intended for public consumption. As such, it would be a breach of privacy to collect and use this data for research. However, content made available across publicly accessible social media platforms, particularly Tumblr and Twitter, or that which was captured by journalists and published more broadly, was considered public domain. Further, the researcher did not use social media accounts to gain access to this content, meaning that no attempts were made to obtain data that may have been available only to users of the social media platform. This was also considered a limitation of this research, in that only the motivations conveyed across public social media accounts would be captured throughout this research.

News interviews were also accessed as primary source material. The families of both Muthana and Mahmood provided interviews to the media in the immediate period after their respective departures for Syria.[118] These interviews were used to provide context to the lifestyles both

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[117] "About the Internet Archive," Internet Archive, accessed March 20, 2020, https://archive.org/about/.

[118] Ellie Hall, "Gone Girl: An Interview with an American in ISIS," *Buzzfeed News*, April 17, 2015, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/gone-girl-an-interview-with-an-american-in-isis;

women lived in the West, as well as any indicators they were being radicalised online and their social media activities, as perceived by those closest to them. Additionally, since Muthana was located in al-Hol camp in 2019, she has been the subject of more extensive coverage and interviews which explore her motivations and time inside the Islamic State. Mahmood is believed to have been killed in the conflict and it does not appear an interview took place at any point after she departed for Syria.

Reports produced by governmental and non-governmental agencies represented one of the most informative and reliable reference points to contextualise and understand the social media posts for this project. While government reports are often produced in support of a political position, the breadth of material covered and trends identified provided direction on the themes for analysis of the case studies. Non-governmental reports, including those produced by the Counter Extremism Project in 2017 and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation in 2018, provided a critical balance to the philosophies which underpin governmental literature. These reports also used empirical data to substantiate their claims, which provided a reliable foundation on which the case studies were analysed. Where accessible, information related to the recruitment process produced by the Islamic State was used to understand the mechanisms developed by the group themselves. Of particular use was the manifesto on women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, the all-female police group within the Islamic State, translated by the Quilliam Foundation. These primary sources were intended to support the development of a balanced and critical perspective on the recruitment of women by the Islamic State.

A variety of secondary sources were also accessed, which were primarily collected from news media and journal articles. News media provided extensive coverage of both women when they initially travelled to Syria, as well as when Muthana was located in displaced persons camps in 2019. Such news articles were collected from a variety of outlets, with preference given for reputable news outlets such as *BBC* and *SBS News*. The interest in female jihadis who travelled to Syria meant such cases often received the tabloid treatment to attract readership and, as such, it was important to source news articles from reliable sources. Even where reliable sources were located, they acknowledged their own limitations, as there were instances where the identities of sources could not be verified due to the nature of the conflict and proliferation of internet-based communications with subjects. Journal articles were also used to provide a credible and academic source.

Atika Schubert and Bharati Naik, "CNN Exclusive: From Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical' and ISIS Bride," *CNN*, September 5, 2014, https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/index.html.

Where possible, information collected from these sources was cross-referenced to confirm its reliability and validity. While primary and secondary source resources offered valuable insight into the recruitment process and sociocultural context from which Mahmood and Muthana come, they are also steeped in the political agendas of their authors – be they the government or the Islamic State. As such, information can be distorted, and in some instances fabricated, to support these narratives. Likewise, the dependence on the internet for the collection means it is a possibility misinformation will be collected. While the use of reputable sources seeks to mitigate such issues, cross-referencing to ensure the credibility of information helped to ensure the research undertaken was an accurate representation of reality.

Data collected for the case studies was processed with thematic analysis to determine common trends in each case study. The purpose of thematic analysis was to extrapolate common themes that came up repeatedly across the data. Due to the limited volume of public social media posts recovered for each case study, deduction was used to determine these themes. The intention behind this analysis was to first identify the motivations of women who joined the Islamic State after a period of engagement on social media, and to then compare them to identify common trends across both case studies. From there, the discussion focused on the application of measures designed to counter recruitment to the motivations identified from the thematic analysis.

Chapter IV: Aqsa Mahmood

One of the first western women to join the Islamic State was 19-year-old Aqsa Mahmood, who departed Scotland for Syria in November 2013. Once there, she would become a propagandist concentrated on the recruitment of women for the Islamic State.[119] Mahmood was infamously credited as the recruiter of the Bethnal Green Girls – Amira Abase, Shamima Begum, and Kadiza Sultana.[120] The Bethnal Green Girls brought attention to Islamic State social media recruitment, and how influential young women could become in this space. Through her Tumblr and Twitter accounts, Mahmood publicly diarised her journey to, and life in, the Islamic State. This chapter will examine the motivations that drove Mahmood to the Islamic State, as well as how her social media presence evolved to capture the motivations of other recruits. In particular, three themes were observed as the main contributors toward Mahmood's eventual decision to join the Islamic State: the online echo chamber she developed, sisterhood, and a sense of religious obligation.

The Echo Chamber Effect

Born and raised in Glasgow, Mahmood appeared well integrated within her community.[121] She was well educated, having attended a private school before she enrolled as a radiography student at the Glasgow Caledonian University.[122] Mahmood was noted to have enjoyed western literature, such as *the Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter*, as well as western music.[123] Mahmood's family lawyer, Aamer Anwar, described the household as moderate and liberal, and that Aqsa was a "bedroom radical" unbeknownst to her family.[124] Her parents were quick to publicly denounce the Islamic State, and reported they privately told their daughter the group is not a true representation of Islam.[125] The characterisation of Mahmood that emerged in the media shortly after her departure for Syria did not fit the traditional profile of a terrorist recruit. Publicly, Mahmood seemed to be a well-educated and integrated member of Scottish society. However, her social media posts told a different story about Mahmood's motivations over the year before she departed Scotland.

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[119] "Aqsa Mahmood," Counter Extremism Project, accessed June 23, 2019, https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/aqsa-mahmood.

[120] Lucy Fisher, "Bethnal Green trio fled Britain with help from ISIS's best female recruiter," *The Sunday Times*, February 13, 2019, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jihadi-bride-shamima-begum-bethnal-green-trio-fled-britain-with-help-from-isis-s-best-female-recruiter-vcvxzrvgj.

[121] BBC, "Parents of IS-linked Aqsa Mahmood feel 'betrayed'," *BBC,* September 3, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-29048536.

[122] "Press Release PM's Extremism Taskforce: tackling extremism in universities and colleges top of the agenda," Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, Home Office, Prime Minister's Office, the Rt Hon David Cameron and MP Jo Johnson, accessed June 23, 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pms-extremism-taskforce-tackling-extremism-in-universities-and-colleges-top-of-the-agenda

[123] "Aqsa Mahmood," Counter Extremism Project.

[124] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'."

[125] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'."

In 2011, Mahmood became deeply concerned with the outbreak of civil war in Syria.[126] Her parents observed that she became more religious, but not in a fashion they interpreted as indicative of radicalisation.[127] Around the same time as Mahmood abandoned western music and literature in pursuit of deeper religiosity, she would often share content on her Tumblr account that was illustrative of her fixation on the war.[128] For example, she reposted images of combatants, information on the number of casualties and quotes about injustice in relation to the conflict.[129] Social media has recently been criticised as a tool for radicalisation as a consequence of the echo chamber effect that can occur for users.[130] The topic of the Syrian Civil War appears to have been an entry point for Mahmood to become embroiled in an echo chamber that amplified radical views and introduced her to others who would encourage her eventual travel to Syria.

In the social media space, an echo chamber occurs when the content a user is exposed to on the platform agrees with their political leaning and, thus, allows for their opinions to be echoed back to them.[131] The social media user is, therefore, not exposed to an accurate or balanced portrayal of real-world political views. Through the repetition of core issues and a lack of exposure to alternative views, individuals within an echo chamber can develop the perception their worldview is more popular or socially acceptable than it truly is.[132] Social media platforms often encourage users to customise their feeds by following accounts and themes of interest. With the exception of paid advertisements, users have been able to isolate the content to which they are exposed to specific viewpoints by exclusively following content they agree with, and subsequently developing their own echo chamber.

This behaviour is consistent with selective exposure theory, whereby people avoid contradictory content in favour of information that reinforces their views.[133] Selections are made based on the

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[126] "Aqsa Mahmood," Counter Extremism Project.
[127] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."
[128] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."
[129] Tumblr user: *whathappenedtopeace*, "Meanwhile in Syria," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 20, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48402727619/meanwhile-in-syria (accessed via web.archive.org); Unknown, Uncaptioned Image of Combatants in Prayer, Reposted by Asqa Mahmood, April 20, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20130420233238/http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48433449049/gharibafisabilillah-by-time-verily-man-is-in (accessed via web.archive.org)
[130] Bloom, "Constructing Expertise," 606.
[131] Kiran Garimella, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Aristides Gionis and Michael Mathioudakis, "Political Discourse on Social Media: Echo Chambers, Gatekeepers, and the Price of Bipartisanship," *Track: Web and Society* (2018): 913.
[132] Garimella et al., "Political Discourse on Social Media," 914.
[133] Eva Jones and Stefan Schulz-Hardt, "Confirmation Bias in Sequential Information Search After Preliminary Decisions: An Expansion of Dissonance Theoretical Research on Selective Exposure to Information," *Journal of Personality and Psychology* 80, no. 4 (2001): 557.

individual's perspective, beliefs, attitudes, and decisions.[134] When exposed to information, people are able to select the favourable elements and ignore the unfavourable. Also known as confirmation bias, selective exposure theory is rooted in cognitive dissonance theory.[135] Cognitive dissonance is the psychological stress experienced where an individual's belief clashes with received information.[136] To avoid such discomfort, certain defence mechanisms will work to balance a person's representation of the world and their environment.[137] In such instances, selective exposure theory would see contradictory information overlooked in favour of that which supports preconceived viewpoints. This theory is linked to the emergence of echo chambers online, where people have greater control over the information they are exposed to and can subsequently minimise their interactions with other views.

Based on the assumption the content Mahmood posted was similar to that which she was exposed, it appears her interest in the Syrian Civil War was framed largely within a religious context. Mahmood did not appear to have ties to the country itself, though she did have ties to its people through their shared faith. This was representative of the first and second mental process identified by Tajfel and Turner as part of social identity theory: social categorisation and social identification.[138] As a means of interpreting events, Mahmood categorised its actors on the basis of their religious views, as was presented to her in the research she undertook across social media. From here, she interacted with content that reinforced these mental processes, and further entrenched a sense of social identification with the subjects of the content she consumed. Such content was predominantly on the Syrian Civil War but extended into other conflicts in the Middle East. This material was framed in religious terms, indicative of the perspective with which she approached the selection of information online, and with which she identified.

Social media algorithms also dictate the content a user is exposed to. These algorithms serve to deliver relevant content to the user.[139] Algorithms introduce content that matches the preferences and interests of social media users and corresponds with their interactions.[140] It was common for suggested content to feed the echo chamber effect and has the potential to introduce its user to more radical content. This strengthens the selective exposure individuals inside echo chambers

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[134] Larry Sullivan, "Selective Exposure," *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Sage Publications (2009): 465.

[135] William Hart, Dolores Albarracín, Alice H. Eagly, Inge Brechan, Matthew J. Lindberg, and Lisa Merrill, "Feeling Validated Versus Being Correct: A Meta-Analysis of Selective Exposure Information," *Psychological Bulletin* 135, no. 4 (2009): 555-556.

[136] Anne Beauchamp, "Cognitive Equilibrium," in *Encyclopedia of Human Development*, ed. Neil J. Salkind (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005): 281-282.

[137] Beauchamp, "Cognitive Equilibrium," 281-282.

[138] Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 226.

[139] Dominic Spohr, "Fake news and ideological polarization: Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media," *Business Information Review* 34, no. 3 (2017): 152-153.

[140] Spohr, "Fake news and ideological polarization," 152-153.

experience by reinforcing the same views and reduces the psychological burden of sorting through material that disagrees with their worldview. Overall, where users within radical echo chambers are continually introduced to new streams of the same or similar information, it amplifies their expectation of how popular their viewpoint is, and therefore, contributes to the normalisation of otherwise radical ideas.

Echo chambers can be used as tools of social influence. As users feel increasingly validated in the views they hold, they become susceptible to further radicalisation within their echo chamber. The introduction of more radical views within such environments often takes place without the same level of criticism that would be typical elsewhere, and thus, the adoption of such views becomes commonplace.[141] Influencers within such environments are able to manipulate their followers to adopt the same views they espouse through the repetition of themes and encouragement that certain views are acceptable and widely held. Such echo chambers can, therefore, encourage a sense of inclusion and identification with a group. In accordance with social identity theory, this can, therefore, be manipulated online into a sense of "us" and "them". This is most often exemplified in left- or ring-wing echo chambers, where unification is encouraged in its most absolute form to counter the other side of the political debate.[142] The consequence of such divisions is a discouragement toward seeking out alternative information from the other side of the political spectrum, and a subsequent deeper entrenchment of personal political views in accordance with the echo chamber's membership.

More broadly, influencers placed within social media echo chambers have the capacity to appeal to the deepest level of social influence defined by Kelman: internalisation. This is the process whereby people accept a belief, both publicly and privately.[143] A private commitment to adhere to a radical set of beliefs is critical to the assurance that acts of terrorism are undertaken on behalf of a terrorist organisation, particularly where a level of autonomy is exercised in their execution. The targeting of non-combatants is viewed as immoral, as is reflected in various laws of war, and as such, campaigns undertaken by many terrorist organisations who seek to target civilians require a deep private commitment to the group's ideals that overcomes any sense of moral and legal apprehension. It is at this point that the third phase of social identity theory is actualised, and individuals undertake comparisons between the group they have identified with and others.

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[141] Kieron O'Hara and David Stevens, "Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet's Complicity in Violent Extremism," *Policy & Internet* 7, no. 4 (2015) 402, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.88.

[142] Pablo Barberá, John T. Jost, Jonathan Nagler, Joshua A. Tucker and Richard Bonneau, "Tweeting from Left to Right: Is Online Political Communication More Than an Echo Chamber," *Psychological Science* 26, no. 10 (2015): 1532.

[143] Herbert C. Kelman, "Compliance, identification, and internalization three processes of attitude change," (1958): 54.

Social media often allows the user a feeling of anonymity, which can make them feel protected from offline consequences for their online behaviours, as per the social disinhibition effect, where people online relax social restrictions that would occur in face-to-face interactions.[144] Though Mahmood has been attributed to her social media personas, the use of a *Nom de Guerre* online helped her to be open in her thoughts and intentions—as is evidenced by the diarised and controversial style of her posts—that did not seem to imitate her day-to-day offline personality. Mahmood made several statements on her accounts that aligned with the beliefs of the Islamic State in a public display of her acceptance of such beliefs.[145] However, coupled with her actions, travelling to the Islamic State to become a jihadi bride, this indicates the level of social influence that Mahmood experienced and the depth of the private convictions she felt, as well as how she perceived her group as comparing favourably to others. These actions are the best evidence that Mahmood was influenced at the deepest level to internalise the beliefs to which she was exposed online.

Mahmood was influenced to conform with a radical set of beliefs, though this was not without a sense of reward, principally in the form of ingroup membership and favourable intergroup comparisons that elevated her self-esteem. What this group offered for Mahmood at a personal level is unclear to the researcher. However, based on her social media posts, it can be assumed the group offered her a sense of purpose greater than herself in the form of religious actualisation. This will be explored later in the chapter but offers insight into the psychological dynamics at play within the online echo chamber. Through frequent interactions with ingroup members, Mahmood may have developed a preference for the ingroup (radical Islamists) over the outgroup (the West). Mahmood's desire to be a part of and participate in online ingroup communities made her more susceptible to influence in the form of recruiters who approached her privately.

Though the topic of the Syrian Civil War served to introduce Mahmood to this influential environment, it was not used to retain her interest. Comparisons between the content posted to her account in April 2013 and November 2013 show a reduction in content linked to the Syrian Civil War, with no posts observed by the researcher made in the latter month. While there are limited captures of her account between April and November 2013, it is apparent that Mahmood had become deeply involved with radical content that she seems to have first come into contact with as a result of her interest in the Syrian War. Behavioural changes observed by her family in

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[144] John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," Cyberpsychology & Behavior 7, no.3 (2004): 321, https://doi.org/10/1089/1094931041291295.
[145] Aqsa Mahmood, "Jihad is the Apex of Islam," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, February 28, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/44214178386/jihad-is-the-apex-of-islam-and-the-positions-of (accessed via web.archive.org)

relation to her increased religiosity reinforce that the material she was exposed to extended beyond the war to personal conduct.[146] This reflects on the depth of the social influence she experienced online. Even without the watchful eye of her online peer group, Mahmood adhered to conduct they would approve of, such as conservative dress, additional prayer, and the withdrawing from tertiary education.[147]

Most of the accounts Mahmood interacted with publicly were observed to follow similar patterns in their posts. When Mahmood posted original content on Tumblr in March and April 2013, she would typically receive around 10 interactions in the form of reposts of likes, indicative of the approximate size of her following on the platform. She appeared to follow a variety of accounts, several of whom seemed to have reciprocated these interactions and formed public online relationships with Mahmood. Posts made on these accounts were typically similar to those made by Mahmood, with the central theme of the Syrian Civil War and the occasional reference to radical Islam. However, there were also users who continued to propagate more radical positions. One such account, using the alias *Prisoner of Faith*, appeared to post almost entirely on subjects related to radical Islam. In one instance in early 2013, this account posted content by then Islamic State of Iraq's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, indicative of a broader awareness of the group's senior leadership prior to their official declaration of a *Caliphate* in mid-2014.[148]

It is unclear whether the accounts Mahmood interacted with were operated by recruiters on behalf of what would become the Islamic State. It is possible that within the echo chamber she developed, she was subjected to influence from non-aligned and aligned radicals who intended to influence whoever they could in order to become active in radical Islam. The online ingroup was not strictly comprised of people who would go on to be a part of the Islamic State, but rather a looser collection of individuals with a similar outlook on issues of significance to the Islamic State. As group polarisation theory suggests, users encouraged one another in their discussions to develop more radical views without necessarily attaching a substantive objective to such views. This environment was ideal for recruiters to exert influence with individuals already susceptible to the same ideologies.

In comparison with the accounts she followed, Mahmood was not the most radical voice within her echo chamber. However, her ideas of what was acceptable, particularly in relation to violence,

[146] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'."
[147] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'."
[148] Tumblr user: *Prisoner of Faith*, "The Blending of 'The Islamic State of Iraq' and 'Jabhat al-Nusra' to create 'The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shaam'," Posted by 'Prisoner of Faith', April 10, 2013, http://heartz-unspoken.tumblr.com/post/47538119453/let-us-declare-relying-on-allah-the-cancelation (accessed via web.archive.org)

had begun to develop to align with the ideologies of the Islamic State. Mahmood posted anti-Israeli content, such as an image of a burning Israeli flag.[149] She also developed an intense reverence for Jihad and viewed it as the "apex of Islam."[150] Her posts at this time appear to have reflected a general development and adoption of radical views, as opposed to an overt endorsement of what would soon become the Islamic State. Though Mahmood was invariably exposed to the Islamic State through her social media circle at this time, she appears to have developed radical persuasions before she was recruited specifically into the group as a consequence of the echo chamber effect. Once inside the Islamic State, the tone of Mahmood's posts shifted significantly toward the radical end of the spectrum, particularly in advocating for violence.

The echo chamber effect appears to have pushed Mahmood toward content of a radical nature. Other members also contained within this echo chamber were able to articulate their concepts of "us" and "them" implicitly and explicitly within the content they posted online. These posts reflected an in-group dynamic that had formed as a result of the interactions between members of the online community. In accordance with social identity theory, Mahmood was individually influenced as a consequence of her participation in the group. Ideals of behaviour iterated within this group were reflected in her day-to-day life. While her parents observed she had become more religious, it became clear Mahmood had adopted views more radical than those with which she had been raised.[151] For example, her withdrawal from university, linked with her eventual departure to Syria, appears linked to beliefs around the role of Muslim women.[152] This also went against beliefs espoused by her parents, who had aspired for their daughter to have a medical career.[153] These beliefs were fostered online, and conformity to them was essential to maintain participation in the group.

Mahmood indicated her views made her feel isolated from her offline peers. She reposted text which outlined the consequences of "speaking the truth" as hatred from Muslims and non-Muslims, being branded a terrorist, extremist or radical, and the risk of imprisonment.[154] Posts on

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[149] Unknown, Uncaptioned Image of a Male burning an Israeli Flag, reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 20, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48430583847/thepeacefulterrorist-members-of-the-neturei (accessed via web.archive.org)

[150] Aqsa Mahmood, "Jihad is the Apex of Islam," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, February 28, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/44214178386/jihad-is-the-apex-of-islam-and-the-positions-of (accessed via web.archive.org)

[151] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'."

[152] "Press Release PM's Extremism Taskforce: tackling extremism in universities and colleges top of the agenda," Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, Home Office, Prime Minister's Office, the Rt Hon David Cameron and MP Jo Johnson.

[153] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."

[154] Tumblr user: *heartz-unspoken*, "Consequences of speaking the truth in dunya in this day and age," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 25, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

the subject in March and April 2013 indicate Mahmood considered herself an outsider in the West and identified with the experiences of Muslim individuals who had been persecuted for their beliefs.[155] This outsider status was reinforced within the echo chamber, where it was not only reiterated but translated into anti-Western sentiments and the justification of violence in the name of Islam directed toward perceived persecutors. Without the opportunity for moderation, such views became normalised. Outsider status was not only a means to pursue a radical agenda, but also to create an in-group built on a common sense of exclusion. As a result of the echo chamber effect, there was a level of control within the group around the content that members were exposed to, which minimised exposure to views from the out-group and allowed them to be characterised in such a way that would encourage members, including Mahmood, to eventually participate in violence against them.

The Virtual Sisterhood

Mahmood became a part of this radical ingroup through exposure to their content in the echo chambers on her social media accounts. The accounts Mahmood interacted with appeared to belong to other women, as opposed to a mix of men and women. This was identified as commonplace within radical spheres associated to the Islamic State. Men and women were especially discouraged from private interactions, in a way that imitated the relationships between the sexes inside territory claimed by the Islamic State. The other women Mahmood interacted with were westerners and claimed to be in cities from London to Brisbane. While it is not possible to ascertain how many followers Mahmood had and how many individuals she followed, Mahmood developed a close social circle online. Interactions within this circle would manifest in the form of public interactions with one another. A post from one woman to Mahmood indicated the pair had never met, as the woman hoped to meet on Earth but prayed to meet in *Jannah* (heaven).[156] This indicates that Mahmood had formed close friendships online, and that such friendships were built around a shared worldview.

Mahmood seemed to bond with her online friends over a shared interest in radical Islam encouraged within the echo chamber. It is not clear whether the other women in this social circle were recruiters for the Islamic State; however, they formed an integral part in one another's radicalisation, which was exacerbated by the echo chamber effects they were all subject to as part of their online activities. While her parents blamed Islamic State recruiter Adeel Ulhaq for their daughter's eventual travel to Syria, the influence of her network online can also not be

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[155] Tumblr user: *heartz-unspoken*, "Consequences of speaking the truth in dunya in this day and age," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 25, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

[156] Aqsa Mahmood, "Anonymous Asked," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, June 13, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

underestimated as normalising and justifying her decisions. [157] The majority of her interactions with her online network, in addition to any Islamic State recruiters, would have been private and are not able to be studied for this reason. However, her public interactions are demonstrative of the wider network she managed to create for herself to reinforce and validate her views.

Within this social circle, one of the most common themes which emerged was that of sisterhood. While Mahmood reportedly had a strong relationship with her biological sisters, there is no indication of what her female friendships in Scotland were like.[158] Online, however, Mahmood developed bonds with other women she described as 'sisters'. Brotherhood and sisterhood are important concepts in Islam, which emphasises a spiritual equality of Muslims before Allah.[159] However, only those who adhere to radical interpretations of Islam are considered to be Muslim by groups like the Islamic State and, therefore, those considered part of the sisterhood or brotherhood are exclusive. This reinforced the sense of identification with the group and comparison to other groups. This radical attitude toward others – both Muslim and non-Muslim – strengthened the resolve of the in-group as opponents to the out-groups and improved their perception of how they compare to the out-group. In the case of the Islamic State, their doctrine prescribes violent punishments, known to have included death and sexual slavery, for those who do not conform to their interpretation of Islam.[160]

The concept of sisterhood in the context of the Islamic State encouraged deeper relationships intended to emulate familial connections, and to act as an alternative support network. This became particularly important when a woman departed for Syria. For Mahmood, in particular, she indicated one of the most difficult aspects of her travel to Syria was to leave her family behind.[161] This was a concern she expected other women would also feel and provided guidance via her Tumblr account on how to cope with the initial phone call home when a woman first entered Islamic State territory.[162] However, Mahmood had a well-established online network that would translate into real world connections who continued to act as her sisters once in Syria. This also allowed for women to directly compare their virtual family with their real one, entrenching their social identity with the former. This led to psychological reward in the form of self-esteem and drove women to view their own families as hostile or antagonistic, subsequently undermining what were likely to be some of the strongest relationships they had offline. This virtual sisterhood would

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157 Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."
158 Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."
159 Javad Haghnavaz, "A Brief History of Islam (The Spread of Islam)," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 4, no. 17 (2013): 213.
160 Ahram, "Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS," 62.
161 Aqsa Mahmood, "Diary of a Muhajirah – 2," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, June 3, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org).
162 Aqsa Mahmood, "Diary of a Muhajirah – 2," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, June 3, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org).

eventually translate to real-world connections once inside the Islamic State, with Mahmood demonstrated in posts about separation from her *hijrah* buddy in September 2014.[163]

Mahmood interacted frequently and publicly with others online she called *sisters*, with a central focus on their religion. These online *sisters* operated accounts which posted content similar to Mahmood. An account by the alias 'Prisoner of Faith' frequently communicated with Mahmood publicly and from as early as 2012 would post commentary on radical Islamic philosophies and, more particularly, on the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Other accounts posted content which reflected similar viewpoints and reinforced one another where they shared and interacted with each other. Though public, their frequent references to sisterhood and engagement with one another as *sisters* created a sense of exclusivity. This sisterhood became Mahmood's echo chamber, where the repetition of viewpoints was viewed as validation, and without challenge, the views evolved to become more radical in nature. This process is known as group polarisation, whereby a group makes decisions that are more extreme than the initial predisposition of the group's members.

The concept of sisterhood is also conducive of groupthink, a phenomenon where a collective desire for unity leads to irrational or dysfunctional decisions.[164] In such an environment, disagreement is seen to contribute to disharmony and is subsequently avoided. Where decisions are already extreme as a result of group polarisation and members are reluctant to act in a disharmonious fashion, individuals can be motivated to participate in otherwise uncharacteristic activities. Accounts from her family indicate Mahmood was not at all inclined toward radical views, and that they were unaware of her intent to travel to Syria.[165] This would be consistent with group polarisation and groupthink, whereby Mahmood did not typically adhere to or opt for radical views until she was placed into a group environment where she identified with the cause and came to be convinced toward their proposed course of action. In early 2013, it appears Mahmood attracted little readership on her social media account based on the low level of interaction, and therefore, is unlikely to have attracted counterarguments that may have disrupted or challenged the development of radical views.

Irrespective of whether the women Mahmood interacted with online were actual recruiters or fellow believers, they contributed to her radicalisation, as she no doubt did to theirs, through the

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[163] Aqsa Mahmood, "When you separate from your Hijrah buddy for the first time in 8 months," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, August 14, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org).
[164] Randy Borum, "Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Involvement in Terrorism* 4, no. 4 (2011): 21, https://dx.doi.org /10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1.
[165] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."

sisterhood they developed and subsequent episodes of groupthink and group polarisation. It is notable that there were no observed instances where views raised were challenged, as groupthink encourages conformity and that members do not raise alternative or controversial views. However, posts which conformed to the ideology were commonplace within the social circle. In one instance in April 2013, Mahmood published text originally written by former al-Qa'ida Chief of Intelligence, Abu Ubaydah Abdullah al- 'Adam, which was on the subject of how to prevent apostate awakenings.[166] While this was not original content, Mahmood made the effort to contribute to the body of content within the echo chamber with equally radical views. Given these sisterhoods emerged within online echo chambers, there was already an absence of criticism and counterviews; therefore, sisterhood becomes a powerful mechanism to control the behaviours and attitudes of women as they are recruited into the Islamic State, with the sisterhood acting as an ingroup in its own right.

The diarised style of Mahmood's post is also indicative of the close relationship she shared with her followers and a desire to express her innermost thoughts, and sometimes vulnerabilities, with them. In the midst of ideologically themed posts, Mahmood often wrote personal items that would receive reaction from her online associates. Examples of such posts included an instance where she purchased an *abaya* (a type of Islamic dress) that was too large and drew laughter from her friends, and concern that her mother would be unhappy with the amount she had spent online shopping.[167] Such posts became interactive places for her *sisters* to share in her experiences, particularly in light of the geographical space between them all. These posts were also a salient reminder that the women who made posts and instructed one another of radical religious views were particularly young and had problems similar to their western peers. The solution to these seemingly mundane problems, however, differed in that the ultimate resolution was to become a member of a terrorist organisation.

Islamic State recruitment material was tailored to a younger audience. Viral videos targeted toward men included references to common youth interests, such as video games.[168] For young women, the sense of community and belonging that comes from participation in a sisterhood was used to attract them to the Islamic State. In the case of Mahmood, this was most clearly evidenced when she was a recruiter herself. In one post, Mahmood appeals directly to her '*brothers and*

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[166] Aqsa Mahmood, "The Apostate Awakenings… and the Way to Prevent Them," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, May 27, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)
[167] Aqsa Mahmood, "I just bought my first abaya," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, February 28, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/44217020721/i-just-bought-my-first-abaya-actual-so (accessed via web.archive.org)
[168] Ahmed al-Rawi, "Video Games, Terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (2018): 747, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1207633.

sisters' to hasten their trips to Islamic State territory.[169] This post appealed to first, a sense of common identity in the form of a sibling type relationship and, second, a sense of urgency that encouraged people to abandon their western lives without a second thought. She also added advice to encourage other *sisters* to join her and relayed the experiences of other women Mahmood interacted with in her daily life in an effort to convince women to join.[170]

While it was these sentiments and ideals that initially attracted women to the sisterhood online, it was the favourable comparisons to other groups, both similar and dissimilar, and the psychological benefits of these comparisons that kept them loyal. For Mahmood, the positive self-identity she derived from her participation led her to develop a confidence that was conveyed to her followers through her social media posts, particularly those which antagonised out-groups. This confidence manifested in a belief that the Islamic State was capable of achieving its military objective of world domination, and that to be a member of any other sect of society would result in defeat. These comparisons—which proved deeply inaccurate with the hindsight of seeing the Islamic State fall—were rooted in the narratives she consumed as a sister within the Islamic State's digital family. This belief, however, coupled with the reinforcement and encouragement she received from her sisterhood online, would eventually be a key driver behind her decision to relocate to Syria and act on the ideologies she had come to believe.

Though Mahmood did share violent and graphic content on her account, it is clear that the themes used in Islamic State propaganda to target men did not necessarily appeal to her and her friends. Even where violence was condoned, it was less graphic than it might be depicted in other publications. For example, Mahmood posted a photo of the Boston Bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, with the caption 'innocent'.[171] She would also post photos of men killed in the Syrian Civil War, though these images were intended to share and inspire sadness more so than to serve as a recruitment tool.[172] Likewise, the content on other accounts she interacted with was of a similar nature and did not reflect the content that would become viral as Islamic State marketing tools, such as videos of beheadings and those modelled after video games.[173]

[169] Aqsa Mahmood, "Diary of a Muhajirah – 3," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, September 11, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)
[170] Aqsa Mahmood, "Diary of a Muhajirah – 3," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, September 11, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)
[171] Tumblr user: *fuxwithmynutella*, Uncaptioned Image of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev with the word Innocent above, reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 24, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48826672190 (accessed via web.archive.org)
[172] Aqsa Mahmood, Uncaptioned Image of Deceased Male, April 24, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)
[173] Miron Lakomy, "Let's Play a Video Game: *Jihadi* Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019): 383, https://doi.org/10/1080/1057610X.2017.1385903.

The use of sisterhood to attract women also acts on motivations traditionally understood to drive individuals to terrorist organisations, namely a sense of isolation.[174] Individuals consider themselves to be on an outgroup within their home countries, and therefore, feel alone. Such feelings were expressed by Mahmood and encouraged by her network. The perception they were outsiders was considered a consequence of their views.[175] This was not seen as a negative consequence, however, as this became a point of commonality within the online ingroup Mahmood found in the Islamic State sisterhood. Posts which highlighted how Muslims were persecuted for their beliefs in western societies were used to find a place of common understanding and stoke sentiments of resentment toward the west. These sentiments were used as the basis for a radicalisation and became the platform upon which Mahmood was radicalised in her views as a Muslim. Shared experiences encouraged the entrenchment of sisterhood online and deepened the divide between Mahmood's newfound online ingroup and the outgroup in which she lived her day-to-day life.

Sisterhood opened avenues for the women to share close personal events and develop their friendships. In one instance, Mahmood shared a post from an online associate that requested prayers for her grandfather.[176] This is demonstrative of the vulnerabilities shown by other women within her social circle in search of support. Requests for *duas* (prayers) were commonplace within Islamic State inner circles online, as a way to connect with one another spiritually.[177] The opportunity to show such support in a public forum, which likely continued privately, further entrenched interpersonal connections within the sisterhood. This would also make it harder for women to betray the trust and confidence of their *sisters*, either in a personal capacity or to law enforcement. These acts of vulnerability would act to further solidify the in-group dynamics, and developed a unified front, at the very least, in their social media presence.

In many instances, the women in Mahmood's social media circle were more preoccupied with their relationships with one another than with their husbands. While there was discussion of their marriages, these posts seldom came with the same level of vulnerability the women displayed with one another on other issues. This created a deeper sense of friendship, which meant that those with whom Mahmood interacted online had a greater level of influence over her. Their

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[174] Tumblr user: *Heartz-unspoken*, "Consequences of speaking the truth in dunya in this day and age," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 25, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

[175] Tumblr user: *Heartz-unspoken*, "Consequences of speaking the truth in dunya in this day and age," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 25, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

[176] Tumblr user: *whathappenedtopeace*, "Urgent," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 24, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)

[177] Aqsa Mahmood, Request for Duas, April 24, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com (accessed via web.archive.org)

advice to her, including encouragement to eventually travel to Syria, came from a place of trust and confidence given the vulnerabilities they had shared with one another. The primary content examined in this research related to posts made by Mahmood in the period between March and November 2013; however, a large dataset exists in the period after she travelled to the Islamic State. The content and tone changes as she evolves from recruit to recruiter, and it is likely that during this time she received instruction on what to post from within the Islamic State as part of their broader recruitment strategy. The limitations of such posts may have also been to protect the identification and targeting of her husband by military actors in the region.

That being said, men were often sent to participate in combat away from their wives. It appears women would often have one another to depend on as opposed to their husbands. Accounts from other wives described how western women lived in close proximity to one another and would spend time together. Mahmood was reportedly a part of this arrangement and was likely to have had similar experiences to other women who have described their experiences since the collapse of the Islamic State. This would include instances where women had multiple husbands, after their husbands were killed, and would spend extended periods alone. Likewise, women were considered subordinate to men and, therefore, friendship did not appear to be an important quality in a marriage. It appears the majority of relationships women had within the Islamic State were with other women and, therefore, sisterhood played an important part in their time inside Syria, just as it did online before Mahmood was recruited.

A sense of sisterhood provided a means to keep women content under such circumstances. Overt recruitment material produced by the Islamic State to target female recruits was tailored to appeal to traditionally feminine pursuits, such as wifedom, home life and children. In social media channels, the concept of sisterhood was used to also remind women of the network they would become a part of and that their married life would not be lonely, even where their husbands were seldom present. This acted as much as an enabler as it did a motivation. Women were encouraged to participate in the Islamic State for the sisterhood it provided, but also because of the pressure from the sisterhood developed in the process of radicalisation.

Sisterhood became a direct line of appeal when Mahmood became a recruiter herself. By June 2014, Mahmood appeared to have at least three times the level of interaction by followers on her Tumblr account. In a post series titled *Diary of a Mujahirah*, Mahmood included specific appeals to *sisters* with advice on instructions for travel to the Islamic State.[178] These appeals also were intended to isolate women from any factors that might inhibit their motivation to join the Islamic

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[178] Aqsa Mahmood, "Diary of a Muhajirah – 2," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, June 3, 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

State, such as family and friends. While, again, it is likely Mahmood received instruction on the content she posted on her Tumblr, there is a level of consistency with the posts she made prior to November 2013, particularly as it relates to the concept of sisterhood. Perhaps the most significant change is that Mahmood writes with more authority. This could be attributed to the high profile she gained after the media picked up on her disappearance, as she became an idol for likeminded women.

One notable trend is that Mahmood seemed to interact primarily with other western women online, as opposed to women based in Syria or the wider Middle East area. In particular, her associates appeared to be the children or grandchildren of immigrants who resided in English speaking countries. There were no instances observed by the researcher where Mahmood publicly interacted with non-western women. Although, based on expressions of solidarity with persons affected by the conflict in Syria, it is expected these were women Mahmood also viewed as sisters. However, this also allowed Mahmood to buy into a fantasy of life in the Islamic State without the risk she may contact someone who provided a contrary view on the reality of life on the ground.

Such conversations would be unlikely to take place publicly as individual and private appeals to would be more likely to yield a positive result. It is unclear whether Mahmood received such correspondence. However, she reportedly contacted her parents while inside the Islamic State to advise them of the ill conditions she lived in, often having to sleep on the floor and becoming sick with pneumonia.[179] Such details were never broadcast on her social media profiles and are unlikely to have been iterated to prospective recruits Mahmood may have had contact with online. The lack of interaction between Mahmood and non-western female members of the Islamic State allowed her to accept a distorted picture of life within the Islamic State.

In Syria, it appears Mahmood mostly interacted with other western women, and seldom wrote of experiences with local women. Mahmood did use intermittent Arabic on her Tumblr account, but this often seemed to be with reference to religion. It is not clear to the researcher whether Mahmood was a fluent speaker, and what impact this had on her relationships with non-western women in Syria. It was reported that Mahmood was a member of the all-female police brigade, al-Khanssaa, known for their brutal punishment of women who disobeyed laws imposed by the Islamic State. Al-Khanssaa Brigade represented an in-group in itself similarly built on the ideal of female friendship. Women who participated in the morality police force had additional privileges, such as the ability to drive and walk about without the company of a male escort.[180] They also

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[179] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."
[180] Azadeh Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape," *New York Times*, November 22, 2015.

had power in their enforcement of the moral code of the Islamic State, which elevated them above their female peers.

Al-Khanssaa was believed to comprise two elements which segregated western and non-western women.[181] Power was a driving force for local women to join al-Khanssaa, as it afforded them independence that was more familiar to them from a pre-Islamic State period. However, western women who joined this brigade, including Mahmood, received substantially different treatment.[182] They were paid more, and had even less restrictions in their day-to-day lives.[183] It was also mandated that western and non-western women within al-Khanssaa would not associate with one another, likely to avoid comparisons about the benefits they received.[184] This also represented an even more exclusive ingroup within the ingroup, whereby its members were elevated above those over whom they exercised power. This afforded them a sense of superiority that enabled them to enact violent punishment over those seen to have transgressed Islamic State law. This may also explain why Mahmood seemed to only have close relationships with other westerners whilst in Syria, as well as why westerners dominated the social media space.

Sisterhood, therefore, became weaponised to convince otherwise non-violent women to participate in the persecution of other women. Much of the recruitment process became a mechanism to ensure conformity within the Islamic State, and dissuade women from voicing alternative perspectives, even in the situations that were so counterintuitive and violent when compared to their western lives. Mahmood did not seem to demonstrate violent tendencies in accounts of her life in Scotland, nor did she post an intention to participate in violence personally on her social media accounts. The precise reasons she was motivated to join al-Khanssaa Brigade are unclear, but it is expected this process would have been a natural progression of her recruitment. Sisterhood, and the strength of female bonds, allowed Mahmood to be part of a situation where she was so deeply entrenched in the organisation's values that she was able to be part of its moral police force.

Religious Obligation

Mahmood was raised in a moderate family and appears to have been predominantly exposed to radical content online. However, her faith – though moderate – became critical in how she would view and process information online. The Islamic State required its followers to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam, one which was espoused within the online ingroup Mahmood became a

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[181] Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers."
[182] Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers."
[183] Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers."
[184] Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers."

part of. This interpretation instilled in Mahmood a sense of religious obligation, whereby she believed the life she would live inside the Islamic State was a way to *Jannah*. This sense of religious duty was shared amongst her online sisterhood, who encouraged one another to fulfil what they believed to be their calling. Several of Mahmood's posts reflected on a deep religious development that took place before she eventually departed for Syria.

Mahmood would often post content that was religious but, in many instances, was not overtly radical. Such content was intertwined with material on western 'occupations' in the Middle East and outrage in particular at the situation in Syria. Her personal background, as a first-generation Muslim in a western nation, was the way in which she came to interpret the information she viewed online and led her to content that aligned with the Islamic State. As an echo chamber amplifies the views it contains, these are often perceived to be more popular and widely held than they really are. Mahmood, therefore, became entrenched in a community that capitalised on her previously held beliefs and continued to push her to embrace more radical ones, particularly as they related to the Syrian Civil War. This also led her to maintain the view that the ingroup she was a part of were more successful in the implementation of their ideology. With time, Mahmood moved her social media content from a focus on injustice and conflicts in the Middle East to material focused almost exclusively on Islam.

Religious identity was a commonality shared within the ingroup of the Islamic State and, by extension, within Mahmood's online echo chamber. Many of the accounts Mahmood interacted with appeared to write almost exclusively on religious issues, again, with little that was overtly radical. The role religion played in her personal life appeared to transform her behaviour. Mahmood's parents observed that she seemed to have deepened her piety, while her posts online discussed how she sought to dress conservatively, in line with her newfound beliefs.[185] Her place in the virtual sisterhood invariably helped, as the women all faced similar experiences in western nations. Within Mahmood's social media activity, there does not appear to have been representation from women who lived within the conflict zone they aspired to travel to. This, perhaps, allowed Mahmood to overlook the dangers of travel to an active conflict zone. This was also a means by which individuals could categorise groups—on the basis of their religious identity—and identify with the Islamic State in that they purported to share a 'true' interpretation of Islamic with its loyal members.

Her online sisters emphasised what was expected of women, the roles they could play in the future of an emergent Caliphate, and how this was the obligation of all true Muslims. Mahmood was subjected to social pressures to fulfil the duties expected of her to maintain her membership

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[185] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical'."

within her online sisterhood and was expected to lead a lifestyle supportive of the aspirations of what would later become the Islamic State. Her role as an online supporter was part of this, but a sense of obligation to participate in the conflict – albeit as a jihadi bride and not a combatant – was a common theme online.[186] The sisterhood and recruiters encouraged the view that this was the path to *Jannah*, to prove one's faithfulness to *Allah*. As an exclusive sect, it was critical that Mahmood support what she came to believe was the true interpretation of Islam, to ensure their prosperity and longevity. This meant that Mahmood identified with the group and saw their values as a reflection of her own personal views. From here, Mahmood's views became increasingly radical to align with the Islamic State's, in an effort to ensure her own position within the group so that she would be seen as a member by outgroups who were perceived as inferior.

This sense of duty developed as a result of the interactions she had within her echo chamber, with her online sisters, and probably through private interactions with recruiters that are not captured in this study. However, it was one of the most critical motivators in her decision to join the Islamic State. The fundamental reason Mahmood travelled to Syria was to become a wife and mother, something she believed was her duty as a follower of the Islamic State's ideologies. This was not an aspiration she initially held when she became embroiled in the online echo chamber. In March and April 2013, no posts were found by the researcher that suggested she intended to become a wife and mother for a *jihadi*, nor that she felt it was her duty to do so. She did post on religious matters, including a desire to live in a Muslim country, and appeared to have encountered radical content in this time, but none that overtly contributed to a sense of religious duty.

However, by November, she would post more frequently on the topic and alluded to a desire to become a wife. It can be inferred that between April and November, the idea that she had a religious obligation to assist in the furtherance of the Islamic State became a deeply held belief. This is demonstrated not only in the content she posted and behavioural changes she exhibited in her day-to-day life, but also in her ultimate decision to depart for Syria. Though the pressure did come from within her online sisterhood to conform to their expectations, many of those with whom she interacted appear to have never left their home countries, and instead remained online supporters in the years that would follow. It can be expected that private conversations between Mahmood and other women online might have contained fantasies about the prospect of life inside what would become the Islamic State, in a more casual exertion of social influence and pressure, but that not all women chose to act on this sense of duty.

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[186] Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspoa'," 26.

In November, Mahmood posted a series of images depicting a jihadi and his wife in the moments before he leaves. These images are indicative of some of the aspirations Mahmood had for her new life in Syria. Unlike other women who would join the Islamic State at a later stage, Mahmood was one of the first western women to make this journey, and so did not have the reassurance of other women to describe life in Syria and answer any questions she may have had. It is widely believed Mahmood was in contact with recruiters during this time. Women had sense of obligation imposed on them by these recruiters made them believe this was the only *right* choice, and that they have a religious duty to fulfil inside Syria.[187] It can be expected that similar pressures were applied to Mahmood, who had been conditioned through conformity with group expectations and views to participate fully in radicalised behaviours. These pressures were also derived from intergroup competition, where Mahmood needed to act in furtherance of maintaining a positive self-identity by acting in an increasingly hostile manner toward outgroup counterparts, to bolster her own self-esteem through comparing favourably and advancing her group agenda.

In an Arabic manifesto produced and circulated within the Islamic State – though not through its western channels – they considered the greatest responsibility for a woman was that of being a wife and a mother.[188] This manifesto was in accordance with the radical Islamic framework that dictated conduct within the Islamic State. Even though it was not designed for western consumption, based on there being no translation provided, the ideals outlined are reflective of the content found on Mahmood and her associate's online accounts. The content of this doctrine is reflected in the material circulated within echo chambers and used in the recruitment of women, as their role within the Islamic State was framed as a righteous obligation. Much as men were called to jihad with the promise of martyrdom, a similar sense of duty was imposed on women to ensure they could satisfy the roles required of them. The role of women within Islamic State society provided Mahmood with a sense of purpose as a consequence of the radicalisation she had experienced and led her to travel to Syria to fulfil this purpose.

Women were important state builders within the Islamic State. The intention that they would raise the next generation of fighters indicated there was a level of future planning within the senior leadership that filtered down to recruitment directives.[189] In the short term, the presence of female recruits was used to attract more men. Material that suggested male fighters may have multiple wives, in addition to sexual slaves, depended on the presence of female recruits who expressed enthusiasm to become a bride. The re-marriages of women when their husbands were killed is indicative that the Islamic State was not necessarily able to meet this demand. As part of their

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[187] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 60.
[188] Al-Khanssaa Brigade, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," Translated by Charlie Winter (February 2015): 18.
[189] Elizabeth Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, no. 11 (2018): 862.

viability in the longer term, the replacement of individuals killed in action was important to the longevity of the insurgency. This primarily came in the form of recruits but was easier where an individual had already been radicalised, such as in instances where they were raised in such an environment. Given the Islamic State did not appear averse to the use of child soldiers, termed *cubs* in recruitment material, a replenished population did not necessarily need to reach adulthood to become a combatant.

Mahmood would later acknowledge the difficulties of life in a warzone to her social media followers but articulated that the cause was worthwhile. In her transition from a contributor and consumer of the online echo chamber to a *muhajirat*, Mahmood's purpose in the state became two-fold: she was both a wife and a success story. *Muhajirat* was the term used for a woman who had successfully completed *hijrah* to the Islamic State. They were used as examples to recruit other women, while they also contributed as wives and mothers. For Mahmood, this was also an important function of her religious duty. It cannot be confirmed that she was in control of her social media once she entered Islamic State territory, but it is believed by the researcher that she was active as a recruiter. The recruitment of other women further developed the capacity for the Islamic State to grow, both due to the capacity to provide brides for foreign fighters who had been promised wives and to develop a supportive population.

Of particular importance to her radicalisation was the development of an admiration for *jihad* within the terms set by the Islamic State. The concept itself is contested within Islamic scholarship, and often interpretations offered by terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are refuted as self-serving and non-Islamic. *Jihad* was interpreted in such a way that justified the activities of the Islamic State, not limited to but including beheadings, public corporal punishment and the use of sexual slavery to oppress minorities.[190] The belief that this was a just war was an idea that came to proliferate the echo chamber Mahmood occupied, particularly in reference to what was often seen as an unjust occupation by the West in the Middle East. The acceptance that such actions were justifiable allowed individuals to overcome personal reservations to conform with the expectations of the wider group, as is often exhibited in instances of groupthink.

While women were not recruited as combatants, they were a part of the conflict in their role as wives. Men would often be killed in combat, subsequently to be considered martyrs, and their wives remarried to other fighters. Women were often treated as commodities, with little time between marriages. This meant that women also needed to understand that jihad meant their husbands would often not come home from combat, but that their sacrifice was for a necessary and important cause. Likewise, women were often exposed to displays of violence in their day-

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[190] Ahram, "Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS," 62.

to-day lives within the Islamic State, and so, to ensure cohesion in the face of such overt violence, *jihad* was used to unify the group through the justification of actions with the expectation group members would act supportively.

Jihad is a core ideological pillar for the Islamic State and is used to justify the actions they undertake and create impetus for their followers to participate in such actions, even where they may otherwise have been viewed as morally reprehensible. It was important, therefore, that recruits would adhere to this interpretation of *jihad*, and rate it highly, to overrule any moral objections they may have had to these actions. This was also important for women, as day-to-day life within the Islamic State meant they were often privy to evidence of violence that targeted civilians. Likewise, as per the doctrine produced by the Islamic State on the role of women, it was important they recognised the significance of *jihad* so that they would react accordingly if they were called to partake in the combat.

Islamic State doctrine, not broadcast in itself but certainly influential in the creation of material to recruit women, stipulated that women were to take up arms in the instance there were insufficient male combatants to defend from adversaries.[191] This meant women needed to be conditioned to conform to such expectations even if they never expected to take up arms. Such instances became common with the fall of the Islamic State, where several women were found equipped with suicide vests, including German national, Linda Wenzel.[192] Mahmood expressed intense admiration for *jihad* as the pinnacle of Islam.[193] However, her relationship with *jihad* – at least in public forums – was somewhat complex. There were instances that almost appeared to indicate an infatuation with conventional iterations of *jihad* that extended to her calls for violence against the west while inside Syria, while she also recognised that her role was as a wife, and not a combatant in other circumstances.[194]

It appears that emotions that bonded the virtual sisterhood – such as a sense of injustice about conflicts in the Middle East and an intense admiration of *jihad* – influenced the women to be supportive of violence, though much of their content only alluded to, and did not outright feature this. This violence was often raised with anti-western sentiments when Mahmood was inside the Islamic State, and though the researcher did not observe threats made by Mahmood against the west online before she was inside Syria, she was likely to have been exposed to this material

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[191] Al-Khanssaa Brigade, "Women in the Islamic State."
[192] Yaron Steinbuch, "German teen's ISIS odyssey is over," *New York Post*, July 18, 2017, https://nypost.com/2017/07/18/german-teens-isis-odyssey-is-over/
[193] Aqsa Mahmood, "Jihad is the Apex of Islam," Posted by Aqsa Mahmood, February 28, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/44214178386/jihad-ls-the-apex-of-islam-and-the-positions-of (accessed via web.archive.org)
[194] Unknown (@ImamShafiee), "Hey Aqsa I found this picture of you," undated.

within her virtual echo chamber, based on the anti-western sentiments that were often posted to her own account.[195] *Jihad* was defined as part of the religious obligations women had within the sisterhood, and their contributions as wives and mothers was seen as an essential component of the conflict.

Mahmood may have experienced some level of discrimination in Scotland on the basis that she was a Muslim. At the very least, she identified with these experiences online and often shared content on the issue in March and April 2013. In one instance, she reposted a response to an accusation that Muslims (as a whole group, and not individuals) had undertaken the Boston Bombing.[196] In this response, there is reflection on how it feels to be persecuted on the basis of one's identify, and how this contributes to a sense of isolation. Mahmood also reposted a comment that essentially stated that Muslims should not need to prove to white people that they are not terrorists.[197] Such isolation is often cited as a motivation for individuals to become members of terrorist groups and undertake violence against the societies in which they were raised.

Though Mahmood recognised her beliefs isolated her from her peers, it also appears Mahmood related to, and possibly experienced, a sense of isolation that came from the treatment of Muslims in western nations, particularly after terrorist attacks. This is also indicative that as of April 2013, Mahmood did not consider herself to be a Muslim extremist, in spite of the views she expressed online. Her view that she was oppressed, a view which may have been rooted in some truth, was used to justify the violence she aspired to achieve. Negative experiences at the hands of the western outgroup, such as those Muthana identified with on her social media, were used to deepen the divide between "us" and "them" in a way that worked to the advantage of the recruiters. This meant that women like Muthana came to see themselves not as violent extremists, but as individuals emboldened to defend their ingroup in the face of an existential threat.

However, early posts lacked the direction that would later come from Islamic State doctrine, particularly in terms of calls for attacks on the West. Once again, it appears that in early 2013, Mahmood was not inclined toward violence, but rather, attracted to an ideology that espoused violence. Women came to have a substantially more active role in the activities of the Islamic

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[195] Unknown, Uncaptioned Screenshots of Islamist Propaganda Video, Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, June 13, 2013, http://25.media.tumblr.com/0623506276b8d9746acb202c85d296c1/ tumblr_mjtod3UKrR1rwpmsxo5_1280.jpg (accessed via web.archive.org)
[196] Unknown, Screenshot of Answer to Anonymous Question, Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 19, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48366599736/antithisandthat-to-be-perfectly-honest-the (accessed via web.archive.org)
[197] Tumblr user: *antithisandthat*, "To be perfectly honest," Reposted by Aqsa Mahmood, April 19, 2013, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com/post/48368366113/bu-hashem-the-art-of-protest-rebloggable-by (accessed via web.archive.org)

State when compared with other Islamist terror groups, such as al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. In early 2013, Mahmood had not established overt ties with the Islamic State or its earlier manifestations. Instead, in this period, it is clear she was in the process of self-radicalisation, which later made her either seek out or be sought out by recruiters who would lead her to Syria. A sense of religious duty was important in Mahmood's decision to join the Islamic State.

Conclusion

Mahmood was not a traditional target for radicalisation. Based on the information available about her life in Scotland, she did not have ties to extremists, was well-educated and seemed to have enjoyed at least some parts of western culture. Offline, there would have been few opportunities for a recruiter to radicalise someone who fits this profile. However, examination of social media accounts operated by Mahmood demonstrate that her online behaviours and interests came to be increasingly radical as she went deeper into the echo chamber that would define her views on the world. Mahmood was not a radical before she ventured online, but the concepts she was introduced to were things she could related to, namely a sense of sisterhood and a religious obligation bigger than herself.

Both of these concepts capitalised on the upbringing Mahmood had experienced: a young Muslim woman in a post-9/11 West. To explore such concepts online does not necessarily lead to radicalisation, but rather, the content on these issues that Mahmood found most appealing was viewed through the lens of radical Islam. Once inside this echo chamber, Mahmood became involved with an ingroup that used sisterhood and religious obligations to entrench a divide between Mahmood and her western roots. Her social media posts indicate how she was conditioned to believe that these views justified her actions, and the actions of the Islamic State. The exact process of her recruitment remains unclear to the researcher, in terms of whether Mahmood sought out avenues to travel to Syria or was approached by an online recruiter, but it is clear that her participation in the radical online community she encountered was a critical step in her journey as a Jihadi Bride.

Mahmood became deeply embroiled in an ingroup within an ingroup, being the online sisterhood of the Islamic State. This sisterhood used the echo chamber effect to strengthen the divide between themselves and their antagonists: any and all adversaries of the Islamic State, but particularly, the West. In this situation, religion was used to create a sense of duty or obligation that drove Mahmood to make *hijrah* to Syria, which ultimately served to advance the agenda of the ingroup and rewarded Mahmood with a sense of personal satisfaction portrayed through her social media accounts after she arrived in Syria.

Chapter V: Hoda Muthana

In November 2014, one year after Aqsa Mahmood departed for Syria, a 20-year-old American woman by the name of Hoda Muthana departed her home in Alabama to make the same journey to Syria to join the Islamic State. Like many other women her age, Muthana was active across several social media sites, including Twitter and Tumblr.[198] The posts she made on these sites, both before and after she travelled to Syria, documented her radicalisation, recruitment, and eventually, encouragement of other women. These posts were captured and made publicly available by Ellie Hall, a journalist who maintained contact with Muthana throughout her time in Syria.[199] This meant even as her accounts were removed, the contents remained available online for use in this study. Muthana is also one of several western *jihadi* brides discovered inside al Hol camp since the fall of the Islamic State.[200] From here, she has provided interviews as part of her efforts to return to the United States.[201]

Muthana was born in the United States to Yemeni parents, with her father having been a diplomat.[202] She maintains that she had a conservative upbringing and was restricted in what she was able to do with her peers.[203] She attributed this as the reason she had such a limited social circle of friends, but would not be able to spend time with them outside of school or the mosque.[204] Muthana resented that her brothers had freedoms she did not, and feared a future where her mother chose her husband from the family in Yemen, meaning she would need to move there.[205] Muthana also had a troubled relationship with her mother, feeling there was no relationship between the two of them.[206] These personal circumstances would culminate to influence her

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[198] Hall, "An Alabama 'ISIS Bride' Wants to Come Home."

[199] Hall, "An Alabama 'ISIS Bride' Wants to Come Home."

[200] Martin Chulov and Bethan McKernan, "Hoda Muthana 'deeply regrets' joining ISIS and Wants to Return Home," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/17/us-woman-hoda-muthana-deeply-regrets-joining-isis-and-wants-return-home

[201] Luke Denne and Gabriel Chaim, "US-Born ISIS Bride Says, 'Everyone Deserves a Second Chance'," *NBC News*, November 9, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-born-isis-bride-says-everyone-deserves-second-chance-n1075046; Conor Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is not a US Citizen, Sec. Pompeo Says, Despite Lawyer's Assertions," *ABC News*, February 21, 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/US/isis-bride-hoda-muthana-us-citizen-sec-pompeo/story?id=61193487; Enjoli Francis and James Longman, "Former ISIS Bride Who Left US for Syria Says She 'Interpreted Everything Very Wrong'," *ABC News*, February 20, 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/International/isis-bride-left-us-syria-interpreted-wrong/story?id=61175508.

[202] Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, "American-Born Hoda Muthana Tells All About Joining ISIS and Escaping the Caliphate," *Homeland Security Today*, April 23, 2019, https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/american-born-hoda-muthana-tells-all-about-joining-isis-and-escaping-the-caliphate/

[203] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."

[204] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."

[205] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."

[206] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."

decisions when Muthana was gifted her first cell phone and entered into a social media space that would ultimately change her life.[207]

Muthana was online in an environment where the Islamic State had announced their *Caliphate*. This meant two things for their online recruitment process: material was more overt and explicit in what was expected of members, and efforts to counter their online presence were stronger. Muthana would have subsequently been subjected to a more overt clash of ideas in the social media space, including exposure to the kind of treatment women were subjected to within the Islamic State, as well as the atrocities committed against others within the region. This means that, potentially unlike Mahmood, Muthana was likely to have experienced the effects of some countermeasures, and still travelled to Syria, irrespective of this knowledge. Notwithstanding this, three similar themes emerged from an analysis of Muthana's social media activity: her presence in an echo chamber found on Islamic State ideals, female friendships, and a sense of religious obligation.

An Islamic State Echo Chamber

Like many of her peers in the United States, Muthana was active across several social media platforms. However, her virtual network came to consist primarily of Islamic State affiliates and members, as opposed to others from her real-world social circles. It was these platforms, coupled with an increased interest in Islam, that appeared to introduce Muthana to these social networks in the first instance. In a 2019 interview, Muthana stated that she desired greater independence from her conservative family, and that her engagement with radical Islam was rooted in a desire to escape this conservatism.[208] It is unclear whether this is the factor that drove Muthana to seek out such information across social media, or whether she encountered them via other means. Regardless of the precise driver, it is apparent from social media posts from late 2013 and early 2014 that Muthana had immersed herself in an echo chamber centred on Islamic State ideals.

Islam was one of the common bonds within this echo chamber. It was on this basis that Muthana was able to participate in this community and form meaningful relationships with its members. These individuals rallied around their place as Muslims in the western world, which some perceived as threatening to their very identity. Muthana framed those she interacted with as 'normal' Muslims, indicative that Muthana viewed their experiences and outlooks, at the very least, to be reflective of her own interpretation of the world.[209] Social media posts made in the year

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207 Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."
208 Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."
209 Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."

before Muthana departed for Syria, between November 2013 and November 2014, indicate she was deeply involved with a virtual 'family' of likeminded individuals. However, the nature of the content Muthana posted, and invariably consumed, was of a substantially more radical nature, idolising prominent *jihadi* figures, such as Osama bin Laden, and adhering to a strict moral code of online interactions that extended from its Islamic State linked facilitators.[210]

Muthana had been raised Muslim, and as such, it was an intrinsic part of her identity and how she categorised the world around her. With this being a central characteristic of members of the Islamic State echo chamber, it was simple for Muthana to identify who belonged to this group alongside her. This category was not so broad as to include all members of the Islamic faith, but rather, an exclusive and radical subset of it. It was at the social identification phase that Muthana was likely to have changed her behaviours to match those around her, as she adopted this group identity to match what she had categorised herself as belonging to. This paved the way for Muthana to undertake social comparisons between the Islamic State and all those perceived as antagonistic to their causes, including the United States,

Muthana identified she participated in a group comprised of some 3,000 members on Twitter, who used the platform to disseminate radical content, inform the increasingly radicalised views of one another and encourage users to conform with behaviours and ideals set by the Islamic State.[211] All of these qualities are characteristics of an echo chamber. Membership of this echo chamber comprised some of the most devout supporters of the Islamic State, known as the *baqiyah* family.[212] The Arabic word *baqiyah* was commandeered by Islamic State supporters online, derived from their motto: *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (endures and expands).[213] These supporters aligned themselves with Islamic State doctrine in the digital space, sharing content of a radical persuasion in accordance with Islamic State views.

From as early as January 2014, Muthana's username on twitter included the word *baqiyah*, indicative of her membership in this online community, and a clear marker of her social identification with the group. Muthana operated in accordance with trends seen within this online community. In January 2014, she posted a quote from Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, a theologian

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[210] Hoda Muthana, "Chillen," February 7, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988567-Twitter-Feb-7-2014-11-30-p-m.html; Hoda Muthana, "Cousins are halal for us to marry so free mixing with them is not ok," August 4, 2014, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988437-Twitter-Aug-4-2014-1.html

[211] Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."

[212] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God, Fourth Edition: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 75.

[213] Nur Aziemah Azman, "Islamic State's Narratives of Resilience and Endurance, "Islamic State's Narratives of Resilience and Endurance," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 1 (2020): 84.

popular within Salafi and Wahabi traditions, on the path to enlightenment, guidance, and victory.[214] In her post, Muthana demonstrated her knowledge of Islam in accordance with that practiced by the Islamic State. This also reveals the type of content Muthana consumed as she was radicalised online, and how she used her own presence on social media to share this within the *baqiyah* family echo chamber. Her username was also a clear connection to the earliest manifestations of this online family, as individuals would often self-identify and go to extreme lengths to protect one another.[215]

This family was an ingroup founded on a strong ideological bond that translated to an emotional one. Online friendships and interactions influenced members to modify their social identities to conform with expectations that aligned to the ideological foundations of the group. The relationships within this 'family' were especially important, as individuals who travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State would often sever ties to support networks in their home country.[216] They were, therefore, able to maintain a support network that encouraged them to participate both online and offline in activities that would advance the cause of the Islamic State. The use of the term 'family', as well as frequent references to 'brothers and sisters', were tools to reinforce how important the bonds were that they shared with one another and maintaining the depth of these relationships was amongst the greatest one could experience.

Membership into the *baqiyah* family represented an elevated status in the online space of the Islamic State. The behaviours necessitated by this group led to the second and third stages proposed by Tajfel and Turner: social identification and social comparison. Social identification occurs when one adopts the identity of the group they categorise themselves as belonging to.[217] Once one has identified with a group, there is a tendency to compare their group to others, with self-esteem being derived from favourable comparisons to other groups.[218] For the *baqiyah* family, this comparison was with 'fans' of the Islamic State, over whom they exercised superior religious knowledge and piety, as well as with the adversaries of the Islamic State. Membership into the family was attractive because they perceived themselves favourably when compared to both groups. As a result, 'fans' were known to aspire to have their accounts suspended – referred

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[214] Hoda Muthana, "The [path] always starts with trials and tests," January 15, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988570-Twitter-Jan-15-2014-5-01-p-m.html.

[215] J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic State, 2015), 15.

[216] Rachel K. Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags: Women's Roles in the Islamic State and Pro-Jihadist Social Networks," *Western University MA Research Paper* 13 (2017): 15.

[217] Hopkins, "Identity and Identification," 526-531.

[218] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.

to as 'martyrdom' – in hopes of becoming *baqiyah* members.[219] Muthana herself was proud of her position in this family, posting a tweet with a rabbit with a sign that read '*baqiyah*'.[220]

A sense of exclusivity and solidarity served to attract and maintain membership, which in turn, kept the family-style echo chambers functional in spite of efforts by western counterterrorism practitioners and social media companies to shut down terrorist recruitment on social media. The structure of this online family was designed to maximise operational effectiveness. Members were instructed to protect one another's identities from counterterrorism efforts and would continually work to endorse the actions of the Islamic State on social media to amplify the echo chamber effect for prospective recruits. To maintain their position in the group, members would disseminate material, share insight into a more advanced knowledge of Salafist Jihadism, and encourage others to participate in terrorist attacks or travel to Syria. Members derived a sense of identity from these activities and, as such, when the expectations changed, so too did their behaviours to maintain group membership. For Mahmood, this meant participation in an increasingly radicalised online space that she contributed to creating through her social media content. These behaviours were gradual, with a trend toward more violent and overt content closer to her decision to relocate to Syria.

The Islamic State and their supporters were well versed social media operators. The use of hashtags, a feature for which Twitter has become known, meant that interested persons were able to rapidly discover relevant content and build an echo chamber on search terms. Some of these terms were specifically targeted toward women, which shows the emphasis that the Islamic State placed on their recruitment.[221] For example, #teamhijabi was used to circulate material specifically targeted toward women.[222] This once again reinforced this idea of community and sisterhood, or in this instance, of being a team. Gender played an important role in online discussions, and many users within echo chambers would identify themselves with account names often starting with *umm* (mother) or *abu* (father) to denote their gender.[223] Muthana also adhered to this convention, and from at least August 2014, she used the name *Umm Jihad* (mother of *jihad*) on Twitter.[224] This distinction was an important feature of online interactions that contributed to a sense of sisterhood and a shared bond online.

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[219] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14.
[220] Hoda Muthana, "Baqiyah Rabbit," August 7, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988430-Twitter-Aug-7-2014.html.
[221] Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline," 857.
[222] Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline," 857.
[223] Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline," 857.
[224] Hoda Muthana, "When u make plans with ur siblings," August 3, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988563-Twitter-Aug-3-2014-1.html

The cohesion of the group was primarily determined by their shared ideology, as they adhered to a common belief system. Ingroup and outgroup dynamics were an important feature within these virtual echo chambers and encouraged members to withdraw from their day-to-day lives and relationships, thus isolating themselves from opportunities for external intervention. These behaviours also further entrenched social identification with group, which drives members to further adopt the group identity to garner favour with the group at the expense of their participation in other groups. Group polarisation within the group meant that radical ideals would be easily accepted, where they may have been individually unpalatable. The Islamic State were revered for their extreme violence. Brutal and indiscriminate mass executions were not only a modus operandi for the group but also a key propaganda piece.[225] The capacity for their supporters to not only accept but endorse such activities was largely the product of group polarisation.

Muthana's membership within this family was indicative of her status and commitment to this group and spoke also to the pressures she experienced prior to her departure for the Islamic State. Not only was Muthana part of an echo chamber facilitated by the Islamic State, but its most radical online components. Social media posts made in January 2014 indicate she consumed a range of media types, including videos, pictures, and literature.[226] Some of this she fed back into her virtual family, posting screenshots of videos with notes of admiration below. Her contributions, in turn, earned her respect and ensured her position within the family. Though the posts viewed by the researcher do not indicate Muthana had a significant social media following, interviews with her suggest she had connected with many others online in the private space.[227] Likewise, her posts were contributions to the sheer volume of material available to those who looked online for content related to the Islamic State, creating a narrative of success that made the ingroup appear, at least in the social media space, as favourable and popular in comparison to those who sought to have them removed from the online space.

An examination of accounts Muthana also followed provided insight into the material available within her echo chamber. Scepticism of media outlets was strongly encouraged. For example, Tumblr user *Bird of Jannah*, an account followed by Muthana, encouraged followers to check their sources and share Islamic State statements that 'debunk any sort of lies and slander'.[228] She

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[225] Vivek Venkatesh, Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Jason Wallin, Jihan Rabah and Daniel Glass, "Promoting Extreme Violence: Visual and Narrative analysis of Select Ultraviolent Terror Propaganda Videos Produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015 and 2016," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018), 1-4, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1516209.
[226] Hoda Muthana, "so obsessed with this," January 6, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988571-Keek-Jan-6-2014.html; Hoda Muthana, "Mood," January 26, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988568-Twitter-Jan-26-2014-4-42-p-m.html
[227] Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."
[228] Tumblr user: *diary-of-a-muhajirah*, "10 Ways to Support the Islamic State," 19 September 2014, http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org)

would make posts that rebutted allegations made by the media, shared material produced by the Islamic State and described her life inside the Islamic State in romantic and cheerful terms.[229] This undermined the narratives that counterterrorism practitioners and western media wanted prospective recruits to consume, about how life under the Islamic State truly was. Attempts to characterise such conditions had little to no impact within the echo chamber, as such content was seldom widely circulated, and if it were, it was only so that it could be refuted.

This is characteristic of echo chambers, whereby outside perspectives seldom reach those within them unless they deliberately seek out alternative information or sources. The discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance makes members less likely to explore this information, and even where they do, they reject it in favour of that which is available to them in the echo chamber. This means that even though counternarratives became prominent in western media with the rise of the Islamic State, Muthana may have had limited exposure to these, and particularly to critical discourse that would have challenged the ideology she came to identify with as a matter of her participation in such an echo chamber. It was this echo chamber that accelerated the process of social identification and comparison while also imposing behavioural changes that led Muthana to disengage from other support networks and sources of information that may have prevented her radicalisation.

Bird of Jannah answered questions about the truthfulness and sincerity of her posts. In one case, she was asked whether she was rewarded for the recruitment of wives and if it was possible to leave and return to one's home country. In response, she claimed that she was rewarded by *Allah* for spreading the truth and that people were free to leave but would often be persecuted by their governments if they returned home.[230] These posts are demonstrative of a broader approach used by the Islamic State within their echo chambers, and reflect the dynamics of ingroup characterisations of outgroups as hostile toward ingroup members, even those who sought to leave its ranks. Seemingly contradicting the narrative of the Islamic State as an oppressive organisation, they were framed by their supporters as a free and fair society in contrast to their ideological opponents. For a woman who resided in the West, exposure to this kind of material may have impacted the way Muthana viewed her peers and broader society, acting to push her away from western ideals and pushing her toward the Islamic State.

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[229] Tumblr user: *diary-of-a-muhajirah*, "The Life of a Muhajirah in the Islamic State," 19 September 2014, http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org); Tumblr user: *diary-of-a-muhajirah*, "How can the Islamic State execute Alan Henning when he went to Syria to help people," 22 September 2014, http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org).

[230] Tumblr user: *diary-of-a-muhajirah*,"Is the Islamic State really as beautiful as you say it is, or do you get rewards for recruiting new fighters/wives? And what if someone wants to go back to their home country? Are they prevented from doing so and beaten? Or killed…" 22 September 2014, http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/ (accessed via web.archive.org).

The Islamic State were not only denounced by the West, but also by religious leaders throughout the Muslim world.[231] The expectation was that such declarations may undermine the legitimacy of the Islamic State and encourage Muslims who were interested in membership to reconsider whether they were actually representative of the values of Islam. Rhetoric was produced to direct criticisms toward Muslims who were not part of the Islamic State. Critics were viewed with contempt online, and their character was undermined online as insincere believers, with Muthana even publicly denouncing her own father once inside Syria.[232] The purpose of rebuttal by the Islamic State was to appeal to its members who had a more sophisticated religious knowledge and might be persuaded by scholarship that countered the ideologies of the Islamic State.

In such environments, selective exposure theory also plays an important role in how information is received. Muthana may have been exposed to material that played out across mainstream media about abuses committed by the Islamic State. While members within the echo chamber worked to create narratives about this content that affirmed their ideological position, these efforts would have required that much of this information was overlooked in the day-to-day lives of members. Irrefutable evidence, such as photos, would have been overlooked in favour of information that did not cause cognitive dissonance. Muthana's decision to embark for Syria around November 2014, in spite of all the information she may have seen, is indicative of the way she processed information to rationalise her decisions, either based on the belief that information about atrocities was untrue or that these acts were justified.

Virtual Sisterhood

There was a level of segregation within the virtual community that conformed with the expectations for men and women within the Islamic State. For example, members of the opposite sex were discouraged from private messaging one another.[233] Muthana shared a tweet that included Sharia rules on the mixing of the sexes in August 2014, furthering the reach of these guidelines to include her own social media followers.[234] This is a feature of the broader Salafi Jihadist ideological framework that was prevalent within Islamic State territory.[235] This indicated

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[231] "Muslims Against ISIS Part 1: Clerics & Scholars," The Wilson Center, accessed January 15, 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/muslims-against-isis-part-1-clerics-scholars

[232] Hoda Muthana, "May Allah Destroy This Taghut," March 13, 2017, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5987996-Instagram-March-13-2017.html

[233] Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline," 854.

[234] Hoda Muthana, "The Shariah rules relating to mixing between the sexes," August 6, 2014, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988431-01-6August2052.html

[235] Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 785, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.772511

a clear demarcation of gender roles even before they entered Syria and Iraq. In conjunction with the radicalisation process, this conditioned women about the way in which they would contribute to the cause of the Islamic State, which were different to western ideals around equality and the expectations for women. The development of female echo chambers, even though the *baqiyah* family comprised of both sexes, provided a support network where individuals would conform to expectations without the sense that these policies were oppressive while also developing a virtual sisterhood.

This position was a step in a broader hierarchy for female Islamic State members. Supporters who considered themselves a part of this virtual sisterhood and the broader *baqiyah* family were considered to be more dedicated to the Islamic State than casual observers or fans of the organisation.[236] They required a deeper knowledge of Islam, which was often reflected in posts made to their social media accounts.[237] In addition to their original material, *baqiyah* members became important in the dissemination of official Islamic State material and, thus, were critical to the amplification of these views within online echo chambers.[238] Some even viewed the online space as a *wilayat* (province) in its own right.[239] Their activities online were seen to support their counterparts in the field, and often framed not only as familial connections, but as brotherhoods and sisterhoods. Members also formed an important pool of prospective recruits, as their self-identification and conformity made them vulnerable to recruiters.

Individuals who moved from the digital space into the physical space in Syria and Iraq were held in high esteem amongst online members of the Islamic State. As such, members of the virtual sisterhood had the opportunity to improve their status within the group through undertaking such actions. This also meant that women were able to make favourable comparisons with members of the group deemed lesser in the hierarchy, subsequently bolstering their self-esteem, essentially acting as an ingroup within an ingroup. This, therefore, validated their sense of self and affirmed the actions undertaken to join and maintain membership within the group, while also serving to inspire members of the virtual sisterhood to make the move to Syria and Iraq. Further, members who were recruited from within this echo chamber had conformed to the norms and expectations of the group, which were rewarded with the opportunity to contribute in a more tangible sense to the objectives of the Islamic State.

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[236] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14.
[237] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 16.
[238] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14-16.
[239] Pearson, "Online as the New Frontline," 854.

Once a woman travelled to the Islamic State she would be branded a *muhajirat*, to acknowledge the completion of the *hijrah*.[240] This title represented an elevated status within the group, particularly in the online space, where they continued to interact with other members of the terrorist group.[241] These women were able to provide information and perspective that was perceived as credible as a result of their lived experiences. Though they may have come from different countries, they were able to relate to a lot of the concerns and issues women in western countries who wanted to make *hijrah* faced. They became a source of expert power through these experiences and, as such, were able to influence other members online simply in sharing them and providing support and reassurance.

Though not all women were raised in conservative Muslim families, with some instances where women would convert to Islam in the process of their radicalisation, the gendered structure of these echo chambers adhered to what may have been normal behaviour for women of conservative backgrounds. Furthermore, as ingroups are often formed on shared identities, the duality of a common religion and gender further strengthened the bond of its membership. Muthana was not required to depart from what she had been raised to find acceptable in terms of gendered interactions and was also able to find a network that was overtly supportive of her as both a woman and a Muslim. Ultimately, the family she engaged with online set expectations that were not unfamiliar to her day-to-day life, gradually adding expectations to modify her social behaviours and identity in accordance with group ideals.

Muthana aspired to be like the women she encountered in her echo chamber who had departed for Syria. Though members of the *baqiyah* family held status within the female hierarchy of the Islamic State, they sat below women who had made *hijrah* to Syria to become jihadi brides.[242] These women would remain active online to role model for others within this echo chamber. Muthana noted that she felt inspired and pressured to be like other women who had made *hijrah* to join the Islamic State.[243] As early as January 2014, 11 months before her departure, Muthana idolised the relationships jihadi brides had with the *mujahideen* in a post to her Twitter of a screenshot from a video featuring a couple comparing the size of their Kalashnikovs, with the caption '*mood*'.[244] Even before the official declaration of the *Caliphate*, it is apparent that Muthana was exposed to and absorbed expectations about the behaviours of women inside a Salafist Jihadi terrorist organisation.

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[240] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 19.
[241] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 19.
[242] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 9-10.
[243] Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."
[244] Hoda Muthana, "Mood," January 26, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988568-Twitter-Jan-26-2014-4-42-p-m.html

Women desired a sense of self-empowerment that seemed to arise from their decision to join the Islamic State, even though the treatment of women often suggested the opposite to be true.[245] This empowerment likely came from the other women they interacted with online. An ingroup provides positive benefits for its members that include a sense of acceptance, support, and a chance for repeated interactions between members.[246] Within this community, women were under the impression their decision to join the Islamic State – in defiance of the west – was an empowered act. This plays on ingroup and outgroup dynamics, whereby there is a sense of antagonism toward the outgroup, known as outgroup derogation, that is referred to as intergroup bias.[247] The outgroup, in this case, the West, are seen as threatening to the ingroup. The decision to act in defiance of the outgroup in an effort to effectively stand up to them was a common trend amongst women, some of whom, including Muthana, felt their participation in the Islamic State was an act of rebellion.[248]

This empowerment also stemmed from favourable comparisons with other groups, particularly those deemed adversarial, as self-esteem was derived from favourable comparisons. Coupled with the sense of sisterhood and community found online, the control of the narrative the Islamic State were afforded in their social media echo chambers meant these favourable comparisons could be engineered. Irrespective of actual territorial and military losses inside of Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State presented their members with a tightly controlled narrative that satisfied their need to perceive themselves as being on the right, and victorious, side of many adversaries, all of whom were framed as inferior. This served to not only bolster the self-esteem of members, subsequently affirming their loyalty and conformity, but also to justify the brutality directed toward others.

Muthana's actions once she entered Islamic State territory in November 2014 were also indicative of the kinds of behaviours expected and role modelled within the familial echo chamber, she was a part of. She continued to participate in the same online behaviours as she had when based in the United States, including a positive view of suspension from social media. In one instance, she posted an image of several armed *jihadis* walking toward the camera with the caption, 'coming

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[245] Ben-Israel, "Telling a Story," 63-64.
[246] Youxia Zuo, Bing Chen and Yufang Zhao, "The Destructive Effect of Ingroup Competition on Ingroup Favouritism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 9, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02207
[247] Megan K. Johnson, Wade C. Rowatt and Jordan P. LaBouff, "Religiosity and Prejudice: In-Group Favoritism, Out-Group Derogation, or Both," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (2012): 154, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025107.
[248] Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."

back from Twitter suspension like…'.[249] She later claimed these posts were under the direction, and sometimes complete control, of the Islamic State.[250] Whether this is true or not, the content produced as a *muhajirat* is indicative of the content she also consumed before her departure for the Islamic State.

The use of social media accounts operated by individuals is seen to give a more organic and genuine account, comparable to native marketing. This is the process whereby advertisements are tailored to conform with the media of the website on which it is hosted, for example, a news story on news media website.[251] One of the most valuable forms of advertisement for the Islamic State was its successful members, which Muthana experienced in the pressure from her own echo chamber prior to her departure and demonstrated once inside the Islamic State. Muthana posted several images that reiterated content found in other Islamic State propaganda material. For example, her Instagram account featured images of young boys with the caption '*lion cubs*'.[252] The 'lion cubs' were a branch of child soldiers who came to feature in videos released by the terrorist organisation.[253] Muthana also posted images of foods, indicative that food scarcity was not of concern to her, in one instance using the hashtag #5starjihad after telling prospective recruits not to worry about food.[254] These posts redressed some of the issues highlighted outside of the Islamic State about security and stability, including access to basic necessities.

Muthana also posted calls to violence to her social media followers. Four months after she entered Syria, she encouraged her followers to undertake drive by shootings or truck attacks directed toward significant American holidays, including Veterans Day and Memorial Day.[255] Her desire to live a more Americanised lifestyle as a teenager is indicative that Muthana did not have a dislike

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[249] Hoda Muthana, "u no one thing straight I'll be there ukhti whenever u tweet me," April 11, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988172-Twitter-Apr-11-2015-7-40-a-m.html.
[250] Finnegan, "'ISIS Bride' Hoda Muthana is Not a US Citizen."
[251] B. W. Wojdynski, "Native Advertising: Engagement, Deception, and Implications for Theory," in *The New Advertising: Branding, Content and Consumer Relationships in a Data-Driven Social Media Era*, ed. R. Brown, V. K. Jones, and B. M. Wang (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC Clio, 2016): 293-204.
[252] Hoda Muthana, "Featuring hamza n Aydan, lion cubs," April 19, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988112-Instagram-Captured-Apr-19-2015-Photo-5.html.
[253] John G. Horgan, Max Taylor, Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, "From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (2017): 651-652, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221252.
[254] Hoda Muthana, "When umm abdullatif and I found slice bread," April 11, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988171-Twitter-Apr-11-2015-7-42-a-m.html; Hoda Muthana, "Dw pll u can get ur cocoa puffs here," April 19, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988076-Instagram-Captured-Apr-19-2015-Photo-10-part-2.html.
[255] Hoda Muthana, "Veterans, Patriot, Memorial etc Day parades," March 19, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988324-Twitter-Mar-19-2015-10-24-a-m.html.

of the United States and its values until these became both acceptable and expected behaviours. Her use of social media as a platform to encourage violence would not have been met with resistance within her social media channels, as the echo chamber effect amplified the sentiment that such violence was justified and acceptable. Though women were not necessarily the targets of calls to violence, this formed a sense of solidarity with the cause through repeated exposure to violent material, and further antagonised the outgroup.

Overall, social media introduced Muthana to an ingroup that operated as an echo chamber and established a support network modelled on a family structure. Though the means by which Muthana became acquainted with this group online are unclear, she was able to rise in status before she became a *jihadi* bride, having been active in the *baqiyah* family circles. Within this family, Muthana interacted almost exclusively with women as part of a strict code of online conduct built around Islamic State ideals for social behaviours. It was through the posts they made, and the contacts Muthana established, that she was exposed to the social identity she became expected to adopt to achieve greater status within the group. This family also substituted for real world relationships Muthana appeared to lack, in the form of close personal friendships.[256]

In the case of Muthana, it also became apparent how the ingroup she was a part of reacted to existential threats originating within the outgroup. In the information space, there was a greater need for the ingroup to unify against the influence of outgroup pressures for survival. The sense of family and sisterhood experienced within echo chambers was a powerful mechanism to control how members interpreted information from the media. Members of the *baqiyah* family, including Muthana, would also use social media to express their more advanced knowledge of Islamic State doctrine, subsequently exercising power rooted in their expertise and influencing members of a lesser status in the process. This also assisted in creating an echo chamber that appeared more organic and had a variety of original content to supplement that produced and disseminated by official Islamic State outlets.

Religious Duty

One of the themes that underpinned the shared identities of the group was adherence to a common religious outlook. For many women, they had been raised in Islamic families and were familiar with the fundamental concepts of the religion, which formed the basis of a shared identity within the sisterhood, representing values that transcended traditional geographic boundaries. These concepts were not inherently radical in and of themselves and appealed to women from a

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[256] Speckhard and Shajkovci, "Muthana Tells All."

variety of backgrounds and acted to introduce them to a radicalised sisterhood that hosted several recruiters for the Islamic State. It was not clear from social media posts how Muthana came to be introduced to the online community that ultimately drove her to the Islamic State; however, she had a conservative Muslim upbringing, that may have influenced her identification with particular issues raised within the echo chamber, such as experiences in western cultures and gender norms. This would have invariably provided her with a shared sense of identity, at a fundamental level, with other women online.

The link between religion and identity formed an important driver for Muthana, who said in later interviews that she felt she had an obligation to travel to Syria to participate in the Islamic State.[257] Though an active member online, Muthana noted that the declaration of a *Caliphate* in June 2014 made her feel compelled to travel to Syria and join the group in person.[258] In particular, she described her fear of hellfire as a motivation for her decision, implying that anything less than joining the Islamic State would have qualified for punishment as a failure to achieve her worldly religious duty.[259] This duty, however, was manipulated and subsequently reinforced throughout the radicalisation and recruitment process to affirm her position within the group and ensure she complied with expectations mandated by the terrorist organisation.

Muthana's sense of self subsequently became linked to the expectation that her role was to become a wife and mother for the Islamic State. If the Islamic State were to become an enduring and intergenerational terrorist organisation, they recognised a requirement to include women in their long-term plans.[260] This ensured there was a continuous supply of recruits already prescribed to the radical ideals of the group. As such, women represented an important and nonviolent role in the conflict, and as the Islamic State perceived that such a conflict was rooted in their self-identification as 'true' Islamists, so too was the role women were expected to play. This sense of duty, therefore, became intrinsically linked to a sense of self for women like Muthana.

The sense of duty or obligation that Muthana felt did not originate organically from her childhood in a conservative religious family, but rather appears to have been a product of the interactions she had online with other members of her virtual sisterhood. Material she was exposed to online made it apparent that there was pressure within the echo chamber to travel to Syria and become a wife and mother for the Islamic State. Though supporters of the Islamic State viewed themselves as virtual combatants, there was consistent pressure to partake in real-world actions that

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257 Finnegan, "Hoda Muthana is not a US citizen."
258 Finnegan, "Hoda Muthana is not a US citizen."
259 Finnegan, "Hoda Muthana is not a US citizen."
260 The Carter Center, *The Women in Daesh,* 7.

contributed to the terrorist organisation. Women did not appear to be exposed to the same pressures as their male counterparts to undertake violent acts, though it remains to be seen to what extent the territorial losses of the Islamic State influenced their outreach to female attackers in other countries.

The desire to become a wife and mother of the Islamic State was ultimately derived from the interpretation of jihad that served as the core justification for the actions undertaken by the Islamic State. In particular, this sanctioned the use of violence against those who did not align themselves to their radical interpretations of Islam and justified its use to other members of the Islamic State who were not necessarily party to these actions. However, the principal role of women was not to undertake violence on behalf of the group, but as supporters of violent activities. The journey from the west to Syria was described by many women as a *hijrah*, and while Muthana expressed some violent inclinations, in her idolisation of a couple discussing the size of their respective weapons, she also reflected an awareness of her status as a woman within the group with references to marriage and the appropriateness of relationships with the opposite sex.[261]

The shift to the position of *muhajirat* can be understood as being linked to the concept of positive distinctiveness within social identity theory. That is to say that people are motivated to achieve a positive social identity.[262] A positive social identity is linked to higher self-esteem, which is derived from the success of the ingroup one is a member of.[263] For Muthana, therefore, her decision to depart for Syria both elevated her status within the group and made a positive contribution to the success of the group and, subsequently, produced elevated self-esteem and a sense of belonging to the group. Positive distinctiveness is a psychological need, and therefore, sought out by members within a group.[264] There are a number of means by which positive distinctiveness can be achieved, but that which may be most relevant to the social media situation of Muthana was social competition.

Social comparison is a self-enhancing strategy identified in social identity theory, where positive distinctiveness is achieved through competition with the outgroup through ingroup favouritism. This is a pattern of preference for one's ingroup over an outgroup.[265] As a sense of self is derived

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[261] Hoda Muthana, "Cousins are halal for us to marry," August 4, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988437-Twitter-Aug-4-2014-1.html
[262] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.
[263] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.
[264] Julian A. Oldmeadow and Susan T. Fiske, "Social Status and the Pursuit of Positive Social Identity: Systematic Domains of Intergroup Differentiation and Discrimination for High- and Low-Status Groups," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 13, no. 4 (2010): 441, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430209355650
[265] J. C. Turner, R. J. Brown, and H. Tajfel, "Social Comparison and Group Interest in Ingroup Favouritism," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 9 (1979): 187-188.

from participation in groups, the perceived success of the group when compared to outgroups correlates with higher self-esteem for its members.[266] On 1 December 2014, around the time Muthana first entered Syria, she posted an image of her passport alongside other women's passports with the caption, '*Bonfire soon, no need for these anymore.*'[267] In March 2015, when asked on Ask.FM if she missed her friends and family, Muthana responded, '*I don't miss anything in the west.*'[268] When asked about her thoughts on the United States, she replied, '*I think that we will take over soon.*'[269] These answers, made while in Syria, demonstrate the division she sought to put between herself and her western life, while also indicating a belief that the Islamic State was superior to the United States.

Muthana stated that she did not hate America, nor did she hate anything else, but felt that the journey was obligatory for her.[270] This contrasted with social media posts she would make inside the Islamic State, that, in addition to statements of taking over the United States, included instructions on how to undertake a terrorist attack with a truck with a caption that she hoped attackers in the west had seen and been influenced by her previous post on the subject.[271] However, it does not appear that she developed a dislike of the United States but, rather, a dedication to a cause that was inherently opposed to the west. As she came to adopt the ideals of the organisation as part of her identity, their adversaries came to be her own. This was conveyed across her social media in the posts she made that qualified as anti-western, a reflection of a common outgroup antagonised by Muthana and other members of the ingroup.

The adoption of such adversaries reflected her belief in the Islamic State as a militarily and spiritually superior force that drove Muthana to view herself, as a member, to be obliged to further the objectives of the organisation. However, as social identity theory posits that participation in a group one favours would correspond with increased self-esteem, Muthana would have invariably experienced positive psychological effects from her participation and increased status within the group.[272] Her answers to questions when inside Syria exert a casual confidence in the Islamic State and their capacity for success, referring to anonymous users as '*m8*' (mate) while discussing

[266] Turner, Brown and Tajfel, "Social Comparison and Group Interest in Ingroup Favouritism," 190.
[267] Hoda Muthana, "Bonfire Soon," December 1, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988423-Twitter-Dec-1-2014-3-45-a-m.html
[268] Hoda Muthana, "Don't you miss your family or friends," March 26, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988195-AskFM-Mar-26-2015-5-11-p-m.html
[269] Hoda Muthana, "What do you think about America," March 26, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988194-AskFM-Mar-26-2015-5-21-p-m.html
[270] Finnegan, "Hoda Muthana is not a US citizen."
[271] Hoda Muthana, "I tweeted this two years ago hope they were influenced by my tweet," June 4, 2017, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5987989-Instagram-June-4-2017-Post-1.html.
[272] Turner, Brown and Tajfel, "Social Comparison and Group Interest in Ingroup Favouritism," 190.

the intention for the Islamic State to take over '*the whole world*.'[273] While her online demeanour is not necessarily a reflection of all that she felt and experienced while inside Islamic State territory, it is an attempt to increase and maintain her status within a group she viewed as better than outgroup counterparts.

It is not impossible that Muthana may have come to such conclusions herself about the trajectory she wanted her life to take, as motherhood and successful partnerships are common desires for many individuals across the world. However, it is the circumstances under which she wanted to pursue such decisions that are particularly interesting to this case study. As a member of the *baqiyah* family, proudly boasted across her social media, Muthana was already of a greater social status than some of her peers. Though the decision ultimately sat with Muthana, there were avenues for her to elevate her status within the group which were tied to a sense of religious fulfilment. This was not just a matter of personal satisfaction or achievement, but a guarantee that Muthana would be rewarded for her efforts in the afterlife.

Groupthink invariably served to normalise the behaviours necessary to reach this spiritual objective, and ultimately transformed the way women thought about what was required of them. This assured that Muthana believed that it was not only the acceptable thing to do to, but the right thing to do. These ideals were imposed on all other women inside the same echo chamber as Muthana, particularly if they wanted to advance their own social status within the group. These expectations raised the consequences of non-compliance, as members would look as though they did not completely support the ingroup or were not as devoted as their peers, and subsequently, pushed women to act on the sense of religious obligation they felt. In this context, women were rewarded not only with a sense of personal satisfaction in achieving spiritual objectives, but also in attaining higher status within the group.

Muthana's sense of self was increasingly derived from the group she interacted with online. Their ideals were derived from this fundamentalist interpretation which, in turn, became a common factor within the sisterhood that united them and set expectations members imposed on one another. The links to her religion manifested in real-world transformations, most notably via her decision to undertake a *hijrah* she perceived as obligatory, but also in the material she posted and consumed online. For example, a theme of religiosity underpinned posts she made across her social media accounts, including down to seemingly trivial matters such as socialising with

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[273] Hoda Muthana, "Is the Islamic State planning to take over Baghdad," March 26, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988195-AskFM-Mar-26-2015-5-11-p-m.html.

her cousins.[274] This compelled her to disregard other components of her sense of self that were contradictory to her religious views, such as tertiary education and westernised comforts.

There is some variation in the way supporters are framed online. For the most part, their support was seen as a welcome contribution. It has been demonstrated that they played an important role in the formation of echo chambers that disseminated propaganda and influenced the recruitment of terrorists, as is exemplified by Muthana's own *Baqiyah* family.[275] However, those who travelled to Syria were revered above all others.[276] This was framed in religious terms, with the view that those who undertook such travel to live a life completely in accordance with the principles of the Islamic State were in favour with *Allah*.[277] Online supporters were never lavished with the same praises as those who undertook the journey itself and, as such, the journey became aspirational for many who sought to achieve the same social status and validation.

There were clear expectations online about what actions could be undertaken to achieve a higher status within the group. These acts signalled a deeper level of devotion to the group, and often required that individual desires be forsaken in the interests of the group. The influence and power of members who had travelled to Syria and communicated back into the echo chamber outweighed that of those who remained online in their home countries. Members with this power would often attempt to use it to advance the Islamic State's agenda, primarily in the imposition of a sense of religious duty. Interactions within online echo chambers appear to have been segregated on the basis of sex, and therefore, a more concentrated appeal to a woman's religious obligation could be used to motivate women to undertake travel to Syria. Naturally, the movement of these women benefited the Islamic State's organisational structure, as they were able to fulfil the state building functions associated with raising the next generation of the terrorist organisation.

Muthana would exert pressure on her followers to join her in the Islamic State once she arrived in Syria. In December 2014, one month after she left the United States, she encouraged her followers not to wait until it was 'safe', with the story that she knew of people who had made it into Syria whilst remanded on bail in their home countries.[278] This was likely the same pressure that had been applied to Muthana during the lead up to her eventual departure for Syria and emulated by her now that she had newfound status and responsibility within the group. This behaviour after

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[274] Hoda Muthana, "Cousins are halal for us to marry," August 4, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988437-Twitter-Aug-4-2014-1.html.

[275] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14-16.

[276] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 19.

[277] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 19.

[278] Hoda Muthana, "Don't wait to come when you're 'safe'," December 14, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988422-Twitter-Dec-16-2014-7-59-a-m.html.

she left the West is demonstrative of how she had rationalised her decision within a religious understanding. It also shows how this worldview was used as a tool of coercion to create a sense of obligation to become a member of the group and conform with their behavioural expectations, no matter how dangerous they might be.

It was not only the act of *hijrah* that was sent as an obligation for women, but also to live and abide by a strict interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and governance.[279] Therefore, to travel to the territory claimed by the Islamic State and live by their law was seen as the ultimate purpose for a woman. Upon her arrival, Muthana acknowledged that there were certain acts she was unable to do as a woman. For example, she had wanted to yell '*baqiyah*' but remembered she was unable to do so as a woman.[280] However, the ultimate satisfaction came in the belief that these behaviours were adherence to the truest interpretation of Islam and conformed with the expectation of the group who embodied such ideals. These gender-based expectations were developed online before Muthana departed for Syria, and subsequently made her a more compliant member of the Islamic State, meaning they were able to exercise more influence on her behaviours and decisions once inside the Islamic State.

Muthana's stricter upbringing perhaps influenced who she would identify as a likeminded individual online. Her allegiance was foremost to her religion, and when her perception of who else was in that religion changed, due to the belief that many of those who identified as Muslims were not true Muslims, so too did her perception of the outgroup. Membership in the Islamic State was consuming and saw its members sense of self influenced in a broad fashion, as other groups came to be viewed as adversaries. For instance, the Islamic State claimed no state sponsorship or support, and therefore, identification with a nationality was seen as non-conformist to the group. Many individuals would post images of their passports prior to destruction on social media when they arrived inside the Islamic State, including Muthana who intended to burn hers.[281]

This approach to membership also afforded the terrorist organisation more control over its members. As people isolated themselves from other groups, they became more dependent upon the Islamic State for a sense of self. It is in these circumstances that individuals develop deep emotional ties to a group and are reluctant to engage in behaviours that have the potential to compromise their position.[282] As such, the imposition of a sense of religious obligation made it

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[279] Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora',* 26.
[280] Hoda Muthana, "That moment when you've waited so long to yell baqiyah," January 5, 2015, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988407-Twitter-Jan-5-2015-11-14-a-m.html.
[281] Hoda Muthana, "Bonfire Soon," December 1, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988423-Twitter-Dec-1-2014-3-45-a-m.html.
[282] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.

clear what behaviours were expected of members. Though there were many instances where women never translated their support to offline actions, it was maintained within the community that the most favourable members were those who had undertaken the trip to Syria to become wives and mothers.

Baqiyah members were expected to have a more developed religious knowledge than their 'fangirl' counterparts.[283] This knowledge was associated to a status that could be attained by members, and subsequently, they were not only influenced by the online environment but also acted as influencers. It was through this knowledge that Muthana became impressionable to increasingly fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, as it became expected that she would adhere to these views, not only because of her position as a virtual member of the Islamic State, but as a member of the *baqiyah* family. This pressure, in turn, contributed to her views that the content she consumed was real and required her attention and action to mitigate the consequences. She felt a sense of obligation imposed on her not only by her peers, who formed her echo chamber, but also driven from her own sense of self-identity, derived from the religious outlook she developed through these interactions.

Conclusion

Overall, Muthana's introduction to the Islamic State appears to have originated as a consequence of her online activities on social media. Though it is unclear precisely how Muthana came to encounter the *baqiyah* family online, her activity online, from social media handles to posts made across her social media accounts, is demonstrative of the depth to which she engaged with this social network online. Its effect on her psychologically was to create a system of rewards and consequences that correlated with actions seen to advance the group's agenda. In particular, adherence to ideals dictated by the religious ideology was rewarded with higher status within the group, a status achieved by Muthana, first online as part of the *Baqiyah* family and then as a *jihadi* bride in Syria.

Inside the *baqiyah* family echo chamber online, Muthana was subjected to increased pressure to fulfil the religious obligations imposed on her, primarily being to undertake *hijrah* to Syria, where she would become a wife and mother for future generations of the Islamic State. The consequences of non-compliance went beyond a lesser status within the group and had a profound personal impact on Muthana, who believed that she would be condemned to hell if she did do as was expected of her. Her conformity to group expectations was not just, therefore, a matter of status, but also of religious obligation as defined by the Islamic State. Fundamentally,

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[283] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14-16.

Muthana reaped psychological rewards for her conformity with group expectations and the favourable comparisons she made – both prompted by material she consumed in the echo chamber, and of her own accord – that drove her to progress her membership to *jihadi* bride.

Chapter VI: Discussion

Three themes common to both cases studies were identified in this research: participation in an echo chamber; development of a network based on the concept of sisterhood; and a sense of religious duty. While Mahmood and Muthana invariably motivated by their individual circumstances, these themes were also observed to be shared by other women within their respective echo chambers. This echo chamber was used to control the narrative delivered to prospective and active members of the Islamic State, and meant the group were able to tailor messaging to appeal to sisterhood and compel women to act in accordance with a strict definition of religious obligation. This also enabled them to control how their adversaries were perceived, leading to the unchallenged view that the Islamic State would be the victors in conflict with all adversaries.

Social identity theory was used to establish the relationship between these themes and the eventual decision to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State. The processes of social identification, categorisation, and comparison, as proposed by Tajfel, were evident in interactions observed across the social media accounts of Mahmood and Muthana. These processes underpinned the thematic commonalities of both case studies, with sisterhood and religion being intrinsic parts of the women's social identities that were influenced via echo chambers to convince them to become active participants of an extremist ingroup. Mahmood and Muthana were rewarded with psychological benefits, namely in the form of a positive social identity, that compelled them to further their participation in order to elevate their status as members, eventually culminating in the decision to make *hijrah* to the Islamic State.

Positive social identity is a principal psychological benefit of ingroup participation, experienced by both Mahmood and Muthana and evidenced in posts made across social media. This occurs where one makes favourable intergroup comparisons. However, where social comparisons lead to a negative social identity, an individual will be motivated to engage in strategies to attain a positive one, including leaving a group or making changes to the ingroup so they compare more favourably.[284] The echo chamber structure meant Mahmood and Muthana only made favourable comparisons. Disrupting and proliferating echo chambers would have introduced new information that undermined such comparisons, while also potentially mitigating the identification and categorisation processes caused by the participation in a virtual sisterhood and imposition of religious duty.

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[284] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.

The relationships that created the virtual sisterhood served as the basis for the echo chamber and the source of guidance on religious matters and the imposition of obligation. Disruption of such relationships would interrupt the sense of belonging, and perhaps open opportunities for intervention to disrupt the radicalisation and recruitment process. These relationships satisfied social needs that made it easier for the women to disengage from their real-world social circles and develop a sense of duty in accordance with Islamic State expectations. With networks modelled on familial structures, namely sisterhood, Mahmood and Muthana found support where their real families would have disapproved. This virtual family and echo chamber acted as an example of the social behaviours Muthana and Mahmood should undertake in order to retain their position and develop status within the hierarchy, while also satisfying social needs they may otherwise have felt disconnected from when they chose to leave their real families for Syria.

This chapter will examine policy, technical and goodwill approaches to online counter-recruitment to examine how these mechanisms work when understood through the lens of social identity theory. This chapter will also incorporate other psychological theories that have been explored throughout the case studies within this thesis and which are linked to social identity theory. The approaches to countering terrorist recruitment outlined in this chapter are general approaches, and as such, will be applied to the specific case studies of this research to identify how they may have impacted on the outcome. As this thesis only covered two case studies, the overall efficacy of such approaches may differ when applied to different circumstances, though some of the underlying theoretical foundations will remain the same.

Policy

Policy solutions provide a broad approach to counter-recruitment and can be categorised into positive and negative approaches. Positive measures refer to content created to counter extremist narratives, while negative measures are the removal of extremist content.[285] These approaches can be combined to increase their overall effectiveness, with their respective impact dependent on several variables, such as the audience, messenger, and means of contact. Mahmood and Muthana were in a space dominated by an extremist narrative delivered via content created and shared within an echo chamber. In terms of these drivers, both positive and negative policy measures could have disrupted the radicalisation and recruitment of Mahmood and Muthana. However, previous implementations of positive and negative measures have seldom accounted for the psychological component of these drivers used by recruiters to connect the social identities of prospective recruits to the wider group to motivate them toward more extreme actions.

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[285] Ghaffar Hussain and Erin Marie Saltman, *Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter It* (London: Quilliam, 2014), 10.

The positive measures this chapter will focus on are counternarratives and education, which are intended to limit the impact terrorist recruitment material has.[286] These initiatives can be delivered in online and offline formats.[287] The online environment has increased the access recruiters have to vulnerable individuals, and as such, positive measures need to adapt to the breadth of this environment. However, positive measures remain limited in their need to identify both persons and narratives and present counternarratives in new media formats that are not immediately rejected by those embroiled in extremist and exclusive echo chambers. Both case studies were noted for their increased religious practice, but otherwise there were few indicators observed by their families and communities that pointed to their radicalisation. This meant that they were not exposed to counternarratives and educational opportunities that may have interrupted their experience. When combined with the influences of sisterhood, religious obligation, and echo chambers online, the lack of effective positive measures meant that Mahmood and Muthana were enveloped in the narratives of the Islamic State.

Counternarratives provide alternative perspectives to those propagated by a terrorist organisation and can be directed by governmental, non-governmental, and community groups. One of the most important factors for a successful counternarrative is in the delivery and ability to appeal to its intended audience.[288] Unless counternarratives are able to reach those at greatest risk of radicalisation, they essentially become redundant. This is not just a question of actual exposure but also absorption of the narrative. Mahmood and Muthana were exposed to immense volumes of information, and as such, were selective in what was retained, with that being the narrative that was most dominant across their respective echo chambers. The content of the message itself needs to appeal to its recipients and cannot follow a scripted and impersonal format that may dissuade from the sincerity of the message.

While these narratives focused on sisterhood and religious obligation, counternarratives did not, and instead looked to profile the violent tendencies of the Islamic State. This approach could have been better tailored, and subsequently better received by its audience in the content it covered and the tone of the message. As such, the lack of material that aligned with the core themes attracting women to the Islamic State meant there were few opportunities for exposure to counternarratives, as they seldom interacted with content outside of an echo chamber preoccupied with sisterhood and duty. Instead, counternarratives that aligned to the trends and

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[286] Erin Marie Slatman and Jonathan Russell, *White Paper – The Role of Prevent in Countering Online Extremism* (London: Quilliam, 2014), 6.
[287] Slatman and Russell, *The Role of Prevent in Countering Online Extremism*, 4.
[288] Slatman and Russell, *The Role of Prevent in Countering Online Extremism*, 8.

core issues seen in these spaces may have provided greater opportunities for intervention and disruption.

Counternarratives must be delivered via a credible messenger. This is someone who possess qualities that make them believable to those vulnerable to terrorist recruitment.[289] Examples of credible messengers include former extremists, survivors of terrorism, and religious scholars.[290] Their credibility is derived from the authenticity of their experience and the expert power they are able to use to influence vulnerable individuals.[291] They can also act as a bridge to reconnect radicalised individuals to the outgroup, which is often so deeply antagonised in terrorist material that positive engagement with an outgroup member may be met with punishment.[292] Mahmood and Muthana were encouraged to isolate themselves from support networks that were subsequently replaced with a loyal sisterhood bound by a common sense of religious obligation. The proliferation of a credible message in this context could have occurred where they were able to appeal to these core drivers and introduce a counternarrative that did not create psychological resistance by causing cognitive dissonance or amplifying ingroup and outgroup tensions.

Finally, counternarratives must engender an individual to appropriately respond to its content. The final stages of Lasswell's model of communication consider the recipient and the effect of an act of communication.[293] It is an important factor to consider in the development of countermeasures as the recipient represents a potential future threat. Even if the counternarrative is presented in a palatable fashion by a credible messenger, if the emotional state of the recipient is not receptive and open, then it is likely such counternarratives will be rebuffed in favour of the radical content that they are accustomed to consuming. Counternarratives introduced to Mahmood and Muthana were interpreted by themselves and the Islamic State as an existential threat, which caused members to double down in defence of their shared ideologies. Therefore, for an individual to be receptive to counternarratives, they must be presented in such a way that is not perceived as an attack while simultaneously providing material that contributes to a negative social identity so that members turn away from their ingroup. Just as radicalisation is a process,

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[289] Garth Davies, Christine Neudecker, Marie Ouellet, Martin Bouchard, and Benjamin Ducol, "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," *Journal for Deradicalisation,* no. 6 (2016): 64.
[290] Davies et al., "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," 64.
[291] Davies et al., "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," 64.
[292] Davies et al., "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," 64.
[293] Harold Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. L. Bryson (New York: Harper and Row, 1948): 37-38.

so too must the introduction of counternarratives to ensure the intended recipient is receptive of the messages.

Just as credible messengers can be effective in their ability to reach vulnerable individuals, the wrong messenger can undermine the efficacy of the narrative they convey, particularly when combined with the wrong message. For example, the US Government were heavily criticised for their attempt to produce satirical counternarratives to dissuade participation in the Islamic State, particularly in the video 'Welcome to ISIS Land'.[294] While the US Government were a poorly received messenger by Islamic State recruits, the message itself was seen as poorly constructed, emphasising the need for both a credible messenger and message. Counternarratives are also subject to engagement from the terrorist organisation, who can use them to reinforce the perceived divisions between the ingroup and the outgroup when the messenger seems insincere. Credible messengers, therefore, reduce the ability for such reinforcement to occur from the terrorist organisation and have the capacity to disrupt ingroup formation which, in turn, can disrupt radicalisation.

Muthana would have likely been exposed to counternarratives delivered by western news media and governments. However, within the echo chamber, these narratives were dissected and refuted by the Islamic State, subsequently diminishing the effectiveness of the message. This content was interpreted in such a way that reinforced Islamic State narratives, including that the West—the outgroup—were manipulative adversaries who had undertaken a campaign to undermine and disrupt the Islamic State—the ingroup. For some members of the ingroup, this was the sole exposure they had to counternarratives. Instead, it may have been more effective to integrate messages that were able to circulate within these restrictive environments but contributed to the development of a negative social identity that forced members to reconsider their membership.

Effective counternarratives can be used to disrupt the power and influence recruiters have online as they reduce the appeal and status of an ingroup. As a group becomes less attractive to its prospective members, they are less inclined to seek out or be interested in participating in the group. This can also undermine the sense of social competition fostered within the group, whereby individuals feel a need to both be accepted and develop status within a particular ingroup, subsequently diminishing the establishment of a positive social identity associated with

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[294] Greg Miller and Scott Higham, "In a Propaganda War Against ISIS, The U.S. Tried to Play by the Enemy's Rules," *The Washington* Post, May 8, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html

that group.[295] Instead, counternarratives can be used to deliver ideas vulnerable or radical individuals may not have been exposed to, and which may resonate with them on the basis of other interests or grievances that attracted them to the organisation in the first instance.

Mahmood and Muthana both identified with the grievances shared across social media by the Islamic State and their supporters. In particular, these grievances identified the outgroup, being the West, as the primary perpetrators. This further solidified the sense of outgroup antagonism, while also attracting individuals who faced similar experiences, or at least identified with their message. When framed in religious terms, as was the case for both Mahmood and Muthana, the ingroup were also able to appeal to and influence an element of their identity that linked their actions with severe consequences in the afterlife and imposed a sense of urgency and duty. While modern western governments traditionally are areligious, targeted counternarratives they produce can take a religious tone to appeal to the religious identities of prospective terrorist recruits, undermining the divide between "us" and "them" reinforced by the ingroup, as well as providing an alternative perspective that still satisfies the spiritual needs and obligations of prospective members. For instance, collaboration with community groups can help government departments understand core issues and themes that could appeal to the target audience.

Education is similar to counternarratives in that it presents a moderate perspective to terrorist narratives. However, unlike counternarratives, education is intended as a preventative measure, as opposed to a reactionary one. The intention of educational programmes is to raise awareness of the risks of radicalisation among those who may be sought out for recruitment, by enabling individuals and communities to identify and counter the process as it occurs.[296] For example, recruitment that targeted disaffected Muslim youths in the west would often need to take place inside Islamic sites, such as mosques and schools, to easily identify and provide resources for individuals most susceptible to the recruiter's message. However, in the case of Mahmood and Muthana, they were not the traditional targets for recruitment. Therefore, there would have been a benefit to providing them with the tools to identify and critically analyse the material they consumed as originating from a terrorist organisation with a very particularly worldview. The identification of persons who may be at risk also have the potential to exacerbate tensions between ingroups and outgroups, and as such, it must be carefully managed and introduced to ensure education does not cause harm.

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[295] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.
[296] Peter R. Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 6 (2013): 445, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.88.

In the internet era, the need for such community participation is substantially altered, as recruiters may engage remotely, or be sought out by interested parties. Online interactions can often be distinct from offline ones, and allow individuals to better conceal their activities, subsequently reducing the efficacy of community education. The families of Mahmood and Muthana both acknowledged they appeared to have increased their religious practice in the period before they travelled to Syria, but this did not concern them as they considered this an organic development as part of their faith.[297] Both women may have received instruction on what was acceptable to share with their community, to ensure they maintained a low profile and were not detected as potential radicals. However, it was through their sisterhood that they were able to disengage from their actual communities, as their psychological and social needs were met within their sisterhoods. This meant that even with community education on the identification of radicalised behaviour, social media has meant that much of this takes place privately, and without the opportunity for community intervention.

Mahmood and Muthana both demonstrated that a shift in loyalty would drive them to leave their most substantial real-world support networks—their families—in favour of a life inside the Islamic State. This means that even if individuals continue to engage with their respective communities, they may have started to consider their online networks as their primary support network and be less likely to confide in trusted members within their community of their radicalisation and recruitment. Once again, without the physical interaction with others who may contribute to radicalisation, it can be difficult for those around an individual being radicalised to recognise the extent of their newfound social network, particularly when social media platforms encourage users to develop a following for themselves and to follow many others more than they may typically interact with offline. However, had they been equipped with the knowledge on seeking out alternative sources and recognising the radical nature of content they consumed, they may have not become so embroiled in the echo chambers that developed around them. Likewise, they may have recognised the shortcomings of the ingroup and been unable to develop a positive social identity, subsequently seeking out other groups to meet this need.

The traditional focus of education, at both an individual and community level, has been less focused on how radicalisation takes place online. The education required is not as simple as the identification of those who may present as recruiters within the community, but to educate individuals on how to critically examine and challenge the material they consume.[298] The critical analysis of content requires a reasonable level of effort, that may sit outside the realistic expectations one has for standard social media use. However, it remains one of the most

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[297] Shubert and Naik, "Glasgow Girl to 'Bedroom Radical'"; Hall, "Gone Girl: An Interview with an American in ISIS."

[298] Slatman and Russell, *The Role of Prevent in Countering Online Extremism*, 11.

important educational tools to equip users to think about the source, content, and intention of the material they consume online. As the radicalisation and recruitment process becomes more self-driven, so too must the tools provided to vulnerable social media users via the education process.

For Mahmood, her interest in current events in the Middle East led her to find likeminded individuals who appeared to engage in self-radicalisation together online as a consequence of the material they were exposed to. This eventually led her to develop radical beliefs that would be used to encourage her to participate in a terrorist organisation. Even if Mahmood had never interacted with another individual online, her exposure to extremist content invariably contributed to her radicalisation, and the self-awareness and self-reflection necessary to identify that one has become radicalised is often beyond reach when embedded within an echo chamber that contributes to the perception that one's beliefs are widespread and popular. In the instance had Mahmood received a more tailored education to discern fact from fiction in the online space, as well as critical analysis skills to identify the origin of her sources as terroristic, it may have prevented the attachment she developed to such perspectives and information.

Education can, at an even broader level, consider the role of critical thinking as part of the national school curriculum as a means to disrupt radicalisation and misinformation across a broad range of ideologies. Both Muthana and Mahmood, alongside many of their peers, were interested in world events, such as the Syrian Civil War. However, the frameworks by which they came to interpret these events were a combination of their own personal experiences as Muslim women in the West and radical interpretations sanctioned by the Islamic State and its supporters. Both women encountered these views prior to or early on in their tertiary education, indicative of the need for an earlier critical thinking curriculum as a preventative measure to radicalisation on the internet. This could also assist in the social categorisation and identification stages of social identity theory, as it leads to a more balanced interpretation of information to reduce the risk of identification with a radical group. This may be an area for further research to further the relationship between social identity theory and terrorist recruitment.

The online space fundamentally reduces the visibility of the recruiters and allows them to operate with a greater degree of secrecy and geographic reach. This means that educational approaches need to consider training individuals to recognise the behaviours of recruits and the radical nature of content they may consume. The behaviours of Mahmood and Muthana during their recruitment period, in terms of their interactions with their families and communities, are indicative not only of the instructions they were likely to receive on the management of their offline interactions, but also of the primacy their new social network had. Without a sufficient education programme that provided individuals with the capacity to understand and interpret the content and interactions they had in such a radical space; they would have been insufficiently equipped to recognise the

depth of influence being exercised. Instead, it is important to consider the social dynamics and nature of internet-based relationships and networks in the development of educational material to counter terrorist recruitment, and how individuals can recognise these situations online.

Both educational programmes and counternarrative campaigns represent opportunities to engage with prospective recruits and disrupt their radicalisation. However, current programmes often fail to consider the relationship between the social interactions one has with a terrorist group and its impact on their sense of self. The familial style relationships Mahmood and Muthana formed online made them resistant to external messaging and relationships while also reinforcing the need to be in near constant communication with members of their ingroup. Even when barriers were enacted to limit the contact these members had with one another online, they would use other social media platforms to seek one another out. These families or sisterhoods occupied the entirety of the echo chambers Mahmood and Muthana were in and appealed to their identity as both women and Muslims. Where positive and negative measures did not match this appeal and challenged the influence it had on the social identities of Mahmood and Muthana, their reactions were deeply personal and negative, as they perceived this not only as an attack on the group but also their sense of self.

Current programmes fail to account for, and pre-empt, the psychological element of recruitment, and the impact social psychology, as identified in social identity theory, can have on one's willingness to participate in a group, in spite of whatever ideology they may perpetrate. The relationship between group participation and one's identity fosters loyalty that also makes it harder for counter recruitment measures, both negative and positive, to disrupt this dynamic. The Islamic State used social media to form an ingroup that was resistant to these measures as a result of its influence and control over members. Mahmood and Muthana exemplified how this extended beyond Islam and into their position as women, and how counter-recruitment measures failed to appeal to these facets of their identities, instead making them feel as though the outgroup represent an existential threat. However, positive measures do not exist in isolation and the recruitment of Mahmood and Muthana cannot be blamed on the absence of such measures. Rather, negative policy measures should be considered in addition to these positive approaches to create a rounded approach to countering terrorist recruitment.

Negative measures disable access to radical content in the first instance. This can be achieved via a number of means, including removing online material or denying an identified individual internet access. Theoretically, this would mean internet users are unable to find radical material, either on purpose or by accident. Realistically, negative measures encounter several issues in their implementation, which mean terrorist material often remains online and accessible. These include tensions between freedom of speech and the removal of content, material produced by a

terrorist organisation that is not illegal or objectionable, and that few skills are required to circumvent technical barriers to access. This meant that Mahmood and Muthana were able to access and eventually create extremist content, even as the Islamic State became the focus of government and non-government counterterrorism efforts.

The emphasis on sisterhood and religious obligation within the echo chambers Mahmood and Muthana were part of meant that the material produced and shared was mostly protected, as it was not, in and of itself, extremist material. The protection of freedom of speech is perhaps best exemplified in the United States, where it is a constitutional right, and judicial tests have almost always favoured this amendment over challengers.[299] Therefore, the limitation of such seemingly innocuous material would appear to be an overreaction by any institution, government or otherwise, with a commitment to freedom of speech. This interpretation of events contributed to the narratives of existential threat for supporters of the Islamic State online, which further united them in their view of a common adversary, motivating them to deepen their relationship with other members of the echo chamber and find alternative social media platforms where there was less of an existential threat, such as *Telegram*.[300]

Mahmood and Muthana developed real relationships with other women online, some of whom made *hijrah* alongside them. This sisterhood replaced real-world familial networks that may have implemented negative measures at an individual level if they became aware of the radicalisation and recruitment process online. This network also created expectations and rules for social behaviours in accordance with Islamic State ideals, and rewarded compliance with a positive social identity. This sisterhood also provided a framework whereby Mahmood and Muthana identified, categorised, and compared social groups and consistently found the Islamic State favourable. Had Mahmood and Muthana become disconnected from these communities, the absence of a positive social identity and a sense of belonging may have motivated them to satisfy this psychological need elsewhere. While there is no guarantee this would have not been with another extremist ingroup, it provides a greater opportunity for intervention and disruption of terrorist recruitment than where an individual is otherwise embroiled in an echo chamber.

In the case of both Mahmood and Muthana, their status in the digital space, both before and after they made *hijrah* to Syria, saw them contribute and engage with a volume of religious material that could be considered scholarship or discussion. The censorship of such content is problematic

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[299] Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization," 438.
[300] Rita Katz, "Telegram has Finally Cracked Down on Islamist Terrorism. Will it Do the Same for the Far Right," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/12/05/telegram-has-finally-cracked-down-islamist-terrorism-will-it-do-same-far-right/.

in that it contravenes western democratic values and laws and can also lead to accusations that the social media platforms who enforce such bans are radical in and of themselves. The ban of all content which discuss Islam, for example, would be seen as Islamophobic. The removal of such content can, therefore, embolden the narrative that the outgroup poses an existential threat to the ingroup, in that they seek to remove the ingroup from spaces they use to connect with one another and disseminate their content. Such broad policies have the potential to undermine the intended effect of deterring recruitment, and instead isolate individuals who were not previously susceptible to recruitment or force them to areas of the internet which are considerably more difficult to monitor and disrupt.

While the potential psychological impact of denying prospective recruits to extremist online spaces, the practicalities of negative measures are much more difficult to implement. Social media platforms used their terms of service to suspend extremist accounts and remove radical content from their sites. This proved ineffective, as account suspension became aspirational for women who had not yet proliferated the inner circles of the virtual sisterhood as a means to prove their loyalty.[301] This strengthened the view of the outgroup as adversarial and threatening and united the sisterhood in their shared experiences of negative interactions with the outgroup. Actions that defied outgroup behavioural expectations were encouraged—irrespective of how small those actions might be—and this was no different in the behaviours exhibited and encouraged online to condition individuals to conform with group ideals. This demonstrated how negative measures could be manipulated in such a way that reinforced ingroup narratives.

These actions were rewarded in the same manner as all others that adhered to behavioural and social expectations, with an elevated sense of self-esteem and increased status from within the group. In order to disrupt this social process, therefore, these actions must be met with negative consequences that outweigh the benefits of group participation, while also limiting access to the group to receive the validation and support that ultimately contributes to this sense of improved self-esteem. A negative reaction from the outgroup is not necessarily enough to provoke a negative social identity for an individual, as their self-esteem is derived from favourable comparisons between this group and their ingroup. Instead, the value of the ingroup could be undermined by denying access to material that reinforced favourable comparisons to the outgroup and proliferating an echo chamber with counternarratives. For instance, more moderate material on the Syrian Civil War could have been made available to Mahmood on Tumblr, while simultaneously denying her access to radical material. This subsequently drives an individual to look for a means to develop a more positive social identity where this need is no longer met by their ingroup.

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[301] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14.

The technical capabilities required to circumvent state restrictions on terrorist material are relatively low, even when the most extreme censorship capabilities are employed. For example, users constrained by geographical restrictions are able to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to access material they may otherwise be unable to. Terrorist organisations are able to adapt their digital presence to ensure members continue to be able to access radical content despite negative measures designed to counter this, like any other organisation with an online presence. Terrorist organisations are also versatile and adapt to efforts to counter their presence online, as the Islamic State were known to adapt their online present to limit counter-recruitment efforts. As it became more difficult to maintain a consistent presence on mainstream social media applications like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, the Islamic State moved to the secure messaging application *Telegram*.[302] Both women faced repeated suspensions from social media platforms where they were identified as Islamic State supporters and were able to continue to create accounts and access the social networks they had developed online.

An unanticipated effect of denying the Islamic State access to social media platforms was that they were able to better control the material their followers were exposed to through directions to limit their interactions with 'untrusted' individuals and use more discrete social media platforms and messaging applications to consume radical material and interact with other members of the group. This, in turn, deepened the echo chamber many members were already embroiled in and further distorted their perception of how popular the beliefs propagated were and made the establishment of the ingroup and outgroup much easier. This environment was conducive to groupthink, with members under the impression more radical actions in the name of the Islamic State were appropriate, and seldom encountered contrary opinions. This manifested in online behaviours like creating accounts after being suspended or banned from the social media platforms but, in some instances, would lead to radical offline behaviours deemed acceptable by the group, such as travelling to Syria or facilitating a violent attack.

However, negative measures are often interpreted as a form of harassment by the outgroup directed toward the ingroup, and further entrench the view that they are diametrically opposed. To adequately incorporate the psychological experiences these women faced throughout the radicalisation and recruitment period, it is important to recognise the significance of relationships. To simply deprive them of the support networks they developed in this time does not mitigate the influence they have had and, rather, has the potential to entrench the beliefs espoused in online ideologies. This is not to say that negative measures do not have the capacity to disrupt terrorist

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[302] Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati and John Horgan, "Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (2019): 1242-1245, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553. 2017.1339695

recruitment but, rather, that they have limited impact when considered within the framework of social identity theory. Both Muthana and Mahmood were embroiled in echo chambers that could have perhaps been disrupted in their earliest phases if radical material had been unavailable or limited, before they developed connections with other group members that resembled familial style relationships. Once these relationships were formed, both women continued to find ways to re-engage with their sisterhoods online, while also feeling their ties to the group—and by extension, their identity—were under threat by the outgroup.

Policy measures provide a standardised and methodical approach to terrorist recruitment, which aims to broadly disrupt and undermine the radicalisation and recruitment of individuals using positive and negative measures. These measures often fall short where they fail to consider the individual drivers of terrorist recruitment, including the social interactions and identities that come from an individual's participation in a terrorist organisation. Social identity theory posits that participation in an ingroup, and adherence to its behaviours and expectations is rewarded with high self-esteem where the group compares favourably with outgroups. Current approaches do not cater to these needs, and as such, fail to provide an alternative ingroup that compares favourably and contributes to improved self-esteem. However, the shortcomings of policy measures can be mitigated through a multipronged approach that combines positive and negative approaches, as well as other measures, including technical and goodwill gestures.

Technical Solutions

The relationship between social media echo chambers and radicalisation has become more apparent in recent times as several terrorist attacks have been the supposed product of, and often reference back to, exclusive echo chambers online.[303] In both the case studies explored in this thesis, it emerged that their engagement on social media took place within an echo chamber where they were exposed to increasingly radical material critical to their radicalisation and recruitment. In such an environment, ingroups become prominent, creating an environment where groupthink thrived, which, in turn, justified violence against the outgroup in the name of the group's ideology shared within an exclusive online echo chamber. Echo chambers also served to protect those contained within them from external perspectives that may have disrupted the radicalisation process and control the narratives individuals were exposed to.

One proposed countermeasure to social media recruitment is for technical adjustments to the sites themselves to reduce the exposure to and availability of radical material. This is a negative measure in itself, but far more targeted than broader policy takedown efforts. This means that

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[303] O'Hara and Stevens, "Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism," 403.

social media platforms must consider how to disrupt the echo chambers that form around this type of content, as it is often their own algorithms that create such environments. These echo chambers foster the development and maintenance of ingroups. Algorithms are used to improve the experience of users on social media platforms by tailoring which content a user sees to the likelihood that they will actually want to see it, and information on how they can be used more effectively is often readily available.[304] As such, the Islamic State were able to exploit the inbuilt mechanics of social media sites to create carefully controlled echo chambers modelled on familial networks that cultivated a ready supply of recruits. Even though their material was disseminated widely across the internet to attract as many prospective recruits as possible, those who engaged with it were actively and positively drawn into the echo chamber to connect with one another and reinforce the messaging being delivered within the social media space.

This research will explore two core mechanisms to prevent the formation of echo chambers on social media sites: the modification of algorithms to limit the emergence of echo chambers and the insertion of targeted alternative material that acts as a counternarrative to radical content. By the nature of their design, modifications to algorithms could see the introduction of other content outside of the narrow perspectives imposed by other members of the echo chambers, whereas the infiltration of echo chambers via the insertion of alternative content would see more targeted material, including counternarratives and connecting vulnerable individuals with appropriate resources. Both approaches are intended to disrupt the effects of recruitment online, particularly to provide new perspectives that disrupt the perception that terrorist narratives are more widely accepted than they truly are in reality. In other words, they are designed to counter the establishment of radicalised ingroups promoted within the echo chambers of such digital environments.

The modification of the algorithms that permit the emergence of echo chambers is a countermeasure that has often been suggested as a means to counter terrorist recruitment on social media. For instance, sites that do not 'recommend' content based on a user's activities limit the capacity to develop a network or community online.[305] This means that their virtual connections are more likely to mirror their real world communities and may limit the prospect for individuals to develop an echo chamber that consists almost entirely of extremist material. A greater balance of ideas means that it is possible for the radicalisation process to be disrupted by individuals interacting with and being exposed to others. The behavioural expectations for

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[304] AJ Agrawal, "What Do Social Media Algorithms Mean For You," *Forbes*, April 20, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ajagrawal/2016/04/20/what-do-social-media-algorithms-mean-for-you/#763ac8dda515

[305] Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson. and David Weir, "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 1-2 (2019): 153-154, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984.

Mahmood and Muthana within their virtual sisterhoods restricted them from their real-world communities and saw them disengaging in favour of Islamic State members and supporters. This, in turn, restricted their access to alternative perspectives. This approach does not necessarily introduce specific perspectives, but rather prevents the encapsulation in material that solely refers to and reinforces one perspective, and in doing so disrupts the development of ingroups and outgroups and the consequent groupthink, which can lead to radicalisation.

In terms of the ingroup dynamic, exposure to alternative narratives through changes to technical protocols may disrupt the narratives created to entrench the sense of 'us' and 'them'. This undermines the control terrorist recruiters have on the narrative regarding outgroup members and provides greater opportunity for the responses and counternarratives to be distributed and encountered online organically through exposure. Though there are instances where other perspectives were acknowledged within Islamic State circles on social media, this was only presented with the criticism to undermine any validity and credibility from the outgroup. This also has the capacity to limit the efficacy of role models, where other viable alternatives are presented under modified algorithms. For instance, Mahmood became a role model and Muthana was influenced by the other women who had gone before her. These role models acted as 'success stories' and were elevated to a higher social status within the group. This was inspirational for those within the ingroup, as it represented an opportunity to elevate their status and cement their position within the ingroup, thus, affirming their positive social identity. The introduction of more positive role models on social media may have, for example, reframed the aspirations of these women and provided other avenues to attain self-esteem.

While a modification to the algorithms would alter the types of content supporters are exposed to, the greatest effect would be on those interested in topics that were exploited by the terrorist organisation as a gateway to their material. This seemed to be the case with Mahmood, who was interested in the Syrian Civil War and driven toward the social connections she established with other women who shared her sense of outrage and disappointment. If her exposure had not become limited by the accounts she selected based on the feeds that the algorithms presented to her—which ultimately formed the sisterhood she joined—then it may have reduced the efficacy of those messages. As with all counter-recruitment measures, it is difficult to measure a non-outcome; however, from a social psychology perspective, this would have undermined the capacity for phenomenon such as groupthink to take hold and make violence an acceptable and justified behaviour.

Much of the religious content Mahmood and Muthana came into contact with was seemingly benign and did not carry overtly radical tones in its messaging. This content did not appear to violate the terms and conditions of the sites that hosted it; however, it appeared to be critical in

the imposition of a sense of religious duty on both women that was a contributing factor in their eventual decision to depart for Syria. However, it was during this period that both women began to identify and categorise social groups on the basis of the material they encountered. In this time before they were entrenched in, and their social identities were intrinsically linked to, their ingroup membership. This material originated from likeminded accounts, some of which may have been operated by the Islamic State themselves, who posted religious texts and interpretations that aligned to the group's ideology and their view on women. In this instance, had there been an adjustment to the algorithm that saw content on the same subject matter but from different perspectives, it may have had the effect of disrupting the sense of religious obligation both women felt, while still offering the opportunity to engage with their religion online.

Both women were able to maintain a social media presence for an extended period of time after their travel to Syria. In the case of Muthana, this meant she had to create new accounts periodically as she was often banned by the social media platform. This is indicative that denial of access to a social media service is often not a viable way to remove those who do not comply with the terms and conditions of a site and, thus, largely ineffective in reducing online radicalisation. Likewise, removal of certain content from the platform is seldom the last time that content is posted to the site. Instead, it is reiterated across multiple accounts managed by a single individual, once again contributing to the impression that a view is more popular or widely held than it truly is and distorting the perception of others within the echo chamber who believe it to be an accepted fact. Alterations to the types of content displayed and to the suggestions of similar accounts worth following can assist in the prevention of the development of such a perspective.

It is difficult to disrupt the content that is fed into an echo chamber without the aforementioned redesign of the algorithms used on social media sites. However, while social media companies have an obligation to police the content that is hosted on their site in accordance with their local legislature, they are not necessarily under the same obligation to fundamentally alter their operating model so as not to inadvertently enabled terrorist recruitment. The adverse effects of echo chambers have been clearly demonstrated in the cases of Mahmood and Muthana, who became deeply entrenched in sisterhoods that shaped them into *jihadi* brides. That being said, social media companies have become increasingly aware of the detrimental effect association with such terrorist organisations, deliberate or otherwise, can have on their business, and have subsequently made efforts to limit such activities on their platforms.[306]

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[306] Patricia Hurtado, "Facebook and its Lawyers Slammed by Judge in Terrorism Suits," *Bloomberg*, September 23, 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-22/facebook-and-its-law-firm-slammed-by-judge-in-terrorism-suits.

Modifications to the algorithms employed by social media sites are not beyond the reach of social media companies, but they may be hesitant to adopt such an approach. Algorithms serve to make the user experience on social media more relevant which, in turn, makes it more popular and more profitable. Even if the association to a terrorist organisation is harmful to their brand, they may see other, less effective but more public, mechanisms as better countermeasures to mitigate any reputational damage without impacting on the service they provide.[307] Confusion and dissatisfaction from contributors to Twitter with modifications to the site's algorithms is the kind of commercial disruption social media sites may seek to avoid.[308] Instead of technical modifications that undermine the performance and relevance of a social media site, and potentially make users more inclined toward other platforms, social media companies may look to options, such as modifications to their community standards, that are less disruptive (and overall less effective), but make them appear involved in combating extremism.

The fundamental objective, however, ought to be on the disruption of echo chambers that have the potential to form radical ingroups. The policies and technical changes implemented by the platforms they host need to consider both the formation and maintenance of the echo chambers that emerge on their sites. Mahmood and Muthana used the platform to connect with other Muslims on topics of common concern; however, the narratives and users they found online did not appear to represent a diverse array of perspectives, but rather, a radical and ultimately terroristic one. The modification of algorithms has the potential to have a similar impact on countering terrorist recruitment as the introduction of counternarratives, in that it reduces the appeal and status associated with the ingroup by allowing its prospective members to not be embroiled in an echo chamber controlled by recruiters and propagandists.

Countering echo chambers online is not simply a matter of reworked algorithms, however. It has been demonstrated that even with access to a variety of information, there is a tendency for an individual to select only information that conforms with their expectations and beliefs.[309] Though the introduction of more balanced material may minimise the opportunities for individuals to be exposed to radical content, it is unlikely to completely eradicate the risk of radicalisation. Alternatively, radical groups may look for other channels where they can share their material exclusively. As social media sites cracked down on Islamic State linked accounts – with Twitter closing 125,000 sympathetic accounts between mid-2015 and early 2016 – the group found

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[307] Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization," 443.

[308] Michael A. DeVito, Darren Gergle and Jeremy Brinholtz, "'Algorithms ruin everthing': #RIPTwitter, Folk Theories, and Resistance to Algorithmic Change in Social Media," *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2017): 3163-3164.

[309] Sullivan, "Selective Exposure," 465.

alternative distribution networks to continue to share material with followers.[310] The messaging application *Telegram* became an important dissemination platform for the group due to its heavy encryption as they found it increasingly difficult to maintain a consistent social media presence.[311] Such an application represented an even more exclusive echo chamber which continued to propagate the group's ideologies.

The infiltration of echo chambers with alternative perspectives, so as to disrupt the recruitment process, could be a more effective solution to the issue of radicalisation and recruitment across social media, given the impact these environments had on shaping the ideological drivers of Mahmood and Muthana. This is not an idea that is entirely distinct from the modification of algorithms, as this process is also intended to introduce alternative content to users who may be prone to radicalisation. However, the infiltration of echo chambers can also take place without changes to the fundamental design of the social media networks themselves. This model seeks to disrupt the monopoly ingroups have over the members within their echo chamber, to undermine their power and influence to determine the narratives presented to members online. More specifically, the material that is presented to those within these echo chambers is targeted to counteract the exposure they have had to radical content.

The technical capability to insert alternative material exists, being used for advertisements that are often targeted to their audience. The same model could be applied based on the content a user becomes subscribed to, to provide them with alternative perspectives from credible sources. This is naturally constrained by the same restrictions as any other means of introducing counternarratives and may be rejected or ignored by users in favour of more palatable ideas. However, just as advertisers develop more subtle ways to market their products to social media consumers, counternarratives could be inserted in non-confrontational formats that do not create cognitive dissonance for the recipients. This can diffuse outgroup antagonism, as this content can be perceived as less confrontational. Naturally, there is no guarantee it will be accepted by its recipients, as per cognitive dissonance theory, but it has a greater capacity to disrupt the status and reputation of the ingroup and elevate positive views of the outgroup.

As with counternarratives, the introduction of alternative viewpoints and critical analysis must be done in a format that is appealing and easily digestible by the consumer, even if its integration is more subtle. A change to the site's algorithms may provide an avenue for this content to be introduced to vulnerable persons, but this does not mean it will be readily considered by its

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[310] Danny Yadron, "Twitter Deletes 125,000 ISIS Accounts and Expands Anti-Terror Teams," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/05/twitter-deletes-isis-accounts-terrorism-online.

[311] Bloom, Tiflati and Horgan, "Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram," 1242-1245.

audience. This means that the approaches used in counternarratives must be applied with a consideration for the psychological state an echo chamber member experiences, a state where hostility toward outside views is engrained in participants, who view the outgroup as antagonistic and threatening.[312] The infiltration of echo chambers may also be extended to more personable experiences, with direct engagement with vulnerable persons to attempt to counteract the social influences of other members within an echo

The issue with targeted proliferation is that outsiders were often treated with mistrust, with members of echo chambers often making their accounts—or at the very least, their identities—private for self-protection.[313] The Islamic State did cast a wide net in their recruitment campaigns, but it remains unclear to the researcher how they determined who was authentic in their intentions and was subsequently permitted to operate within the echo chamber and interact with other members freely. It is apparent across both case studies that, at the very least, engagement was separated on the basis of gender. Therefore, the disruption of female recruits needed female counter-recruiters to drive this infiltration. This also meant men could pose as women online but needed to provide the sense of credibility to develop the trust and confidence women within the Islamic State sisterhood shared with one another.

Exposure to alternative materials in and of itself is not necessarily enough to disrupt the psychological process of recruitment, in that it does not guarantee a negative social identity that would drive someone to seek to leave a group.[314] Instead it is important to consider all the avenues through which the terrorist organisation engaged with a prospective recruit to affirm their sense of positive social identity. The Islamic State *jihadi* brides came to represent a complex social community, complete with a social hierarchy, influencers, and social expectations for members.[315] This reinforced the collective ingroup identity that was so protective of its core value and violently hostile toward outsiders, consequently creating an environment increasingly difficult for infiltration. However, as the technical capabilities already exist and counternarratives can be marketed in a more subtle fashion, namely microtargeting, this countermeasure represents a possible response that engages with the nature of social media sites themselves while also not posing an existential threat to the ingroup, and by extension, the identities of its members.

Overall, technical countermeasures have the capacity to limit the efficacy of echo chambers. This subsequently diminishes the power and influence of relationships within this space, which disrupts

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[312] Davies et al., "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," 64.
[313] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 14-16.
[314] Cameron, "A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity," 242.
[315] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 9-10.

the formation of radical ingroups. In the online space, Muthana became entrenched in a social hierarchy rooted in support for the Islamic State through the *Baqiyah* family.[316] This social structure affirmed and reinforced the development of radical beliefs in the hope that members would feel inspired to undertake further actions in support of the Islamic State: namely, a relocation to Syria to become a bride.[317] It is impossible to say that alternative perspectives may have countered the recruitment of Muthana, but it would have invariably widened the opportunity that she may not have been influenced to undertake the actions she did had they seemed more unacceptable within her online community. The proliferation of Muthana's echo chamber would have been difficult to achieve without technical measures, due to the guidance her peers offered her to protect her identity and their own. It needed to be done in conjunction with a range of counternarratives that were underpinned by messages that mitigated the effect recruiters had on her sense of identity as a result of the ingroup she became a member of.

Likewise, Mahmood became embroiled in an echo chamber that formed as a consequence of her legitimate interest in the Syrian Civil War. The capacity for terrorist organisations to capitalise on the interests of vulnerable individuals is diminished when they are unable to latch on to the content that acts as a gateway to their own radical material. While the modification of algorithms to reduce the emergence of echo chambers will not necessarily stop terrorist recruiters identifying and engaging with vulnerable individuals, it does limit the capacity for groups to emerge and participate in behaviours like groupthink and outgroup antagonism. This, in turn, reduces the community of online supporters who are readily available for recruitment and continue to disseminate original and officially produced terrorist material.

Goodwill Gestures

The final countermeasure examined in this thesis is goodwill gestures, which are the collaborative initiatives that emerge in response to terrorism to collectively condemn and seek solutions to their actions, including recruitment. These movements have most recently extended to the online space and sought to include technical experts and leaders from the private and public sectors.[318] Often the actions expected to arise from such initiatives qualifies as a policy or technical measure. However, the collection of resources, power and influence behind such initiatives affords them greater legitimacy and to ensure responses are better coordinated between corporations, experts, and governments. What has been demonstrated across policy and technical measures is that a

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[316] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 9-10.
[317] Inch, "Jihad and Hashtags," 9-10.
[318] "Building Stronger Partnerships for a More Secure World," Global Center on Cooperative Security, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.globalcenter.org/

single approach is seldom sufficient to disrupt the radicalisation and recruitment process. Instead, a coordinated, multidimensional approach is more likely to succeed.

It has been demonstrated throughout this thesis that the drivers behind terrorist recruitment online are rooted in the social relationships and groups that form on social media. This interaction, built into the sites themselves by their very name, is designed to foster social interactions on a digital platform irrespective of the physical distance that may exist between people. The use of these technologies has become a concern for the social media platforms themselves, who recognise the harm that can be caused where a terrorist group entrenches themselves on the platform.[319] However, the case studies within this thesis used multiple social media platforms to engage with their peers, recruiters, and eventually, with prospective recruits. Where a social media platform becomes inhospitable to a terrorist organisation, they move to another.[320] As such, the denial of access needed to counter recruitment on social media must come from a collaborative approach incorporating governments, communities, experts, and social media platforms.

Goodwill gestures enable a collaborative approach to counterterrorism issues. The intention behind this approach is to foster greater cohesion and coordination in the implementation of countermeasures across a spectrum of actors, including counterterrorism practitioners, experts, community leaders and governments, such as the Christchurch Call.[321] One of the issues with countermeasures is their application tends to be broad. While individual-level responses are resource-intensive, broad approaches can have an impact on the recruitment that is difficult to measure, but the social dimension of recruitment demonstrated in the case studies of this thesis indicates that it may be difficult for a broader approach to have an effective impact. Goodwill gestures can provide a space whereby the appropriate actors are brought together to find how they can best utilise resources to mitigate terrorist recruitment online. This also amplifies the perception of a united outgroup, which can undermine ingroup narratives of disharmony, disunity, and weakness.

In addition to collaboration and coordination, goodwill initiatives also provide a basis upon which independent contributions to counterterrorism are encouraged and supported. The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), for instance, sees members commit to improving their own

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[319] Sam Sachdeva, "Heeding the Call on Social Media Terror," *Newsroom*, September 20, 2019, https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/09/20/818911/heeding-the-call-on-social-media-terror.
[320] BBC Monitoring, "Europol Disrupts Islamic State Propaganda Machine," *BBC News*, November 25, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50545816
[321] "Building Stronger Partnerships for a More Secure World," Global Center on Cooperative Security.

platforms in addition to collaborative efforts.[322] The imposition of expectations across a wide variety of actors can also work to reduce discrepancies that are exploited by terrorist organisations on social media sites. Members of the GIFCT include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and LinkedIn.[323] Though competitors, these social media platforms all host different types of content and can be used in different ways. As such, each respective platform must implement its own measures to counteract the ways terrorist organisations may seek to use their platform.

The consequence of a unified approach to counterterrorism online—exemplified in the denial of access to the Islamic State and its members—has been to limit their opportunities to establish and entrench social communities online. The inhospitable state of mainstream social media networks has pushed the Islamic State to prioritise platforms where they can operate with less restriction. In 2015, the Islamic State circulated a list of 'safe' mobile communication applications and encouraged that sensitive conversations with recruiters take place on Telegram, as opposed to across social media sites.[324] The Islamic State would use channels on this platform to communicate to followers, disseminate radical content and plan attacks.[325] However, by December 2019, the Islamic State had reportedly been removed from the platform following an account deletion campaign by Telegram.[326]

Even when the Islamic State were able to maintain a presence on Telegram, their reach was reduced. The steps required for interested individuals to access radical content are greater than on mainstream social media platforms with more accessible search functions. One element of attraction for members of the Islamic State was the outward projection of power, influence and status members presented online. Mahmood and Muthana posted content that indicated they believed the Islamic State to be superior, and by extension, they developed a positive social identity linked to their membership. Muthana, for instance, posted material that correlated with her position as a member of the *baqiyah* family, representative of her elevated status within the group.[327]As the Islamic State lost its capacity to operate online, its members were limited in their ability to project the core values of the group and attract new members to its ranks.

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[322] "Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism: Evolving an Institution," GIFCT, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.gifct.org/about/.
[323] "Members," GIFCT, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.gifct.org/members/.
[324] Margaret Coker, Sam Schechner and Alexis Flynn, "How Islamic State Teaches Tech Savvy to Evade Detection," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 16, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-teaches-tech-savvy-1447720824.
[325] "Terrorists on Telegram," Counter Extremism Project, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.counterextremism.com/terrorists-on-telegram
[326] Katz, "Telegram has Finally Cracked Down on Islamist Terrorism."
[327] Hoda Muthana, "Baqiyah Rabbit," August 7, 2014, accessed via: https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5988430-Twitter-Aug-7-2014.html

The impact of this was to create the perception that the Islamic State were losing in the social media space. Most permanent suspensions from mainstream platforms limited the capacity for members to remain connected with one another, and subsequently diminished the size of their social media presence. For individuals who had to continually seek out new platforms and accounts, it would have been increasingly difficult to ensure their own security online and to maintain the impression that they were part of a group that sat in a position of power. Without access to the narratives created and controlled by the Islamic State, it became increasingly possible for the proliferation of alternative information sources into their echo chamber, which would have undermined these narratives. This meant that favourable comparisons to outgroups became less compelling with reduced access to this information, leading to a negative social identity and driving individuals to find new social groups.

Goodwill initiatives in the form of the GIFCT, and others like it, such as the Christchurch Call of 2019, can act to coordinate individual measures to achieve better collective results. This also provides opportunities to limit the reach future terrorist organisations may have on social media platforms. This means that when a terrorist organisation next seeks to establish a presence across social media as a means of recruitment, there is already a framework in place to deny them access to multiple social media sites in a decreased timeframe. The use of social media networks for recruitment leads to the emergence of social groups by its own design. In future, goodwill initiatives have the capacity to prevent and restrict the access and reach of such groups on social media platforms, as well as reduce the timeframe it takes them to exhaust all other mainstream social media options.

It ought to be acknowledged that the denial of access to a space where terrorist organisations congregate online does not remove the threat posed by radicalised individuals, who may be driven to violence without routine engagements that take place on social media, but rather, through the consumption of material independent of social media. However, it severely limits the reach of terrorist organisations, like the Islamic State, to foster social groups. Likewise, where social media companies have improved channels to communicate with counterterrorism practitioners, experts, and community leaders (and vice versa), there are improved opportunities for a multidimensional approach that combines online and offline measures to reduce the risk posed by radicalised persons.

The themes identified across both case studies had strong ties to their sense of self-identity, which appeared to be derived from the relationships they formed with likeminded individuals online. The concept of sisterhood or a familial connection appeared to form a large portion of their interactions with others and represented an ingroup within an ingroup. Likewise, the sense of religious obligation both women experienced was a consequence of the adoption of *Salafist Jihadi*

Islam as a fundamental component of their identity. While it is not uncommon for individuals to form their identities around a religious outlook, the consequences, in the case of the Islamic State, were to move to an increasingly radical position and view the outgroup as an enemy. With respect to both themes, a unified response from outgroup members with similar experiences and identities, namely Muslim women, may have had the capacity to undermine the status of the ingroup and to make promotion within its ranks a less compelling prospect.

The effect of goodwill initiatives is contingent on the willingness of all necessary parties— governments, their respective institutions, and technical corporations—to participate and use the initiative as a starting place for further action. Such action frequently is expected to incorporate policy and technical measures outlined above, as well as others not explored in this thesis. The intention behind such initiatives is to create a collective statement that terrorism is not tolerated in the online sphere, and then to undertake actions that reinforce these views.[328] Such actions include the measures detailed throughout this chapter, as well as other initiatives on a case-by-case basis.

There are issues within the initiatives themselves, as a consequence of the matter they seek to combat. These goodwill gestures can be seen as the unification of the outgroup, for whom terrorist organisations view themselves as distinct from. In the case of the Islamic State, the outgroup represented an extremely broad collection of individuals and groups, notwithstanding likeminded organisations and terror groups who did not absolutely conform to their ideology. This unification can further entrench a sense of 'otherness' and be perceived as hostility by members of the ingroup, which deepens the divide between those at risk of radicalisation and those interested in intervention. These initiatives also raise the profile of counter-recruitment campaigns, which subsequently increases the caution and suspicion within online communities that they may be targeted.

Mahmood was active amongst members who perceived the online environment to be a distinct province of the Islamic State. As this environment became more difficult for members to operate in, it could be perceived as an existential threat to the group itself, even though it poses no physical risks. This was demonstrated when members faced account deletion on the platform Riot, where the Islamic State had relocated after being ousted from Telegram.[329] Members were seen to react with confusion and frustration to the site's actions, as they lost contact with one

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[328] "The Call," Christchurch Call, accessed January 20, 2020, https://www.christchurchcall. com/call.html
[329] Rita Katz, "ISIS Is Now Harder to Track Online—but That's Good News," Wired, December 16, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-isis-is-now-harder-to-track-onlinebut-thats-good-news/

another and found few opportunities on other social media sites.[330] Though such statements are seemingly trivial, where this environment is perceived as a frontier, the constant removal from social media platforms feels deeply personal to those who have made it their home.

In circumstances of existential threat, ingroup bias has been shown to increase.[331] This means that as members on social media sites are denied access to such platforms, there may be an increased tendency to favour the Islamic State more than before, which may culminate in more extreme behaviours than before under the belief the outgroup pose an existential threat. This poses its own dangers, as members will have invariably been exposed to the violent expectations of the organisation and may seek to act on it. Even in instances where they do not resort to violence, increased ingroup favouritism will make these individuals more resistant to other countermeasures that may be enabled as a consequence of goodwill initiatives. This would be especially true if further countermeasures originated from members of the outgroup, who are already treated with suspicion, and would likely be antagonised further under conditions of increased ingroup favouritism.

A message of condemnation can have the effect of delegitimising the recruitment campaigns of terrorist organisations. This is particularly effective when it comes from multiple domains and seeks to remove the platform of any terrorist organisation. GIFTC represents how several social media networks have put aside commercial rivalries to present a unified front and deny terrorist organisations access to their services. The success of such denial is often mixed, based on the benefits and risks of such action, but in making their platforms more difficult to use, they are able to limit the opportunities for terrorist organisations to embed themselves on the sites and conduct recruitment campaigns. Where social media companies have clear policies and frameworks in place to limit the presence of a terrorist group on their platform, the less able these groups are to maintain an enduring presence and reach a wider audience.

Muthana, in particular, operated in a digital environment where she was aware of the criticisms that had mounted against the Islamic State. Before her departure, she was likely exposed to the media coverage of their atrocities and the unified responses that came from governmental and expert voices alike. It cannot be stated that these acts did not contribute to a sense of confusion within Muthana, but her subsequent decision to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State is indicative that these measures were not enough. To Muthana, the Islamic State were not the illegitimate organisation global actors had united to characterise it as. Instead, the unification of

[330] Katz, "ISIS Is Now Harder to Track Online—but That's Good News."
[331] Andrew Erik Giannakakis and Immo Fritsche, "Social Identities, Group Norms, and Threat: On the Malleability of Ingroup Bias," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (2011): 82, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210386120.

the 'other' was perceived as an existential threat to the Islamic State in their targeting of any individual or group who joined in these efforts and sought to turn their own members against them.

When it comes to countering terrorist recruitment in this environment, it is, therefore, important to consider the way it will be received. While there are certain limitations to the advances that can be made while considered a part of the outgroup, the content and perception of restrictive actions pushed in the online space in a coordinated and cohesive approach can be disruptive to the formation and maintenance of a strong ingroup. Where members start to doubt, even slightly, the effectiveness, morals, and objectives of the group they belong to, their own self-esteem and identity can be adversely affected. As such, they may be receptive to new relationships and groups where they can develop status and boost their self-esteem. The incorporation of broader identity-based groups to whom the prospective recruits can relate, such as the Islamic community in this instance, has the potential to make counter-recruitment activities feel less adversarial and antagonistic, as there are common identity-based themes and experiences that can be used to bridge the divide.

This response is to be expected when terrorist organisations need to defend themselves against their adversaries in narratives. However, these goodwill gestures can be effective when they are comprised of individuals or groups who are prepared to use the tools at their disposal to limit the reach and capability of the organisations they seek to counter. As with all countermeasures, there are restrictions of the efficacy of such an approach that are rooted in the psychological reaction of radicalised individuals engaged in terrorist organisations. The principal benefit of goodwill initiatives is in the collaborative approach it affords counter-recruitment writ large, whereby resources can be pooled, and a multidimensional approach can limit the shortcomings of each individual countermeasure.

The resistance to such initiatives by terrorist organisations, reinforced by the reaction members have to existential threats and challenges to their sense of social identity, mean it is inevitable that there will be strong resistance amongst terrorist organisations to the implementation and action of such initiatives. However, in order to disestablish a group and make it unviable for them to continue to operate on social media sites, it is important to consider the role social identity theory may have in the reception to countermeasures, particularly with respect to the unintended consequences that may arise where individuals feel their identity is threatened. The strength of these group dynamics was enough to drive Muthana and Mahmood to relocate to a warzone from their western lifestyles and presents immense challenges that are likely to endure and be replicated by other terrorist organisations across social media.

Conclusion

Individual responses to countermeasures are often hard to predict, but when these responses are examined with respect to the relationships an individual has with a radical ingroup, it becomes more apparent how certain countermeasures will be received and perceived. First and foremost, the collective identity of the ingroup entrenches a sense of loyalty and trust that dissuades members from betraying the group. Outgroup antagonism also builds a sense of superiority and fear of 'otherness' as members aim to distinguish themselves from the outgroup. Muthana noted her fear of hellfire if she did not conform to the expectations of the Islamic State, and subsequently rejected the values she had been raised with in the west.[332] When placed in context with the material she was exposed to and the relationships she formed, social identity theory provides insight into why Muthana developed such fears, and also why she would have been so resistant to any efforts to intervene in her radicalisation and recruitment.

The division of countermeasures into policy, technical solutions and goodwill initiatives does not reflect an exhaustive approach of all the measures available to counterterrorism practitioners, but rather, is an attempt to broadly categorise some of the main approaches to the issue of terrorist recruitment. The utility of such approaches is impossible to quantify, as it is incredibly difficult to measure a non-outcome, but there are certain advantages afforded by each approach in terms of the ways it can limit the radicalisation and recruitment of further vulnerable individuals. Goodwill initiatives, in particular, highlight the potential where these countermeasures are used collaboratively to create multidimensional approaches to countering terrorist recruitment. While each of these approaches have shortcomings that can hinder their efficacy and exacerbate ingroup and outgroup tensions, when used in conjunction with one another, the overall impact could better undermine the positive social identity individuals associate with their ingroup membership.

One of the core issues of these countermeasures is their versatility and application in the social media space. The Islamic State quickly proved they were adaptable to social media and exploited its very design to indiscriminately disseminate radical content and recruit from pools of vulnerable people identified online. In contrast, countermeasures were slow and reactionary. By the time the Islamic State found themselves homeless across social media platforms, with their eviction from Telegram in December 2019, it had been five years since the terrorist organisation first emerged.[333] In that timespan, countless individuals were recruited into its ranks, some travelling to Iraq and Syria, and others joining a digital *jihad* from their homelands.

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[332] Finnegan, "Muthana is Not a US Citizen."
[333] Katz, "ISIS Is Now Harder to Track Online—but That's Good News."

Terrorist recruitment is a social experience, which centres around shared grievances and develops into a common identity. Muthana and Mahmood's experiences were rooted in their social interactions with other women and defined how they viewed themselves and their identities in accordance with shared beliefs. It is these relationships that appear to be one of the main drivers for female recruits within the Islamic State. The sense of sisterhood that emerged as a product of echo chambers developed on social media provided both Mahmood and Muthana with a support network that transcended physical boundaries and imposed behavioural expectations and codes of conduct that translated into real-world action. The issues that motivated Mahmood and Muthana to investigate the Islamic State may have varied, but the factors that seemingly drove them to actually join were rooted in the social networks they constructed for themselves online.

The psychological effect these relationships have on the individual is also often overlooked in the development of countermeasures.[334] The social identity that is derived from these interactions is an important component in the loyalty and trust that reinforces group cohesion and ingroup favouritism. In future, consideration of the nature of social relationships, as well as an understanding of the factors that enable such relationships to thrive, is a factor that will improve the responses to radicalisation and recruitment across social media platforms. This is particularly true as terrorist organisations develop broader recruitment strategies that call for broad responses. Overall, where social identity theory, and the relationships that drive this, is taken into consideration, it can improve the opportunities for countermeasures to succeed just as it improves the chances for terrorists to recruit.

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[334] Davies et al., "Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism," 78.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

While the successful recruitment of western women by the Islamic State seems counterintuitive upon first consideration, particularly given the extensive use of violence against women, social media posts made by Aqsa Mahmood and Hoda Muthana reveal themes which, when analysed through the lens of social identity theory, offer possible explanations for their motivations to undertake *hijrah* to Syria. Both born and raised in western nations, Mahmood and Muthana appeared to have no predisposition to radical ideologies on the basis of their upbringing. However, encounters on social media with the Islamic State, in the form of its content, supporters, and recruiters, ultimately persuaded them to adopt an extremist position and relocate to Syria for the purpose of supporting the intergenerational aspirations of the Islamic State as wives and mothers.

Social media sites are designed to optimise user experiences by allowing people to select the content they want to follow and share. This means users can surround themselves with likeminded opinions in such a way that distorts the perception of their real-world popularity. Social media was an enabler for both women, creating an echo chamber that contributed to their radicalisation and facilitated interactions with likeminded and more extreme individuals. This was the first theme identified across both case studies, and which would have likely been experienced by many other women who joined the Islamic State after engagement on social media. These echo chambers allowed Mahmood and Muthana to embroil themselves in extremist environments that refused outsider contributions and perspectives, which may have otherwise acted as moderators on their thoughts and subsequent behaviours.

In both cases, their echo chambers involved members with whom Mahmood and Muthana formed bonds modelled on familial structures: the second theme identified in this study. For Mahmood, there was a particular emphasis on the concept of sisterhood, which is important within Islam more broadly, but was manipulated as a means to understand the role of women within a radicalised context. This sisterhood acted as a support network and formed the basis of the ingroup to which Mahmood belonged. It was this sisterhood that appeared to guide Mahmood in understanding how to categorise and identify her social world, as well as setting the extremist belief system she adopted in her internalisation of the group as her own. While Muthana engaged with the *baqiyah* family, who were connected directly with the Islamic State, her interactions were primarily with other women. This family created a clear path by which status could be earned and female members could express their devotion to the group, with the top position being that of a martyr's widow. Once again, this group guided Muthana in her action of travelling to Syria as a means to actualise status and act upon values entrenched within this virtual family.

The third theme to emerge was that of a sense of religious obligation. The imposition of this obligation took place over social media via exposure to extremist content that fit the Islamic State narrative. However, not all of this content was necessarily original to the terrorist organisation, with both women posting references to religious scholarship and their personal takes on a number of issues from a religious perspective. The Islamic State used fundamental religious concepts, particularly in terms of *Jannah* and the afterlife, to influence the decisions of its followers. For both women, *hijrah* to Syria would be met with not only increased social status, but benefits in the afterlife, while inaction would lead to severe spiritual consequences. These women were raised as moderate Muslims; however, fundamental understandings of Islamic concepts were misrepresented by the Islamic State in their own interpretation so as to motivate its supporters to undertake acts in support of the group. Coupled with the echo chamber effect and influential sisterhoods both women became embroiled in, they came to view *hijrah* as a means by which they could satisfy religious duties, while attaining and maintaining ingroup membership.

These motivations can be understood within the framework of social identity, whereby their association with and participation in the Islamic State afforded them a positive social identity. This was the result of favourable comparisons with outgroup counterparts, as well as identification with the ingroup and internalisation of their values and ideals. The distortion of information both women received via their echo chambers and social connections formed the basis of this interpretation that the Islamic State were militarily and spiritually superior to adversaries – such as western nations and Muslims who did not agree with their radical interpretation of Islam – and allowed both women to view their own communities negatively while they still resided within them. While their participation could have remained digital, as was the case with many supporters who never undertook *hijrah*, the desire to elevate their social status within the group, meet group behavioural expectations and avoid the social and spiritual consequences of non-participation pushed both women to Syria, while also creating and bolstering a positive social identity.

The rise of social media, and of terrorist recruitment on social media, has meant that any person with internet access has the capacity to access radical content. For counterterrorism practitioners, this has meant that recruitment is no longer relegated to a select group of vulnerable persons identifiable by the locations they frequent and people they interact with. On paper, neither Mahmood nor Muthana appeared to have the hallmarks of prospective terrorists and may have not registered as such with counter-recruiters until they were inside the territory held by the Islamic State. As such, social identify theory was used in this thesis to not only understand the motivations of female Islamic State recruits but also to evaluate the efficacy of counter-recruitment mechanisms, many of which have been adapted for the recent uptake of social media use, with

particular consideration of the themes identified as the primary driver for Muthana and Mahmood online.

In order to counter the psychological benefits of the Islamic State recruitment model, counterterrorism practitioners would have needed to associate a negative social identity to the Islamic State to push the women to find another source from which they could derive a positive social identity. This notion was considered in terms of three approaches to countering terrorist recruitment: policy, technical and goodwill measures. All of these initiatives had both advantages and disadvantages, but when considered in terms of social identity theory, it was noted that there was the potential to exacerbate intergroup conflict by presenting the outgroup as an existential and united threat to the ingroup in attempts to limit terrorist presences on social media. This was true for Mahmood and Muthana who were deeply attached to ingroup relationships and reaped psychological rewards for their ongoing and escalating involvement with the group, rewards which were unmatched elsewhere, and would have reacted negatively to the prospect of losing these relationships and rewards.

Across all three counter-recruitment mechanisms examined, the significance of intergroup conflict became a particularly apparent basis upon which the responsiveness of prospective recruits could be understood as it affirmed the positive social identity afforded to them by the Islamic State. Behaviours observed in this study where counter-recruitment material was encountered, particularly in the case of Muthana, who was active on social media after the official emergence of the Islamic State in mid-2014, were generally a result of outgroup antagonism promoted by the ingroup. The Islamic State (the ingroup) pushed the narrative that the West (the outgroup) were an existential threat, thereby undermining any of the counter-recruitment material encountered. It was found that this solidified the resolve of the ingroup, making clear the expectations and requirements of members, even in the face of counter-recruitment material. It was also identified that certain approaches to counter-recruitment within this environment had the capacity to further entrench the view of the outgroup as an existential threat, such as suspending accounts from social media sites, which essentially rendered such efforts counterproductive.

The existence of echo chambers also hampered efforts to deliver counternarratives, meaning they would not have reached their intended audience even if these had been constructed in such a way that did not inflame intergroup conflict. The Islamic State exercised a level of control over the material circulated amongst its online supporters and would pre-empt counter-recruitment material so as to undermine its efficacy if it was encountered elsewhere online or offline. While there are mechanisms to disrupt echo chambers, and the presence of extremist material online has become a focus of several social media companies, it was identified in this study that the most successful counter-recruitment mechanism was a combined and collaborative approach,

such as goodwill gestures aimed at unifying social media companies with governments. As with other approaches, this could inflame tensions; however, with pooled resources, access to a broader range of credible messengers, and technical countermeasures, collaborative initiatives have the potential to compensate for the shortcomings of using a single approach to counter terrorist recruitment and provide a multifaceted approach to deradicalise and disrupt recruitment.

While this thesis identified three themes across two case studies, broader observations have been made about the social and psychological nature of the radicalisation and recruitment process on the basis of interactions not only between recruiters and recruits, but also amongst recruits themselves. Social media has enabled these interactions to take place transnationally with an ease that has never before been possible. These social media sites also make possible a digital space where ingroups can conform and convene. Mahmood and Muthana were sheltered from alternative perspectives in this space, and subsequently, developed an unchallenged view of the Islamic State. For both, the social and psychological benefits of their participation outweighed those found in their western lifestyle, and on this basis, they undertook *hijrah* to Syria, alongside countless other women from across the globe.

The Islamic State may have been notable for their early widespread use of social media in 2014, but they are far from the only terrorist organisation to recruit online. Extremist organisations from across the ideological spectrum have found homes on social media to radicalise and recruit individuals. While the drivers of these recruits require further research, social identity will invariably have a role to play as it did in the cases of Mahmood and Muthana. Likewise, social identity theory could be considered in tailoring collaborative approaches to disrupt further terrorist recruitment from other organisations online. What is apparent, irrespective of how the problem is approached, is that terrorist groups have established itself on social media and will present an enduring challenge for some time to come. Mahmood and Muthana may have been amongst the first examples of terrorists recruited on social media, but they are far from the last.

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