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To cite this article: Lauren R. Shapiro & Marie-Helen Maras (2019) Women's Radicalization to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42:1-2, 88-119, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513694](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513694)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513694>



Published online: 07 Nov 2018.



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Women's Radicalization to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States

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ABSTRACT

American women joining Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have increased and their roles evolved beyond auxiliary and domestic provisions, demonstrating both agency and tenacity for pursuing, recruiting, supporting, and spreading extreme Islamist ideals and terrorism. Social learning theory was applied to information gained from open-source court cases as a way of examining how thirty-one U.S. women acquired, maintained, and acted pursuant to radicalization to religious terrorism for ISIS. Internet functionalities, reasons, roles, and support types for radicalization and illegal activities for ISIS were examined using self-, dyad-, and group-classifications. A gendered interventive program based on social learning theory's extinguishing of radicalized ideology and behavior was outlined.

Radicalization is a widely studied yet contested concept that is sometimes, but mistakenly, used interchangeably with terrorism.¹ Although lacking a universal definition, radicalization is defined in this article as a gradual process whereby individuals are socialized into extreme beliefs that are articulated in nonviolent and/or violent acts.² Society is particularly concerned with radicalization to terrorism, whereby individuals adopt extreme beliefs that justify the use of violence to promote political, national, religious, or ideological goals of the terrorist organization they are inspired by or join, through coercion, intimidation, or inculcation of fear in people and their government, regardless of their own roles.³ Hoffman purported that in comparison to secular terrorist groups, those who are radicalized to religious terrorism (i.e., endorsing violent acts to achieve goals based on radical interpretations of their faith) are the most dangerous due to the lethality and violence of their actions.⁴

Historically and presently, individuals subscribing to extreme interpretations of different faiths (e.g., Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islamism) have engaged in religious terrorism. A recent report indicated that the proportion of terrorist attacks from religious extremists in the United States has increased from 9 percent in the 2000s to 53 percent in the 2010s.⁵ Attacks from 1992 to 2017 by Islamist terrorists accounted for more deaths and injuries than nationalist, right-wing, left-wing, and other/unknown terrorist groups combined (52 percent vs. 48 percent), even when the Oklahoma City

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and 11 September 2001 bombings were removed.⁶ Technology, particularly the smartphone and Internet with its various functionalities, has provided the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; a.k.a. Islamic State of Iraq and Levant [ISIL] or Islamic State [IS]) with a global platform to facilitate the radicalization process using propaganda to appeal to both men and women for support, sympathy, and recruits to further its goal of Islamic state-building.⁷ Although ISIS expects men to fulfill their roles as fighters and martyrs, women have gendered, domestic roles as wives and mothers to the next generation for the caliphate.⁸ Women's proclivity online and their agency in expanding assigned roles to include auxiliary and operational functions, combined with the public's difficulty in perceiving them as perpetrators, makes them as big, if not a bigger threat to American security.

The current study examined radicalization of women in the United States to religious terrorism; specifically, the focus was on women who engaged in operational and/or support activities for ISIS by fostering the religious and cultural ideology of a radical interpretation of Islam. Despite Western women⁹ comprising a lower proportion of migrants to ISIS (10–15 percent) than men,¹⁰ their involvement in the group has been increasing since 2015 while men's migration has been tapering off.¹¹ Moreover, women in general are reputed to be steadfast in their radical religious ideals and pursuit of their extreme beliefs, despite loss of their male counterparts from arrests and death, by financing and facilitating operations; influencing and advancing the group's cause; and using propaganda to recruit and educate new members, particularly their own children.¹² The main goal of this article was to employ social learning theory as a framework by which to examine how women in the United States acquire, maintain, and act pursuant to radicalization to religious terrorism for ISIS.¹³

Radicalization: Social learning theory and Internet functionalities

The trajectory toward radicalization to religious terrorism differs for each person, although there are common underlying “ideological, psychological, and community-based factors” contributing to one's susceptibility to ISIS propaganda.¹⁴ According to Akins and Winfree, “All crime is learned, a claim that includes illegal acts committed by terrorists, no matter the underlying ideology, religious (or pseudo-religious) underpinnings, or location in the world.”¹⁵ Radicalization to religious terrorism, as defined in this study, includes both cognitive and behavioral components that correspond to the legal criminal requirements of *mens rea* (intention) and *actus rea* (action) for terrorism. This concept of radicalization is consistent with the notion that social processes contribute to changes in the acceptance of ideology and illegal behavior of religious terrorism.¹⁶ Akers's social learning theory (SLT)¹⁷ was employed in this study as a means of understanding the social-cognitive mechanisms underlying U.S. women's radicalization to religious terrorism, and illicit engagement in terrorism and terrorist-related activities for ISIS.¹⁸ Unlike stage or step theories explaining radicalization,¹⁹ the four factors in SLT contributing to the acquisition and maintenance of societal-deemed “deviant” behaviors are ongoing processes.²⁰ As such, this approach provides insight into how the extremist ideologies and associated behaviors can be extinguished through deradicalization.²¹

A central tenet of SLT, *differential association*, holds that social interactions and identification with the primary groups' members structure the setting within which beliefs and behaviors occur. People learn ideas and activities, regardless if these are extremist or non-extremist in nature, as a product of their social interactions.²² Applying this component of SLT to radicalization to religious terrorism, the social community is key to constructing an environment, whether physical or online, conducive to this process. Women are active agents in their own radicalization, regardless of whether these extremist beliefs are linked subsequently with violent or nonviolent actions.²³ ISIS takes advantage of the fact that many of the Muslim converts (born and raised in another or no religion) and reverts (born Muslim, striving to reengage) exposed to its propaganda have little knowledge of and/or limited experience with mainstream Islam.²⁴ Women who are interested or curious about Islam may seek out this information from others in their communities.²⁵ However, many of the opportunities for public face-to-face real-world locations that Western men may have to congregate, such as at the mosques and Islamic bookstores, are not available to them.²⁶ According to Pearson, Western women are often banned physically and culturally to "these highly gendered spaces."²⁷ Even when mosques do not exclude women, they are prevented from discussing religion with the men due to physical segregation, and are given only limited access to Islamic literature.²⁸

In contrast, the Internet seems to offer women an inclusive virtual social environment for religious exploration in an always-accessible format that allows rapid development of differential association for the users.²⁹ As specified in SLT, the rate of radicalization to religious terrorism fluctuates with the intensity, frequency, and endurance of the interactions between the recruit and those who possess and share pro-ISIS attitudes and values.³⁰ The advantage for ISIS is that it has whole networks of supporting enablers for their operation whose sole purpose is to communicate via websites, publications, blogs, apps (e.g., Fir al-Bashaer) and other social media, particularly Facebook, which has over two billion monthly users³¹ and Twitter, which has over 69 million monthly users.³² Using a grassroots approach through decentralized peer-to-peer radicalization, recruiters are able to encourage and advise, organize hashtag campaigns, and enlist followers to retweet so ISIS messages trend on Twitter.³³ In this way, ISIS creates group dynamics online that mimic the sharing and caring shown in real social milieu, thereby allowing women to enjoy a sisterhood of friendship and support within a gendered community.³⁴ Women with only a rudimentary understanding of Islam who use the Internet to learn more information are the most vulnerable to extremist ideology, mainly because they lack the knowledge and skills needed to evaluate the messages critically.³⁵ To ensure radicalization, ISIS discourages recruits from asking outsiders about Islam, thereby preventing them from being introduced to potentially conflicting information.³⁶

The online social network³⁷ provides ISIS with an inexpensive means for finding female sympathizers, connecting with them frequently over long periods of time to discuss, educate, and recruit them to radicalized Islam.³⁸ ISIS was able to wage electronic *jihad*³⁹ because by 2013, most Americans (91 percent) owned cell phones⁴⁰ and by 2015, a large subsection of young adults used their phones to access social media (86 percent) and the Internet (88 percent), especially YouTube (82 percent) and Facebook (77 percent).⁴¹ ISIS also increased recruitment success by capitalizing on American

adolescents' desire to interact online daily with their friends (59 percent) and their penchant for making new friends online (60 percent), who they sometimes even met subsequently in person (20 percent).⁴² In particular, adolescent girls use social media to meet new friends, most commonly on Instagram and Facebook (78 percent), and text messaging is their preferred means of daily communication with friends (62 percent).

A second component of SLT involves adopting *neutralizing definitions* toward extreme beliefs condoning violence, despite these acts being illegal.⁴³ SLT identifies communication and socialization with members of the extremist group as essential to the process of transformative learning during radicalization of violent behaviors and the extremist attitudes, values, and ideology supporting these behaviors.⁴⁴ Social affiliation facilitates the women's acceptance of violence against an enemy, which ISIS dehumanizes by applying the degrading terms of infidels or apostates, excommunicating them, and killing them.⁴⁵ The women are able to minimize the negative emotions society ascribes to terrorist acts and rationalize that although terrorism in general is immoral according to societal rules and laws, committing these acts are justifiable in some circumstances, such as religious wars. The women are also swayed by the positive messages associated with ISIS, such as happy families enjoying life in the caliphate that are posted on Facebook and Twitter⁴⁶ and Mujatweets, which are brief videos posted on YouTube that depict ISIS as a generous organization and positive presence in its territories.⁴⁷

The Internet aids in women's search for peers with whom to interact and explore these extreme beliefs and it serves as "the decade's radical mosque."⁴⁸ Internet technology in America makes ISIS's centralized goals of propaganda marketing; fund-raising for travel, training, and operations through fraud; and opportunities for planning, organizing, and obtaining weapons and other materials, easily accessible.⁴⁹ ISIS uses graphic violent images to distort reality and gain attention, notoriety, and sympathy for their cause.⁵⁰ To ensure their propaganda will be found online by anyone curious, interested, or predisposed, multiple languages are used in ISIS electronic books and magazines, chat rooms, blogs, videos (YouTube, LiveVideo, PalTalk), Twitter, Facebook, and other social media accounts.⁵¹ Adolescents are comfortable communicating and strengthening their relationships with friends through various online modes: video chat (59 percent) and texting through instant messaging (79 percent), social media (72 percent), e-mail (64 percent), and messaging apps, like What's App (42 percent). Similarly, half of the young adults who own smart phones access the Internet and use apps, including What's App (36 percent) and Snapchat (41 percent).⁵²

ISIS recruiters send out tweets, post on Facebook, and visit chat rooms and cyber cafés to interact with potential adherents and prospective terrorists.⁵³ Through discussions with ISIS sympathizers and supporters, the women intensify their anger toward "nonbelievers" who allegedly suppress them; justify the use of violent terrorist acts, such as murder; and mobilize resources to arrange, direct, and subsequently conduct illicit activities.⁵⁴ The women's attitudes, values, and beliefs are strongly influenced by group membership and dynamics that forces them to subordinate their own ideas for that of the group through the process of groupthink.⁵⁵ The collective perspective expressed in the online ISIS community is by default "more extreme than that of any individual alone" and "members conform to majority views."⁵⁶ Interest and sympathy with the

group, particularly by girls and young women in Muslim diaspora communities who adhere to religious traditions and feel alienated from their Western peers, may turn their thoughts into actions.⁵⁷ For example, cognitive changes in ideology are externalized through corresponding changes in the women's clothing, such as wearing the *burqa* and *niqab*, and behaviors, including distancing themselves from others, particularly friends or family who reject their new extreme beliefs in favor of those who accept them.⁵⁸

Differential reinforcement (also known as operant conditioning), the third factor in SLT, refers to the process whereby the desired extremist beliefs and behaviors are acquired through a system of past and anticipatory reinforcers by internal or external sources in the environment.⁵⁹ The likelihood that the women will voice neutralizing beliefs and engage in terrorism and terrorist-related activities is modulated by the frequency and type of reinforcer. An immediate and continuous reinforcement schedule (i.e., each and every time the act occurs) is used to facilitate the acquisition of new, desirable behaviors and is typically followed by variable ratio reinforcement, such as applying reinforcers after a set number of times desired behavior occurs, to maintain the newly acquired behaviors. During acquisition and maintenance phases, a person increases the number of desired behaviors exhibited when positive consequences or rewards are applied or unpleasant consequences are removed and decreases undesirable behaviors when unpleasant consequences or punishments are applied.⁶⁰ Online ISIS members, sympathizers, and supporters control recruits through continuous application of social and physical reinforcers that rapidly normalize extremist actions and thoughts.⁶¹ Positive reinforcement can be measured on social media platforms by the number of likes, retweets, friends requests, followers, and other interactions that posts receive.⁶² Negative reinforcement occurs when a women who has been shunned by the community is reintegrated into the group. Likewise, punishment on social media include posting hateful, shaming, and degrading comments on a message or picture that is inconsistent with ISIS propaganda. It could also consist of tweeting or posting names or details about women who received lashings by the al-Khanssaa Brigade for their failure to comply with rules under *Sharia* Law, such as transgressions involving Western modesty and fashion notions in public.⁶³

The last factor in SLT involves learning through *imitation of modeled behaviors* that are reinforced, often with minimal comprehension of how the behaviors fit within the group's grand scheme.⁶⁴ The women will be more likely to emulate opinions and behaviors by a model who is rewarded than punished, a type of learning called *vicarious reinforcement*.⁶⁵ According to SLT, women's exposure to ISIS models who espouse terrorist beliefs and engage in terrorism and terrorist-related behaviors and their perception of these models as desirable and similar to them are key to their decision to imitate them.⁶⁶ Some women have models available in their physical environment, but there is an abundance of online models on various social platforms and apps accessible from computers, tablets, and cellphones. Many of the ISIS recruiters boast on various social media platforms about successful attacks on Westerners, urging the men to continue the fight and shaming those who have not yet joined.⁶⁷ The most typical ways women could imitate other women would be by physically traveling to the caliphate, which is highly praised, or by retweeting a message or image online supporting ISIS.⁶⁸

Women's attraction to ISIS

The appeal of ISIS to newly converted and reverted Islamic girls and women from Western countries has fascinated researchers, Western society, and the media. Online propaganda espoused by ISIS through “social media, rap videos, counter culture magazines” (*Dabiq*) have achieved “hip and trendy” status particularly among the youth in Europe and North America,⁶⁹ encouraged discussion of extreme Islamic ideology in virtual communities,⁷⁰ and promised female recruits “empowerment, deliverance, participation, and piety.”⁷¹ ISIS is adept at using the Internet as a facilitator and catalyst for radicalization of women (and men) in the United States and abroad,⁷² promising a sense of belonging and a utopian life to those who travel to Syria to join them.⁷³ ISIS started recruiting women out of necessity rather than a desire to be inclusive,⁷⁴ specifically to perform state-building roles for the caliphate—mainly domestic and support (e.g., financial, training, propaganda)—to legitimize the terrorist group and their creation of an “Islamic State” within ISIS-controlled territories.⁷⁵ Evidence of ISIS’s success includes their ability to overtake major cities in Syria/Iraq from the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, to establish their caliphate in 2014, to govern the current residents and newly arrived foreign recruits, to maintain control of the region until the end of 2017, and, most remarkably, to continue recruiting new members despite the loss of the caliphate and high death rate of its residents during airstrikes.⁷⁶

Existing literature shows that women’s reasons for joining terrorist groups, supporting terrorism, and engaging in terrorism inspired by a group’s ideology vary⁷⁷ and interestingly, often differ from the terrorist group’s reason for recruiting them.⁷⁸ Men and women may join ISIS and/or otherwise support them for similar reasons, including adventure, sympathy, dedication to the terrorists’ cause, escape from religious harassment, socioeconomic advancement, mental health or personal problems, ethno-national goals, and belief that it is their fundamental duty to build the Islamic state.⁷⁹ Applying a gendered approach to understanding women’s agency in joining ISIS, Sjoberg and Gentry indicated that women compared daily social and political struggles in their lives versus what ISIS offered them.⁸⁰ For example, Kneip found the main reason for women migrating to join ISIS was “female emancipation”; that is, they sought independence from parental control and freedom from Western oppression in the forms of deciding to travel and choose a mate, gaining honor and respect from the ISIS community, and obtaining power over others.⁸¹ Although women may travel with male migrants or as a family to join ISIS, those who travel as single women (sometimes in pairs or groups, against wishes of or unbeknown to family) were classified by Hoyle, Bradford, and Fennett as having three motives: *grievances* (e.g., perceived mistreatment of Muslims), *solutions* (i.e., state-building, sense of belonging, identity), and *personal* (e.g., revenge, redemption, relationships, respect).⁸² Women also seek equality with men⁸³ by emerging as agents of fundamentalist Islam and demonstrating their commitment to ISIS to the same degree as men.⁸⁴

Push/pull factors have been suggested by researchers to explain what predisposes certain individuals to be receptive to radicalization of extremist beliefs and subsequently to propel them toward engaging in terrorism or terrorism-related acts.⁸⁵ *Push* factors for radicalization may include: sociopolitical alienation; religious identity; and anger, hostility, and/or frustration over perceived discrimination, socioeconomic inequality, and

foreign policy.⁸⁶ Political, religious, and/or ideological goals to which terrorists subscribe are often antecedents to their behavior.⁸⁷ *Pull* factors explain why individuals are vulnerable to radicalization and attracted to the extremist ideology.⁸⁸ Saltman and Smith identified the *push factors* for Western women who joined ISIS as social and/or cultural isolation, perception that the Muslim community was being persecuted, and resentment over the lack of action by the international community concerning this persecution.⁸⁹ They also identified strategic and tactical *pull factors* as the building of an “Islamic utopia,” the availability of roles in the “building” of the Islamic state or “Caliphate Brand,” romanticizing life in the Islamic state, pursuit of sense of belonging and identity, and desire to fulfill perceived religious duty.⁹⁰

Women’s roles and types of support for ISIS

Researchers examining the roles women play in religious terrorist organizations have generated different typologies, some of which are dependent upon the women’s location in Western- versus Muslim-governed areas. Griset and Mehan described four roles that represent increasing involvement within the group: *sympathizers*, who serve men’s financial and domestic needs; *spies*, who provide strategic support; *warriors*, who engage in operations to impose violence; and *dominant forces*, who inspire, plan, and guide the group.⁹¹ Using a similar framework, Cragin and Daly reported that women’s roles in terrorist groups included *logisticians* (participating in basic and major terrorist operations), *recruiters*, *suicide bombers*, *operational leaders and fighters*, and *political vanguards* who influence decision making within the terrorist group.⁹² Dissatisfied with the lack of an empirical foundation in these aforementioned typologies, Vogel, Porter, and Keibell evaluated women’s roles in political and revolutionary conflict groups using a thematic framework: *active* (which included attempting and engaging in terrorist attacks and leadership activities); *caring* (including traditional female roles; e.g., mothers and wives); *support* (covering logistics); and *ideological* (i.e., activities that promote the terrorist group’s ideology).⁹³

Alexander classified the predominant contributions of U.S. women in ISIS as: *plotters*, who create, attempt and/or execute terrorist attacks; *supporters*, who obtain material support, spread propaganda, and/or otherwise promote terrorists’ agenda; and *travelers*, who travel to the terrorists’ locations (Islamic territories under *Sharia* law or *hijrah*) to engage in supportive or operational activities⁹⁴ and thus fulfill their religious duty.⁹⁵ Applying their own typology to Western women who had migrated to ISIS-controlled territory, Saltman and Frenett grouped roles women played into *state-builders*, including domestic, educational, and medical roles; *recruiters*, actively promoting propaganda, educating about Islam, and enticing recruits; and *potential militants*.⁹⁶ Roles by women in ISIS in Spencer’s typology included: *domestic* (mother and wife); *operational* (Al-Khansaa brigade and online recruiter); and *state building* (skilled worker, student).⁹⁷ Based on her sample of seventy-two women, she found the roles they performed were mainly operational, particularly recruiter (43 percent), and domestic (30 percent).

The roles women play contribute to the type of support that they provide to their terrorist organization. General information regarding female terrorists operating outside the United States has revealed a variety of patterns of involvement and levels of

agency,⁹⁸ which may likely also be true for those inside the United States.⁹⁹ Women have joined various existing terrorist groups (Shining Path, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia], Ku Klux Klan, Animal Liberation Front, Earth Liberation Front, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, to name a few), serving in ideological (e.g., exchanging information, recruitment) and instrumental support roles (e.g., doing administrative tasks, such as bookkeeping, and fund-raising).¹⁰⁰ In some cases women, albeit to a lesser extent, have contributed operational support through leadership (e.g., Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades) or terrorist execution, such as suicide bombers (e.g., Tamil Tigers), sometimes even through creation of their own groups (e.g., Black Widows).¹⁰¹

Initially, women who joined ISIS were blocked from providing *operational* support, such as fighting except in exceptional circumstances as occurred in Libya in 2016;¹⁰² but their roles have evolved, at least within ISIS-controlled territory as part of the all-female al-Khansaa Brigade they have been allowed to gather intelligence, enforce women's compliance with Islamic morality, and search other women at checkpoints.¹⁰³ However, regardless of location, women predominantly render *instrumental* or tangible support that serves the objectives of ISIS, including inciting violence and mobilizing sympathizers and supporters to join the group and/or take action, such as sending money and guns.¹⁰⁴ Involuntary instrumental support as sexual slaves for ISIS fighters,¹⁰⁵ sanctioned by the religious leaders of the group,¹⁰⁶ is provided by kidnapped children and adult women considered unbelievers or "infidels."¹⁰⁷ Women also engage in *social-cognitive* support by promoting and disseminating ISIS propaganda, shaming men for not being actively involved, and praising men who provided operational and instrumental support.¹⁰⁸

The usefulness of the aforementioned typologies for roles in an empirical examination of Western women who have joined ISIS is limited for three reasons. First, some of the roles described are only relevant to those living in the caliphate, such as state-builder, operational leader, or suicide bomber. Second, different typologies inconsistently grouped the same role with different activities (e.g., state-builders referred to domestic activities in one typology but referred to learning skills in another). Third, the typologies do not provide an adequate breakdown of the women's roles within ISIS into unique or mutually exclusive categories as distinct from the types of support the women provide. For example, the role of sympathizer was associated with instrumental support, that of financing and cooking activities, or the roles of raising funds and distributing propaganda were both categorized as material support. This is particularly problematic because it does not adequately differentiate the roles and corresponding activities performed by the women, limiting its applicability.¹⁰⁹

Current investigation

The aim of the current investigation was to examine radicalization of U.S. women to religious terrorism for ISIS through the lens of SLT. The study made use of the government investigations of ISIS supporters in the United States by examining the court documents submitted into evidence during prosecution, which are available through open-source websites. The data were coded for: social milieu during the radicalization process as alone or with others; the reasons why women in the United States committed or attempted to commit terrorist acts and other terrorism-related activities for ISIS; the

Table 1. Demographics for U.S. sample of thirty-one women accused of terrorist crimes for ISIS.

Variable	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>
Age		Religion	
Under 21	9	Islam-born	21
21–30	7	Islam-convert	10
31–40	8		
41–55	7	Birthplace	
Residential location		United States	15
Northeast	5	Somalia	7
Midwest	15	Bosnia	3
South	8	Pakistan	1
West	3	Turkey	1
Marital/family status		Afghanistan	1
Single/no children	11	Bangladesh	1
Single/children	4	Sudan	1
Relationship/no children	1	Unknown	1
Relationship/children	2	Education level*	
Married/no children	3	Less than high school	5
Married/children	10	GED/high school	3
		College/graduate	9
		Unknown	14

Note. *Less than high school referred to girls who were homeschooled or currently in high school. College/graduate referred to women who had some college and those with college and graduate degrees.

types of roles women had within ISIS; the types of support these women provided to ISIS; and the Internet functionalities used by these women to gain and further their radicalized beliefs and actions. Ultimately, the study sought to fill in existing gaps in the empirical research on understanding female supporters of ISIS in the United States and to determine whether SLT could be used both as a vehicle to understand radicalization and a mechanism for deradicalization of extremist beliefs and acts.

Consistent with the goal of the study, hypotheses corresponding to the four tenets of SLT were tested. Hypothesis 1 proposed that ISIS created a social community through a mixture of online and offline members to promote their extremist beliefs and recruit the U.S. women to their cause. Hypothesis 2 proposed that ISIS encouraged the recruited women to develop neutralizing definitions through exposure to violence and to a narrative supporting the use of violence as justifiable for the cause through online and offline propaganda. Hypothesis 3 proposed that ISIS subjected recruited women to a system of continuously reinforced values and beliefs in real-life and online that rewarded them for their acts of support/compliance and punished them for failures to the mission. Hypothesis 4 proposed that ISIS provided female models performing roles and espousing extremist ideology, rewarding them both online and in real-life, to encourage imitation of the observed ideas and behaviors by the recruited women.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of thirty-one women ($M = 31$ years, $SD = 11.12$ years).¹¹⁰ All cases that met the following criteria were included: (1) female, (2) labeled as “homegrown,” defined as born, raised, and/or legally living in the United States, including those with naturalized citizen and permanent resident status, and (3) evidence supported that they

conspired to, attempted to, or committed one or more acts from 2009 to 2017 that were inspired by, assisted in furthering the ideology or goals of, or in the name of al-Shabaab (and developed into support for ISIS) and ISIS terrorists recognized by the U.S. government as terrorism-related.¹¹¹

Demographics of age, residential region, marital and family status, religion, birthplace, and educational level for these women are shown in Table 1.¹¹² Nine of the thirty-one women identified were under 21 years of age. The government did not press formal charges against the four adolescent minors under age 18 years (13 percent of the sample) for attempting to travel to ISIS territory. The juveniles, only one of whom was born in the United States—the other three were not (two in Somalia, one in Sudan)—were Muslims living with their parents in the Midwestern region of the United States and attending high school. Five of the late adolescent girls (16 percent of the sample) ages 18 to 20 years old were formally charged; two had cases against them in absentia, two plead guilty and received prison terms, and one received community service and probation for her cooperation in a related case. All of them were practicing Muslims (two through conversion), but only three were born in the United States. The other two were born in Somalia. Three of them earned high school degrees and two had some college, and although two of the five were in relationships, only one had children.

The remainder of the sample included seven young adults ages 21 to 30 (23 percent of the sample) and fifteen middle-aged adults (48 percent of the sample) ages 31 to 55 years (eight were in their thirties, five were in their forties, and two were in their fifties). Of the seven young women, one was dead, one has a case in absentia, three plead guilty, and two are awaiting indictment. Four of the young women were born in the United States (57 percent), all were practicing Muslims (three through conversion), many were living in the Midwest region (43 percent; Southern, 29 percent; Western, 14 percent; Northeastern, 14 percent) of the United States, and all were married with children. One of the middle-aged adult women was dead, five plead or were found guilty, and eight plead not guilty and/or had cases pending, and one was given probation. Many of the middle-aged adult women lived in the Midwestern region (40 percent; Southern, 27 percent; Western, 20 percent; Northeastern, 13 percent) of the United States and had been born in a foreign country (60 percent, mainly Somalia and Bosnia), but all were practicing Muslims (five converts). Five of the eight married women (53 percent) and four of the seven single women had children (57 percent). The data were predominantly incomplete regarding the highest education of these women.

Procedure and coding

The data consisted of court documents, official press releases, and reports available on open-access websites for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Counter Extremism Project, George Washington University Program on Extremism, and the Investigative Project on Terrorism.¹¹³ The benefits of using all four databases was to ensure that all possible cases could be included; many of the women were listed on multiple sites, allowing for verification of information and ensuring it would be as complete as possible. Court documents consisted of criminal complaints, courtroom minutes, affidavits, exhibits detention hearing transcripts, continuing trial order and transcripts, indictment,

motions, criminal discovery, general allegations, plea agreements, and detention orders. These documents provided demographic data (age, ethnicity, current location, birthplace), information about the motives, and actions of the women (e.g., social media use, travel, fund-raising).¹¹⁴ Two coders reviewed the data for demographics of each woman and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

Radicalization process classification. To understand the radicalization process and subsequent social influences that contributed to women's acts in support of terrorism, the sample was grouped into one of three classifications—self, dyad, or group. The *self*-class described women who started and stayed alone during the radicalization process and activity. The *dyad*-class described women who either started alone and joined one other person or started with one other person and stayed with him/her during the radicalization process and activity. The *group*-class described the women who started as dyad and joined a group or started with a group and continued with it during the radicalization process and activity.

Socialization and support network. Women's perceived support from family and friends in their social worlds could contribute to the promotion or devaluation of extremist ISIS ideas and actions. Information in the data regarding whether family members (parents, siblings, spouse/partner, children, extended members) and/or friends of the women, both online and offline, *approved* of ISIS and/or encouraged her *involvement*, perhaps because they were also involved in ISIS activities or sympathized with the group. In addition, the use of the Internet to begin the radicalization process and its use thereafter in activities was also examined.

Internet functionality. The legal documents were examined for specific references to social media use, general Internet use, or no use specified for online communication used by the women during the radicalization and activity process. Theoretically, the Internet serves the dual purpose of being a mechanism to aid in the radicalization process and to abet the recruit in performing activities in service of the cause. Two methods were identified for the interactions between recruits and other sympathizers and/or those in the terrorist group. *Long-lasting/permanent messages* were made using Facebook, e-mail, Messenger, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, blogs, chat rooms, and Internet/text that was typically admitted as physical evidence in the case. *Temporary/encrypted messages* were made using Instagram, What's App Messenger, Kik, Surespot, and Skype, but due to their nature, would only be included as part of testimonial evidence.

Reasons for radicalization. The data were examined for six possible reasons for the women's radicalization, based on previous research findings.¹¹⁵ Radicalization may occur because the woman may *identify* with the terrorist/group's religious, political, or extremist ideas. Another reason for radicalization stems from the woman's *need for belonging or to fill a void*. A woman's desire to *correct a real or perceived injustice* and/or *to get revenge* in the United States or abroad could also lead to radicalization. Radicalization may also result when the woman *sympathizes* with the group's situation and believes in its causes. Women may also radicalize as part of being in a *relationship* or desiring a relationship with a terrorist or sympathizer. Finally, a woman can become radicalized because she is *vulnerable* due to being mentally ill, cognitively challenged, young and impressionable, brainwashed, or bullied. The coding did not require that only one reason be identified and as such every reason indicated in the documents was identified.

Roles. A typology categorizing six possible roles that the women fulfilled was created and was used to examine the data. A *planner* attempted to provide or provided tactical strategies for at least one or more terrorist attacks or training. A *financial provider/adviser* attempted to provide or provided funds, connected the group to funding agents, or advised the group on how to get funding for one or more terrorist attacks or training. A *supplier* attempted to provide or provided supplies, (e.g., food, weapons) for training and/or at least one or more terrorist attacks. A *terrorist enactor* attempted or succeeded in carrying out at least one or more terrorist acts against a person/people in the United States and/or abroad.¹¹⁶ A *spouse/companion and breeder* attempted to travel or traveled to ISIS territories/occupied land to be a spouse/companion for the male terrorist and to provide children for the caliphate. An *educator* promoted the cause by attempting to indoctrinate or gain support from new members, including their family, friends, and children, into the group. In recognition that the roles women held could be concurrent, all roles were identified.

Types of support. The data were examined for three types of support that the women could provide. *Instrumental support* was signified when the woman attempted to provide or provided tangible items and/or services (e.g., self, materials, funds, fighters) to ISIS, followers, or sympathizers. *Social cognitive support* was signified when the woman attempted to engage or engaged in dialogue with the group members, followers, or sympathizers to exchange knowledge and ideas, advice, feedback, and access to information. *Operational support* was signified when the woman attempted to organize and execute or executed an attack in furtherance of the terrorist goals. As the women could engage in multiple types of support types, all indicated were identified.

Reliability in the coding for features within each typology described above met the minimum 90 percent agreement during training. Scoring was completed by two coders and a master coder scored 20 percent of each coder's work. Percent agreement (number of agreements divided by the number of agreements and disagreement) between each coder and the master coder averaged 94 percent, ranging from 83 percent to 100 percent. Any discrepancies between coders were discussed and resolved.

Results

The purpose of the study was to use SLT as a framework for understanding the radicalization process of women in the United States to the religious terrorism of ISIS. The radicalization process classification for self, dyad, and group was used to examine each typology.

Socialization and support network

Many of the women began radicalization with at least one other person (65 percent), indicated that friends or family approved and were involved (90 percent), and used the Internet to begin (77 percent) and throughout (68 percent) their radicalization process. The radicalization process classification for the sample resulted in nine women being assigned to the *self*-class, ten to the *dyad*-class, and twelve to the *group*-class. Table 2 displays the socialization and support systems and Internet use by radicalization process

Table 2. Mean percentage of approval, involvement, and Internet use during radicalization by radicalization process class.

	Self	Dyad	Group
Approval			
Family	00	60	100
Friends	89	60	75
Involvement			
Family	00	60	83
Friends	100	70	75
Internet			
Start	78	100	58
Continued	78	90	83

classification. The data reflected different patterns of approval and support for the women's extreme beliefs and involvement with ISIS. One trend was strong approval and support given online by friends to the women in the self-class and offline by family and, to a lesser extent, friends to women in the group-class. The other pattern was moderate approval and support given by family and friends both offline and online to the women in the dyad-class. ISIS involvement for half of the dyad-class women began offline with their partners (50 percent), whereas the rest began with online partners they found (40 percent) or who found them (10 percent).

Internet functionality

The data were examined to determine the women's use of long-lasting/permanent messages and temporary/encrypted messages, both overall and by their radicalization process class. Figure 1 shows the mean percentage of women who used the eight types of long-lasting/permanent messages. The top three most commonly used were general Internet and texting (48 percent), Facebook (42 percent), and Twitter (35 percent). In contrast, the mean percentage of women using temporary/encrypted messages according to the official documents records was minimal (e.g., 13 percent used Skype, 7 percent used What's App), but this was likely not an accurate reflection of actual usage. The court documents rarely reported use of the temporary/encrypted messages in the women's testimony, barring some mentions of Skype or What's App. For 10 percent of the women, there was no information available for either long-lasting or temporary messages.

Different pattern use of long-lasting/permanent messages was indicated for women in the three radicalization classes. The self-class women used the widest variety of messaging systems, particularly Facebook (55 percent), Twitter (44 percent), e-mail (44 percent), and general Internet/texting (44 percent). The dyad-class women relied predominantly on two messaging systems—Facebook (60 percent) and general Internet/texting (70 percent), whereas the group-class women used mainly general Internet/texting (50 percent), and to a lesser extent, YouTube (33 percent) and chat rooms (33 percent).

Reasons for radicalization

Table 3 displays information regarding the reasons women were radicalized by the type of radicalization process class. Not surprisingly, relationship was the primary reason for

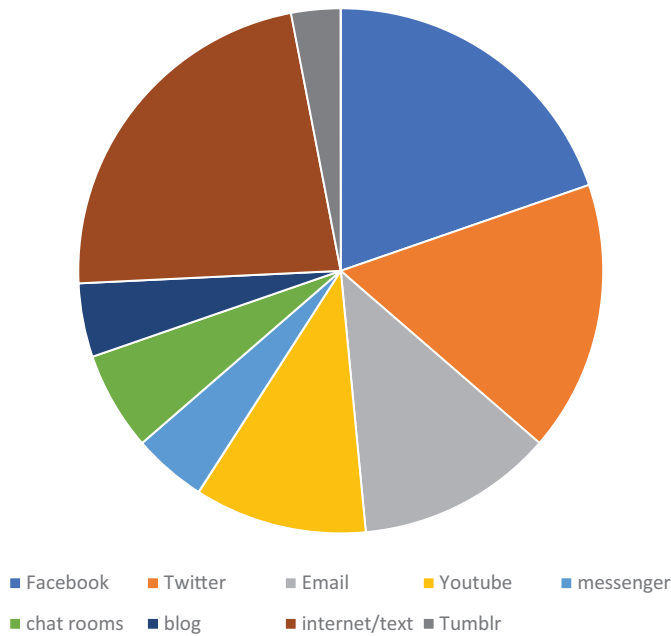


Figure 1. Mean percentage of women using nine types of long-lasting/permanent messages.

Table 3. Mean percentage of reasons by radicalization process class.

Reasons	Self	Dyad	Group	Mean
Identify	78	40	42	51
Need to belong	22	00	00	06
Correct injustice	00	10	00	03
Sympathize	67	50	33	48
Relationship	44	80	100	74
Vulnerable	33	10	33	26

dyad-class women and group-class women, whereas sympathy and identification were most often mentioned for self-class women. The number of reasons indicated in the data varied by radicalization process class. Women in the group-class had three (42 percent) or four (33 percent) reasons, whereas women in the self-class had two (44 percent) or three (33 percent) reasons and those in the dyad-class mainly had one reason (50 percent).

Roles

Table 4 displays information regarding the roles women played for ISIS by the type of radicalization process class. The predominant roles played by women in the self-class were traveler and educator. The women in the group-class were most likely to engage in the traveler role, whereas the middle-aged women served as financial providers. Women in the dyad-class were equally likely to be planners, terrorist enactors, and travelers. Although many women were travelers (48 percent) for ISIS, the number of roles they performed differed by radicalization class. Women radicalized in the dyad-class (60 percent) or group-class (75 percent) performed one role, whereas those radicalized in the self-class were equally likely to have one, two, or three roles.

Table 4. Mean percentage of roles by radicalization process class.

Roles	Self	Dyad	Group	Mean
Planner	22	40	00	19
Financial provider	22	20	50	29
Supplier	22	20	25	23
Terrorist enactor	22	40	00	19
Traveler	67	40	50	52
Educator	56	00	25	19

Table 5. Mean percentage of support type by radicalization process class.

Support type	Self	Dyad	Group	Mean
Instrumental	78	70	100	83
Social-cognitive	67	50	67	58
Operational	22	40	00	19

Types of support

Table 5 displays information regarding the types of support women played for ISIS by thetype of radicalization process class. The women in all three classes provided instrumental and social-cognitive, where operational support was only provided by the women in the self- and dyad-classes. The women in the group-class were more likely to provide two support types than one (67 percent vs. 33 percent), whereas women in the self- and dyad-classes was almost equally likely to provide one (56 percent) or two support types (44 percent).

Discussion

The rise in the number of Western women being radicalized to Islamist terrorism across the United States and worldwide is alarming to the public, but more importantly, it is a security issue as many of the recruits remain unidentified.¹¹⁷ Religious terrorists are particularly dangerous as they seek to destroy, rather than correct, the existing system from which they feel alienated.¹¹⁸ ISIS embraces the use of deadly force in their Holy War against a wide range of enemies of Allah.¹¹⁹ Although the radicalization process to religious terrorism involves a combination of offline and online interactions,¹²⁰ Pearson warns that women who are culturally restricted to learn about Islam from public spaces will seek this information on the Internet.¹²¹ The flexibility and constant accessibility of the Internet, through computers and related technologies, has enabled ISIS recruiters to succeed in radicalizing Western women, near and far, as it provides opportunities for them to communicate relatively undetected and without filters.¹²² The Internet has become ISIS's most important personal tool for recruiting women, communicating with sympathizers and group members, and spreading propaganda to elicit funds, induce fearmongering, and encourage followers to fulfill the group's needs.¹²³

Akers's SLT was applied to thirty-one cases of U.S. women radicalized to ISIS as a means of understanding both their adoption of ideology of extremist Islam beliefs during radicalization and subsequent acts supporting this terrorist organization. The women, as "small cells, groups of friends or even individuals," interacted with ISIS "via social media and personal contacts."¹²⁴ To capture this aspect in radicalization that subsequently led them to join and provide support for the larger social network of ISIS

supporters, sympathizers, and members, the women were classified as self, dyad, or group and their classification was used for the analyses of their Internet functionalities, reasons, roles, and support.

Social network is encompassed under *differential association* in SLT and is one of the key elements for the women's initial and continued connection to the group and desire to learn about their extremist ideology during the radicalization process.¹²⁵ Consistent with H1, the results indicated that ISIS created a social community through a mixture of online and offline members, supporters, and sympathizers who promoted their extremist beliefs and recruited these women to their cause. Relationships were the predominant gendered reason indicated for radicalizing the women, especially for in the dyad- and group-classes and probably were the "glue" keeping them together.¹²⁶ The women in the dyad-class were primarily radicalized with or by spouses (60 percent), offline friends (20 percent), and online men offering them marriage (20 percent), but their ideological development was likely supplemented through online connections given their high use of the Internet. In contrast, every woman in the group-class had undergone radicalization with offline friends (33 percent), family (25 percent), or both friends and family (42 percent).

The development and maintenance of violent extremist beliefs that led the women to engage in supportive ISIS acts were facilitated through their interactions with a community of similarly minded people, many of whom they knew in the real world.¹²⁷ This notion was evident for the women in the dyad- and group-classes, all of whom had either family or offline friends and half had both family and friends who sympathized and were themselves involved with ISIS. One woman from the dyad-class was likely radicalized at the Pakistan campus of Al Huda Institute, the sister school to the one in Mississauga where four unnamed Canadians ages 16 to early 20s attended prior to traveling to ISIS-held territories. Another example was a convert from this group, who was likely radicalized by her friend with extremist ideology resulted in his creation of the Al Qaeda magazine, *Inspire*; she, in turn, radicalized her roommate, a revert who was also included in this group.

The gendered factors for women in the self-class for connecting to the ISIS social network were identity (33 percent), sympathizing with perceived injustices linked to exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination (22 percent), or both (44 percent).¹²⁸ Obvious signs of radicalization shown by the women were consistent with someone forging a new identity through religious exploration, including adoption of pious clothing, religious conversion, and attempts to convert family members, change in friends, rejecting Westernized un-Islamic hobbies, online searches for information and postings on social media, and seeking out Islamic public spaces.¹²⁹ For example, two of the women in the self-class withdrew from their hometown mosques that did not support *Salafi-jihadist* movement espoused by ISIS and transferred to ones that did. Six of the women in the self-class were born in the United States, but converted to Islam in their search for identity. Unlike the other two groups, none of these women had family approval or sympathy for ISIS or their involvement. They rejected their family and offline friends, who disapproved of their extremist beliefs in favor of an online support system of friends and suitors who sympathized (56 percent) or were themselves involved (67 percent) with ISIS.¹³⁰ Sympathy was also motivated the women, as exemplified by the

adolescent in the dyad-class contacted by a former classmate to help stop the alleged rape of Somalian women and children by Ethiopians through financing travel for *jihadi* fighters.

The women in the sample also used social media to construct their identity and express their concern and outrage for Muslim victims worldwide. Freiburger and Crane suggested that social bonds forged “over the Internet may be especially strong and influential for stigmatized groups,” resulting in them resorting quickly to the next step of carrying out support or operational actions in the real world.¹³¹ Facebook and Twitter were important in providing these women with access to a virtual community that befriended them, taught them the extremist narrative justifying the need for violence, and provided explanations for their discontent.¹³² Women generally use social media for interpersonal communication and to maintain their relationships.¹³³ By decentralizing the task to unofficial recruiters, ISIS can build close relationships in a short amount of time through constant and frequent online interaction. An example of this intense interchange occurred with three adolescents in the group-class, who vocalized their extreme ideology on Twitter and Tumblr and exchanged thousands of messages with ISIS facilitators.¹³⁴ Many of the recruits were not necessarily religious or had little knowledge about main-stream Islam initially, making it easier for ISIS to convince them that the presented extremist ideology was the only correct one and to discourage them from seeking out other views that may provide them with conflicting interpretations.¹³⁵

The second component of SLT involves definitions that promote and support violence as the preferred option to obtain the goal, while minimizing negative emotions associated with terrorist acts. Support was shown for H2 in that ISIS encouraged these recruited women to develop neutralizing definitions through exposure to violence and to a narrative supporting the use of violence as justifiable for the cause through offline and online propaganda. For example, court documents indicated that the women in the sample had magazines, DVDs, and books created by terrorists/*jihadists* advocating guerrilla warfare and insurgency, including how to engage in violent attacks and glorifying the death of their enemy in the name of Allah.¹³⁶ This type of propaganda gives the illusion that the deviant ideology depicted is in fact the norm and acceptance of it contributes to the mutual interdependence among group members.¹³⁷

The women also had online footprints by e-mailing, texting, and engaging in social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Online propaganda justifying murder and beheadings as “*halal* [permissible under Islamic law]” facilitate its acceptance among ISIS recruits, sympathizers, and followers, and paradoxically normalize this concept by juxtaposing the violent messages with innocuous scenes of sunsets and children playing.¹³⁸ The adoption of pro-terrorist, violent ideas is a gradual process, likely the result of multiple interactions in the women’s online community. The documents revealed that the women watched violent beheadings and suicide bombers imploding on YouTube and Facebook; learned how to construct bombs from the Internet; read, responded to, and posted pro-ISIS messages on Facebook and Twitter; disseminated violent *jihad* propaganda; and joined discussion forums in chat rooms regarding the aggression against and victimization of Muslims around the world. Acceptance of the neutralizing definitions for ISIS was voiced by the women who desired to have their male loved ones get training to become fighters and to die martyrs. The women also

used the Internet to obtain operational and tactical information, training manuals, websites for fund-raising, and seemingly legitimate news constructed to garner their support.¹³⁹

During radicalization, the women sought out others online who had similar views and confirm their beliefs, normalizing and solidifying their extreme ideology under the guise of unity of Islam.¹⁴⁰ ISIS disguises its narrative in private spaces on the Internet, such as chat rooms, to give the illusion of objectivity to participants, such that the ideas they are discussing are evolving, but, in reality, they are simply echoing the group's rhetoric.¹⁴¹ Not surprisingly the women's online vocalizations through multiple accounts were more radical and provoking than anything they stated in public. In some cases, the women tweeted approval and endorsement for a violent ISIS-inspired shooting incident in the United States or tweeted contact information of federal employees to be killed, yet their offline quiet natures prompted their families to deny that the women were dangerous or intended harm.

Differential reinforcement is the third component and refers to the process whereby the behaviors associated with support of terrorist acts and beliefs are reinforced by internal or external sources, normalizing them and increasing their likelihood of reoccurrence.¹⁴² Consistent with H3, ISIS-recruited women were subjected to a system of continuously reinforced values and beliefs in real-life and online that rewarded them for their acts of support/compliance and punished them for failures. Women who joined the caliphate were promised two rewards—the congenial connection to other Muslims who share their beliefs in how to live and practice their religion here on earth and “a place in paradise.”¹⁴³ According to Peresin, the prize for *hijra* to the ISIS-controlled territory is the romantic opportunity to be the bride of a strong heroic fighter and “a free house, equipped with top-of-the-line appliances and all expenses paid.”¹⁴⁴ The online recruiters emphasized the beauty of the sisterhood to the adolescents and young women in the sample, making it a strong lure and incentive for them. The role of traveler was also important to the unmarried girls and women in the self- and group-classes, although few successfully made it overseas. Even married women with children willingly accompanied their husbands on the journey. For example, a married woman from the dyad-class traveled to ISIS territory with her husband and brother to live in the caliphate, where she successfully had and raised a child and worked in a hospital.

Women who engaged in instrumental support for ISIS, raising funds and supplies, were lauded within their American communities. Female terrorist enactors were recognized and praised by both the men and women of ISIS, either online or in the magazine, *Dabiq*, and used as an example to shame the men into action. Online educators receive their rewards in the form of becoming instant celebrities and influencing others based on the number of likes, followers, friends, and retweets they have on their social media platform, both of which are perceived by adolescents and young adults to be an important achievement.¹⁴⁵ Severe punishments were doled out to women by ISIS, such as disfiguring them by having acid thrown in their face by men or lashings by the women's brigade for those who fail to follow *Shariah* rules (e.g., not wearing a *niqab*). The media broadcast a terrifying story about an Austrian adolescent who attempted to escape being forced to become a sexual slave and then beaten to death.¹⁴⁶ One of the women in the group-class,

who turned state's evidence by testifying against her friends, required protection and was shunned by both her family and the pro-ISIS community.¹⁴⁷

The fourth component of SLT refers to social learning processes of observation and imitation of acts associated with terrorism. The data supported H4 that the recruited women observed and imitated the offline and online extremist ideology and behaviors of rewarded ISIS female role models. The educators for ISIS had three main tasks: find followers through the provision of the "true" interpretation of Islam, encourage supporters to provide money and supplies, and convince women to perform *hijra* to ISIS-controlled areas to become wives and mothers of *jihadists* to build a utopian caliphate for believers.¹⁴⁸ Consistent with the social media research, all of the adolescents (under 21) communicated vis-à-vis Twitter and Facebook, exposing them to propaganda promoting a happy domestic lifestyle of ISIS brides under *Shariah* law.¹⁴⁹ For example, an online Scottish recruiter, who joined ISIS at age 19, served as a model by meeting and befriending a 20-year-old in the self-class on Twitter, who then left home to perform *hijra*, traveling to ISIS-held territory, marrying a fighter, and becoming a recruiter by posting propaganda on Twitter.

Overall, the women in the sample regardless of radicalization route primarily provided instrumental support (81 percent) and served in the role of traveler (52 percent). The women supplied ISIS with money, weapons, and people. Travel to the caliphate was an important aspect of this type of support, particularly when they offered themselves as potential wives and mothers (69 percent). Two adolescent sisters and their adolescent friend¹⁵⁰ attempted to travel in 2014 to ISIS-held territory, perhaps copying the highly publicized attempted travel of another adolescent from the sample and her brothers, or perhaps even imitating successful non-American travelers, such as the 16-year-old British twins or 15- and 17-year-old Austrian friends.¹⁵¹ They, in turn, may then have served as inspiration models for the attempted travel in 2015 by three Canadian adolescent girls and successful travel by three British adolescent girls.¹⁵²

The other roles women in the sample imitated differed by radicalization class. The educator role, such as posting opinions and support for ISIS and anti-Western sentiment, was adopted primarily by women ranging in age from 20 to 38 years in the self-class (56 percent). For example, one woman from this group reposted violent videos and photos, such as a weapon-wielding boy, on Twitter. Women in the group-class were financial providers, having successfully launched fund-raising campaigns in their communities combined either with e-mail and Facebook or with chat rooms and texting. Six of the women charged with collecting money for al-Shabaab likely learned fund-raising from their collaborators (three were part of a group of twelve and the other three were part of a group of five).

Women in the dyad-class (40 percent) and in the self-class (22 percent) provided operational support and served as planners (26 percent) and terrorist enactors (32 percent). The six women who planned and committed or attempted to commit these violent terrorist acts used guns, bombs, and grenades against innocent people and government forces. For example, a woman in the self-class gained "fame" as the first American woman killed overseas; she was shot alongside her male counterparts after throwing a grenade at Syrian government forces in 2013. She, in turn, may have served as a role model for a woman in the dyad-class, who was killed alongside her husband

in a shootout with police in 2015. Of the women in the dyad-class, one was charged with aiding and abetting her husband's attempt to blow up the prison where he was incarcerated and two were charged with plotting to detonate a bomb in the United States.

Conclusions

The study determined that women's radicalization process could be conceptually separated into three distinct classes of self, dyad, and group. The most commonly used online tool for interacting with ISIS members, sympathizers, and supporters by the women was Internet/texting, whereas secondary use of the other Internet functionalities depended on radicalization class: Facebook and Twitter were used by self-class women; Facebook by dyad-class women; and YouTube and chatrooms by group-class women. The main reason for radicalization of women in the dyad- and group-classes was relationship, but women in the self-class were radicalized due to sympathy and identification. Self-class women were travelers and educators, group-class adolescents were travelers and adult women were financial providers, and dyad-class women were travelers, planners, and terrorist enactors. Women provided mainly instrumental support and secondarily social-cognitive support, with operational support rare and only given by a few women in the self- and dyad-classes.

SLT principles provided an explanation for how the women acquired and maintained the Islamist terrorist ideology and performed terrorist-related actions. Just as SLT holds that all behavior is learned, it also contends that behavior can be unlearned. This social, cognitive, and behavioral approach provides a multidisciplinary perspective to countering religious terrorism that can be applied at the preventative level to inoculate at-risk/potential recruits from accepting extremist propaganda and at the intervention level to heal and re-socialize those who defected prior to or returned after the collapse of the caliphate.¹⁵³ Most importantly, just as women were agents in their radicalization, actively seeking extremist ideology and carrying out roles for ISIS, they must correspondingly be agents in the deradicalization process. Specifically, it is important to partner with the local Muslim community consistent with their culture, whose *imams*, leaders, and members can become a meaningful part of the social network the women need, as well as serve as models for the ideology and behavior consistent with mainstream Islam. Female practitioners should be employed to help the women in both the prevention and deradicalization intervention levels by teaching critical thinking for Internet-related information, developing social networks within the local community, providing peer-to-peer counseling and guidance, and offering and accepting alternative perspectives.¹⁵⁴

The program will need to create an open-minded social environment that allows the women with extremist views to express their ideas and examine their neutralizing definitions of violence as the only solution to creating *Ummah* (collective community of Muslims) by listening to different points of view from a variety of people, particularly those in the same age range, religion, and culture, as well as the leaders and members of their community. By exposing them to a balance of beliefs and encouraging them to seek information from multiple online and offline sources that can then be brought into

the discussions, they can develop the requisite critical thinking skills needed to appraise the credibility of the source and the legitimacy and quality of the information. Rather than prevent the women from using online examples to bolster their justification of extremist Islamic ideology, examples of the psychological, emotional, and physical damage caused by acts condoned by ISIS should be included in the discussion. That is, the victims' stories must be represented, such as the impact on the individuals, their families, and their communities when women and children are kidnapped, raped, and enslaved or men are killed simply because they were not Muslim or were Muslims who did not accept ISIS ideology. As Westerners' treatment of Muslims is a concern and a driving force for radicalization, it is important that non-Muslim community members be invited into the discussion. This will also allow Muslims and non-Muslims to learn about each other, understand the fears and concerns each has about the other, identify intolerance expressed through bullying and the effects it has on individuals and the group, and help them to find common ground on the path to becoming an integrated American community. The women should also be exposed to mainstream models in the real world and online—both within and outside of their own religion and culture, given praise for using critical thinking to examine their beliefs, and positively reinforced for enacting acts observed by these models that contribute to a nonviolent solution to building tolerant communities.

There were three limitations of this study. First, the study relied on secondary data of court documents gathered by the government to provide evidentiary support for prosecuting these defendants. It was not possible to interview or otherwise obtain information directly from the women accused or involved in terrorism due to their acts being of national security. The alternative option was to create a dataset based primarily on media news reports and articles, however, these sources contain their own biases. Hence, the decision was made to use multiple datasets constructed from government documents. Second, the data itself was limited in that the government was not systematic or thorough in every case regarding information collected and admitted into evidence for the Internet functionalities used by the women in furthering of their alleged crimes. Despite concerted efforts to configure as much relevant detail as possible about the women's network, reasons, and activities, not all information was publicly available. For example, it was not possible to determine the extent that the Internet, especially social media platforms, and apps were used in the radicalization process and criminal acts. New information may have emerged in cases after this article was written and thus will not have been included in the analyses. Third, it was not possible due to the small sample size to perform comparative statistical analysis nor was it deemed necessary for this study. Official court documents provide an opportunity for researchers to examine the "etiology of terrorism," especially "the actors and their motivation and justification behind their actions."¹⁵⁵

Future researchers can examine the efficacy of using SLT in understanding both men and women's radicalization to terrorism for left-wing and right-wing groups. Of importance, however, regardless of which group women are motivated to join, their roles in "creating a hatred-filled, revenge-seeking and military-trained next generation" should not be underestimated.¹⁵⁶ As a way of helping researchers in understanding the dynamic of how social media enables radicalization, the government prosecuting

terrorists should collect this information systematically. In particular, interviews with terrorists should include questions specifically asking them which social media they used and which influenced them during radicalization.

Acknowledgments

The authors received an OAR Faculty Scholarship grant (90692-03 01) from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in June 2016.

Notes

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 110. Only thirteen of the women included in the sample were investigated and prosecuted as individuals. In eighteen cases, the women were grouped as part of alleged conspiracy with one or multiple women and/or men. Not all of the cases led to formal charges, despite their actions being consistent with terrorist crimes, due to their age and/or cooperation with law enforcement, such as turning state’s evidence in exchange for probation.
 111. The cases used were tried by federal prosecutors using the standard in 18 U.S.C. § 2331. Criminal act of domestic terrorism in accordance with 18 U.S. Code § 2331 on Terrorism, including acts resulting in kills or injures as per § 2332 (Criminal penalties), and/or commits associated terrorist related acts listed in 18 U.S.C. §2339 (Harboring or concealing terrorists), 2339A (Providing material support to terrorists), 2339B (Providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations), 2339C (Prohibitions against the financing of terrorism), and 2339D (Receiving military-type training from a foreign terrorist organization).
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114. In cases of missing information (e.g., demographics, Internet functionality), credible news media sources were also examined. However, to ensure corroboration of facts and a simple index of reliability, only when the same information was provided through multiple sources was the information added to the dataset.
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