

How Jihadists Recruit Girls and Young Women

Web Propaganda for Terror and Violence is Tailored to Female Target Group

Jihadist content on the social web is being aimed at girls and young women, seeking to recruit them for terrorist organizations: the girls are being induced to marry jihad fighters, have children and raise them in accord with jihad ideology. Web images of flowers, recipes, and romantic stories about jihad serve to gloss over the misanthropic thrust of this ideology.

Outreach via Facebook, Instagram, Telegram

LURING GIRLS BY PLAYING ON DETAILS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Jihadist blogs, profiles, and postings on the social web – in the girls' own language, in this case, German – are tailored to the female target group. Glorifying the idea of militant struggle, the content subtly or openly advertises for terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda or the "Islamic State" (IS). The message: girls and young women are just as important as men for jihad, and the terrorist organizations need them. They are exhorted to become a part of this greater cause and help to carry out the purported "will of God".



Recruiting: Girls and young women are urged to join terrorist organizations. (Source: Instagram)

These outreach ads are generally published on Facebook, Instagram or the messenger app Telegram. The pitch is kept at a low threshold at first, so that its extremist background is not immediately apparent.

Inspiring sayings or religious quotes, for example, may be combined with images and other short texts. The "like" and "share" options then do their part toward infiltrating the daily communication of these girls and young women and gradually creating an opening for jihadist propaganda.

'Girly' Colors, Hearts-and-Flowers as Bait

SEPARATE COMMUNICATION FOR MALES AND FEMALES ON THE NET

Jihadist profiles or channels for girls and young women often feature colors like pink and purple, along with hearts-and-flowers motifs. The postings rely more heavily on images and texts than on videos, taking up everyday topics such as relationships, sexuality, or bodily development. They suggest positive feelings of confidence and self-esteem, offer the young women orientation, and support them in developing their own identity. The values that are conveyed are linked to proscribed behavior, which is frequently legitimated by reference to a religious fatwa.



Profile with hearts: Jihadist channels directed toward girls come across – initially – as harmless. (Source: Telegram)

The strict separation of the sexes dictated by Islamist ideology is also observed online: male users are not allowed to communicate with female users via profiles, nor may they visit groups intended for women. The girls are given the impression that they are among themselves; however, it is not possible to verify whether the persons maintaining these Islamist profiles are in fact women.

Fatwa

Particularly on pages for girls, *fatawa* (pl.) are frequently to be found. Questions relating to religion, love, sexuality, and the body are answered in accord with religious texts by various scholars. A *fatwa* is an Islamic legal opinion, on any particular topic, issued by an Islamic scholar. Those seeking advice assume that the statement corresponds to what is written in the Koran, to Islamic tradition and Islamic law.

Personal Approach and Contact Requests

GRADUALLY, TRUST IS ESTABLISHED

The persons behind these profiles and postings – assumed to be women – address the adolescent girls as “sisters”, creating a feeling of closeness similar to that among girls who are good friends. Once the contact has reached a personal level and trust has taken hold, it becomes easier to keep the girls coming back for more and to indoctrinate them with jihadist messages.

Options for direct contact via e-mail or telephone are offered in order to entice young female users to engage in communication that is as private and personal as possible. For example, jugendschutz.net has documented instances in which a person-to-person exchange was suggested on the issue of emigration (“hijra”) to Syria or Iraq, or on life in the “Islamic State”.



Indoctrination: Girls are enticed to establish personal contacts. (Source: Telegram; original is not pixelated)

Narrative: Good, Fulfilling Life under Jihad

LIVING IN THE CALIPHATE IS MADE TO SOUND ROSY

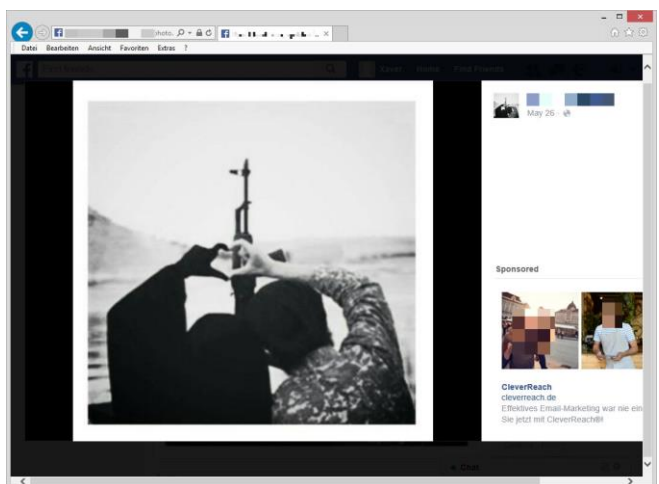
In most of the postings, living the jihad is described as a way of fulfillment. This narrative is supported by supposedly authentic longer statements from women on their life under “jihad” and the “caliphate” – usually positive descriptions of everyday events, such as having a meal with neighbors or shopping at a market where the goods are beautifully displayed. This creates the impression that everything is good and normal.

Although there are also reports on negative events, such as bombing attacks, these are idealized as trials sent by God and – quite in keeping with jihadist propaganda – they are associated with the promise of redemption. It follows that also girls and young women who contribute to the armed struggle will be rewarded in the hereafter.

Emotional Appeal through Love Poems

JIHAD IS IDEALIZED AS A ROMANTIC ADVENTURE

Jihadist online propaganda directed toward girls depicts the armed struggle as a romantic adventure, a means of escaping from everyday life in western society and finding true love. Girls who leave their country and join up with Al Qaeda or IS in Syria and Iraq are made to believe they may marry a “heroic warrior”. This image – of young, strong, rebellious men presented like pop stars or film heroes – sparks hope in the girls and young women of finding the man of their dreams.



With a heart and an assault rifle: marriage as a propaganda item in the armed struggle against the Western world. (Source: Facebook)

Love poems are also used to create feelings of emotional connection. One poem that frequently comes up is attributed to Abdullah Azzam (the founder of Al Qaeda). In flowery, moving words, the terrorist leader thanks his wife for her support. Through it, he says, she enabled him to devote all his energy to the armed struggle. This romanticized narrative is flanked by photo images, for example of a jihadist couple: he is wearing camouflage and has an assault rifle, she is in black, with a full-body veil.

Wife of the Warrior, Mother of Lions

WOMEN ARE EXPECTED TO SECURE A STOCK OF FUTURE WARRIORS

In most of the postings, the role allocation conforms to archaic patterns: the husband is a fighter, while the submissive wife looks after the children and the household as “queen of the home”. In this ideology, however, women as potential mothers are indispensable for establishing the caliphate, since they can bear children and raise them in keeping with the lore of jihad.

The “righteous woman” – according to the propaganda – finds fulfillment in this task, in obedience to God and her

husband. She sees to it that her sons are brought up to form the next generation of warriors – young lions, “cubs of the caliphate” – and to continue the struggle against the “infidels”. She raises her daughters to become “god-fearing” women who, in turn, will attend to raising new warriors.

In jihadist web content for girls and young women, this mind-cast is expressed through images of attractively presented food or baby clothes, in suggestions for handicraft projects, tips on bringing up children, or cooking recipes.



Baby clothes as an eye-catcher: Jihadist postings target young women who want to have children. (Source: Telegram)

The projected role of women is combined with anti-democratic propaganda attacking “godless Western society”. It is claimed, for example, that the “infidels” no longer respect mothers and regard women solely as sex objects; a faithful Muslim woman, it is suggested, is in constant danger of being touched indecently. This scenario of permanent threat is intended to stoke anxieties and make the girls more dependent on the group that will supposedly protect them.

Female Jihad Warrior and Assassin

VIOLENCE IS GLORIFIED AND LEGITIMIZED

The other female role image being propagated is that of the woman warrior. Jihadists present it, for example, in photos of armed women wearing the niqab (full-body veil) and toting an assault rifle. They are described as defenders of their religion who must take arms in order to combat everything that is “un-islamic”. This is said to include committing terrorist attacks.

With content such as this, jihadists are offering girls and young women a matrix for the legitimization of violence and terror as an act of self-determination. Violence is glorified as a way of breaking with conventions, as an emancipatory rebellion against the societal majority, against Western social mores, against parents and friends who have “fallen from the true faith”.

Jihadist online propaganda exploits violent acts committed by women just as those committed by men: a knifing in

Hanover in 2016, when the 15-year-old Safia S. attacked a policeman, was glorified on the net as a heroic deed, and the girl – who at the time was caught up in the Salafist scene and sympathized with IS – was stylized as a model for others. Postings declared that hers was an act of self-defense, called for solidarity with Muslim women constantly threatened by “the infidels”, and tried to instigate copycat attacks.

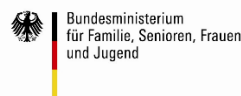


IS follower “to the defense”: Women are also being incited to fight against “infidels” by committing terrorist acts. (Source: Telegram)

Work on Topics Relating to Political Extremism

Within the context of its work on political extremism, jugendschutz.net pursues research on Islamist web content and develops activities to counteract it. Currently, this work on Islamism is supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth as part of the national program “Living Democracy!”.

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