



Articles

#IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism

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Abstract

In this paper we present initial results from an ongoing study of women affiliated with pro-IS networks on Twitter and other social media. Our particular focus is on 20 accounts belonging to individual identified as 'fan girls.' Drawing on an analysis of Twitter posts from these 20 accounts, we identify key characteristics of the fan girl in an attempt to bring conceptual clarity to this role and enhance our understanding of who these girls are and their potential for radicalization.

Keywords: terrorism; women; Islamic State; fan girl; Jihad; social media

"feeling extra radical tonight" – fan girl tweet, 2015

Throughout 2014 and 2015 an emergent phenomenon began to draw significant media attention: young girls and women were decamping from the West to begin radically different lives in territories held by the terrorist organization, the Islamic State (IS). Searching for ways in which to better understand this phenomenon, media outlets fixated on the potential role of social media as a radicalizing agent, turning to Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and other sites as portals through which to peek into the psyches of an increasing number of young women. In their bafflement, reporters and/or their expert guests made a number of erroneous claims. One notable example was the statement made during a CNN report that IS propagandists gain female recruits online through the strategic use of pictures of kittens and promises of Nutella. More widely, media outlets simply dismissed female followers as 'fan girls', thus likening all IS affiliated women to rabidly infatuated teenagers swooning over teen idols.

'Fan girl', as Merriam-Webster (2015) defines the term, refers to a "girl or woman who is an extremely overly enthusiastic fan of someone or something." When one conjures an image of a stereotypical fan girl, they may envision hysterical teenagers screaming and crying at a One Direction concert or at a Twilight movie premiere. However, this term has also been adopted by members of IS networks as a derogatory epithet for individuals who are viewed as lacking the sincere ideological commitment of regular members ('baqiya'), and who join IS networks in order to enjoy the notoriety that comes from participating in pro-jihadist groups[1]. Thus, within the IS subculture, fan girl has a very specific meaning. Moreover, the over-broad use of the term to describe all or most women affiliated with the IS is not only inaccurate, but obscures significant differences in the motives underlying women's actions.

In the present study we present initial findings from an ongoing study that includes a sample of 20 individuals identified as 'fan girls.' Drawing on a qualitative analysis of social media posts (primarily Twitter) over a 10 month period, we demonstrate key characteristics of the fan girl in order to bring some conceptual clarity to this role and its place within pro-IS networks. By examining the different trajectories some of these



girls' lives took over ten months, we are also able to enhance our understanding of the fan girl's potential for embracing *and* enacting IS ideology.

Female roles in pro-jihadist terrorist groups

A central misconception previously found within public discourse on pro-jihadist terrorist groups is that women play little to no role in their activities. In large part this misconception can be attributed to what is perceived to be the inferior nature of women's status within radical Salafist movements. Although it is manifestly the case that women within many such groups do play a lesser role – for example, being barred by some from waging jihad on the battlefield like their male counterparts (Lahoud 2014) – they do effectively participate in a number of other, often equally crucial ways (Al-Tabaa 2013). Cragin and Daly (2009) have identified three: as facilitators, propagandists and as a group's historical conscience[2]. Elaborating on the nature of women's participation in pro-jihadist groups, Cunningham (2007: 121) observes:

Women have been supporters and family members of global Islamist groups like Al Qaeda for many years, but they have also reportedly been used to train women ('Mother of Usama'), run women's organizations and groups, participate as girls in Islamist summer camps, run Internet magazines, distribute Qur'ans in prisons and schools, create Islamist nongovernmental organizations and charities, participate in Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), and engage in illegal activities such as fund-raising ... Although these activities are nonviolent, they are also frequent pathways to militancy for male members of global Islamist groups and are critical sources for propaganda, recruitment, and fund-raising.

Then there is, of course, women's participation in direct terrorist activities such as suicide attacks (Bloom 2011). In short, despite the fact that, prior to the rise of social media, women's participation in pro-Jihadist groups was often invisible to external audiences, they have played an "essential role in the short- and long-term survival" of pro-jihadist groups (Von Knop 2007: 398).

Social media has had at least two significant effects in relation to women and terrorism. First, social media sites are spaces within which women are now increasingly afforded new opportunities to become exposed to Jihadist groups and their ideologies. Within these sites, potentially interested females can link to other sympathizers, as well as to recruiters (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015). These sites also allow women a greater freedom to engage in a wider array of activities on behalf of such groups, including recruiting potential converts, distributing propaganda and mobilizing sympathizers (Cragin and Daly 2009; Rabasa and Benard 2014).

Second, social media has permitted us a greater glimpse of the types of activities women engage in within pro-Jihadist networks. However, despite increasing attention to women's activities online within IS, Al Qaeda and other networks, there remains critical gaps in our understanding of the roles that women play in online Jihadist communities. As we noted previously, one of the roles that remains under-examined is that of the 'fan girl.' Within the pages that follow, we take up the challenge of beginning the process of examining this role in greater depth.

Method of inquiry

The present paper is based on results derived from analysis of data generated through the qualitative portion



of a larger, on-going mixed methodological study of gender and online radicalization within pro-jihadist networks. The larger study, which began in January 2015, examines women's participation in online radical milieus (forms of social media hosting pro-jihadist content). It is composed of four smaller inter-linked projects: a quantitative analysis of posting/tweeting patterns by males and females (from multiple pro-jihadist groups on Twitter[3]), a network analysis of selected online Twitter-based groups (pro-IS, pro-AQ), a qualitative study tracking and analyzing posting activities of approximately 50-60 Twitter accounts disseminating pro-IS content, and; a smaller qualitative study of female identified accounts found within Al Qaeda affiliated Twitter groups.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this paper is drawn exclusively from the third project, the goal of which is to identify the various roles women play within pro-IS networks in the form of a typology. To develop this typology, in January 2015 one of the authors began to follow and collect Twitter postings from approximately 40 accounts following one of several popular pro-jihadist Twitter accounts. Over time, and as accounts appeared and disappeared, this number grew to include postings from 105 accounts. Criteria for inclusion: the account owner self-identified as female, posted principally in English and was a member of one or more networks associated with IS. Determinations as to gender were aided by the use of female titles for names/twitter handles, pictures of female figures as avatars and/or references to one's role as a mother or wife. As each account was added, her Twitter account was captured in PDF using Adobe Acrobat and her tweets were collected on a daily basis in Excel format through the analytic software, Twitonomy. Further information about the account holder's online activities was also sought through keying her twitter name and handle into online search engines. These searches yielded women's blogs, YouTube channels, postings on ask.fm and Facebook accounts. We were also aided by the fact that account holders also frequently post links to other online content of interest to them – such as e-books about the Islamic State, blogs and e-books on making hijrah to Syria – were followed and these materials also collected for analysis.

To analyze our data, we employed a form of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) 'grounded theory' approach. Thus Twitter postings and other materials collected from the accounts studied was subject to an initial open coding using Glaser's (1978) concept-indicator model: key concepts were searched for first, and then linked to words and phrases that functioned as indicators of that concept. Once an initial typology of roles was developed, and each of the accounts in this study coded by role(s), the coding was then independently verified by trained research assistants working in our lab. Of the 7 roles identified as being largely unique to IS[4] networks, the focus of this paper is the 'fan girl'.

The #fan_girl

In developing criteria for constructing the 'fan girl' role as part of her typology, one of the authors relied not only on formal definitions of the term (as found in Merriam-Webster and other sources), but also on posting characteristics typically seen to be associated with individuals referred to as 'fan girls', and sometimes 'fan boys', by IS followers. This led to the development of the following list of indicators. Individuals identified as 'fan girls':

- generated few independent posts of an ideological nature
- were more likely to retweet ideologically-oriented posts of others within their network



- exhibited contradictions in behaviour and attitude with respect to IS dogma
- openly viewed the act of belonging to a subversive network as ‘cool’
- treated key figures and other popular actors within their network with extreme respect, following them, tweeting to them, citing them in posts and attacking those they felt were disrespecting these individuals or the IS (including attacks against both IS and non-IS members)
- viewed Twitter suspensions as a ‘badge of honour’ and publicly boasted of their Twitter ‘martyrdom.’
- were more likely to tweet a wider range of content than women in other groups, including
- often highly personal information
- were sometimes treated dismissively as ‘wannabes’ or, at best, fringe members of IS networks by more established members.

#Fan_girl sample characteristics

Of the 105[5] accounts studied over nine months of data collection, 20 met the criteria discussed above and were coded as ‘fan girl’ accounts. Of these 20, the youngest was reportedly 15 at the start of data collection and the oldest 32 (the average age was, however, under 25). All were unmarried. Nationalities of the women in this sample reveal a wide range of geographic locations: Venezuela, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia, Britain and the U.S. Their ethnic origins were equally diverse, including Kurds, Somalis, Chechens, Iraqis and self-described ‘Caucasians’. While some were from Muslim families, others were ‘converts’ – that is, converts to the Muslim religion, usually fairly recently converted. Of those from Muslim families, we suggest they were not typically from families practising extreme or even particularly traditional forms of the faith, as a recurring theme in many postings from this group was parental concerns over their daughter’s recent behaviours and attitudes.

Unpacking the #fan girl phenomenon

“radicalize is my new fave word btw”

“someone radicalize me yo”

- Tweets from a fan girl, 2015.

In this section, we explore the fan girl phenomenon in further detail, drawing on our data to unpack this role and how it fits within pro-IS networks.

While it is the case that we have identified eight criteria for differentiating fan girls from other female posters within pro-Jihadist online groups, perhaps the single defining characteristic of a fan girl is simply her apparent belief in violent extremism as something that is ‘cool’. As one of the authors (cite) has argued elsewhere, for many disaffected youth violent extremism is seen as having a certain subcultural cachet because it allows one to see herself as fighting back against real or perceived disempowerment. Adding to the ‘coolness’ factor is a slick IS propaganda campaign aimed at attracting young people from across the globe through messages that make not only the IS’s ‘cause’ seem variously cool and romantic, and their brand of extreme violence as ‘fun.’ Fan girls appear susceptible to such messages as illustrated by their active retweeting of images like the one found below (see Figure 1.).



Figure 1: A cartoon version of extreme violence



When fan girls spoke directly about violence – whether it be violence enacted by the IS or in relation to things in their personal life – they exhibited a similar cartoonish sensibility. For example, rather than using graphic descriptions or imagery to evidence their support for acts of violence – gruesome imagery that is widely available through social media – they tended to use emoticons instead[6] (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Tweet from a fan girl

WALLAHI THE FIGHTING HAS JUST
BEGUN, DIE IN YOUR RAGE O'KUFR. 🗡️💣🔥

Not only does belonging to a pro-IS network on social media confer a 'cool' status upon the fan girl, it also provides her with an 'instant family'. As Amarnath Amarasingam (2015) similarly noted following the Garland shootings[7], one of the strongest attractors associated with pro-IS networks is that, once an individual is accepted, they belong to a "deeply connected group of youth who find a sense of community and kinship online", a community "united by mutual love and support." Such bonds can become so tight that girls sometimes complain they spend more time on social media than engaged in activities in the real world. Indeed, most of the fan girls are, relative to other posters in their network, high volume tweeters and thus it was not uncommon to see individuals posting upwards of 50 to 100 tweets per day. Further, these tweets also indicated that these girls were also fairly active on other social media sites – ask.fm, Facebook, snapchat, kik and surespot – and were using these sites to advance friendships and other relationships with IS network members.

Participation within a network alone does not, however, denote 'coolness'. Although IS social media networks can be fairly large – consisting of thousands of connections – most networks have a core cluster of participants, 'thought leaders', who maintain close relationships only with their most trusted followers and largely through Twitter's direct messaging system or in secure chat rooms. When new individuals attempt to join networks, they may be viewed with distrust and it can take some time before they are accepted within



a network, even at its fringes. Postings from new network members may be scrutinized and criticized by skeptical regular members. ‘Newbies’ can also find themselves blocked by Twitter users or otherwise denied access to the posts of suspicious Tweeters. Thus, to break into an inner circle, fan girls typically attempt to gain the online ‘friendship’ of influential figures. Perhaps not surprisingly, the easiest online members to attract attention from within these networks are IS recruiters, who deliberately maintain active, popular accounts. Indeed, almost all of the fan girls studied had, at least at one point, attached themselves to one of the most notorious female recruiters within IS circles, a woman publicly identified within IS literature as a source of assistance for females wanting to migrate to Syria. While closeness to this woman, and other known recruiters, was common, fan girls also linked themselves to other influential members in attempts to boost their online status. Two well-known radical male clerics were frequent targets of such attention. These attempts, while in some instances creating friendly connections between the fan girl and her target, also had an unintended negative effect: they exposed her as a ‘wannabe’ who either did not know of, or did not ascribe to the prohibition against ‘free mixing’ between genders (online and elsewhere). Thus, such attempts derailed any postures of public piety the girl may have attempted as a means of establishing her bona fides within the group. One fan girl who attempted this route was outed as a ‘kafirra’, or female non-believer, by one of her male targets:

“I’m back ya kaffira [name deleted] may I make baraa from you, your democracy and your followers” – Twitter post, 2015.

The example above, was, however, only one of several instances where we observed a significant lack of coherence between the ideological stances a fan girl might profess to have adopted and her behaviours and comments on social media. The most notable lack of congruence in professed beliefs and outward behaviours were found in avatars and pictures posted by fan girls. It is a central tenet of IS doctrine that female faces should not be seen in public. If females are to be seen at all, no part of their body must be visible to male eyes. When we first began this study in January 2015, at least two of the girls maintained face avatars on their Twitter accounts, one while using a IS propaganda image as background (see Figure 3 below). The other girl had links on her Twitter account to other social media sites – Instagram and others – where she had posted ‘selfies’ of face and body shots, revealing not only her face and hair, but also a fair amount of cleavage. Such examples call into question the depth of a girl’s commitment to the tenets of IS dogma. They also underscore our point that many of these girls appear to be initially attracted to IS networks because of their purported ‘cool’ factor and not because of a sincere, committed belief in the IS brand of fundamentalist Islam. Another piece of support for this contention comes from the content and tone of their posts, which often had more to do with daily life – complaints about babysitting, family members – or gossiping about others in their network than to do with expressions of piety or faith.



Figure 3: Example of lack of ideological coherence[8]



The #fan girl and the question of radicalization

The primary reason for studying what would appear to be a group of relatively normal, if highly misguided teenagers, is that the online social space to which they have gravitated is one that is actively used to recruit members for the IS. It is what we would call a ‘radicalizing milieu’ (Bloom 2013). Thus, while it is the case that ten months of observation of the behaviours of a small group of individuals might seem to yield little information in terms of answering significant social and behavioural questions in other contexts, the speed with which individuals can undergo a radicalization process, and have apparently done so in relation to joining the IS (Homeland Security Committee 2015), suggests that ten months is not inadequate for developing some insights into this phenomenon.

For the purposes of this study, radicalization is defined as:

1. Engaging in behaviours on behalf of the IS that constitute criminal conduct and/or
2. Migrating to Syria or Iraq to join the IS

Of the twenty girls identified as fan girls, only two exhibited indisputable signs of having been radicalized. One was a 15 year old girl who was arrested at London’s Stansted airport on her way to Turkey, where she intended to cross the border into Syria. In this case, her family and school had been alert to changes in her behaviour at least one month prior to her attempt to leave the U.K. as evidenced by the post below, written several weeks before she was found at the airport:

My mum and my school make me go counselling because my mum thinks I’m becoming radical and people online are “grooming” me into a cult. 🤔😭🔫 - Fan girl tweet, 2015.

A second UK girl, aged 16, pled guilty to possessing instructions for how to make bombs. A police investigation also turned up evidence that she had been involved with a young male implicated in a terrorist plot in Australia. Among various plans, they intended to migrate to Syria together to join the IS. As with the first girl, this individual also left behind several clues prompting school officials to contact police. A third woman, 32, and a close friend to the 15 year old girl intending to leave the U.K., was also investigated by police, although it is not known if any charges were laid. Two of the women are presently active on Twitter (the girl 15 and the woman 32); however, their pro-IS postings have decreased substantially. The 16 year old has been largely inactive, likely because she is out on bail pending sentencing.

Of the remaining fan girls, three moved into the role of being a ‘baqiya’ or accepted community member.



Their accounts are active, they continue to post pro-IS messages and they remain tied to influential community members. However, recently we observed that the content and tone of one of the most prolific posters in the group, had changed significantly. We attribute this to the fact that, after an extensive campaign by Twitter to remove pro-IS accounts and destroy their networks, the number of Baqiyah members has dwindled and thus individuals are receiving far less attention and support than previously. One possible explanation is that with fewer individuals to mirror and thus reinforce this girl's ideological posturing, she is returning to more mundane topics, such as babysitting and kittens.

Interestingly, the majority of the girls followed ($n=14$), have either become inactive ($n=3$) or their accounts have been deleted ($n=11$) and they had not rejoined. For the latter group, extensive efforts have been made to see if we could find these individuals operating under a different Twitter name. While we have had a lot of success locating some of the original 105, many of whose accounts have disappeared and reappeared over time, we could not find these 11. In our larger sample, accounts were deactivated for a number of reasons, some of which may also be the case here. Reasons cited for leaving and not returning to Twitter included: individuals decamped to other social media platforms where they were less likely to be banned; some left for family or other personal reasons, and; other wanted to focus on graduate and other studies.

Based on the findings from our sample, it would appear that while radicalization remains a reasonable concern in relation to those inhabiting the fan girl role, over the short-term most of the girls and young women did not become sufficiently radicalized to pose an immediate flight or other risk. Of the two who clearly did, both were fairly young, connected to IS recruiters through social media, had extensive IS connections (online and in the real world) and were involved in romantic relationships with males who also actively ascribed to IS ideology.

Concluding remarks

Recent media reporting on women's participation in IS and other pro-jihadist groups has substantially raised the profile of a phenomenon that had previously been largely obscured. However, while it is the case that we now know more about female involvement in radical Islamist terrorist organizations, much of that same reporting has also tended to oversimplify a significantly more complex set of dynamics. In essence, the role of women within these groups is often reduced to a single dismissive term: fan girls.

Within this paper we sought to establish some conceptual clarity around the fan girl role by sharing insights we had learned from studying the social media activity of 105 women affiliated with IS networks, both online and in the real world. From these 105 women, we identified 20 who clearly met the criteria of a fan girl. By tracking their posting activity, we gleaned some useful insights into who these girls are, and, perhaps most importantly, their potential for a deeper involvement in pro-IS activities – that is, their potential for moving beyond expressions of online support for IS doctrine to actual IS-inspired acts in the real world. What we learned from this exercise is that the majority of fan girls studied do not go on to become violent actors in the real world; nor did most of them migrate, or attempt to migrate, to IS held territories in Syria or northern Iraq. Indeed, it appears that over time most of them simply dropped out of pro-IS networks, likely moving on to some new enthusiasm. Of the two who did manifest signs of radicalization, both left sufficient signs to indicate they had moved into a more active adoption of IS ideology and thus could no longer easily be dismissed as 'fan girls.'

The present study is not without limitations. Among these limitations, we note that, absent the ability to trace individual IP addresses to establish identities, we are forced to rely on sociodemographic and other



information provided by posters. It may be the case that one or more of these accounts are ‘sock puppet’ accounts – that is, accounts belonging to individuals hoping to deceive others, a not uncommon problem in relation to research on IS Twitter groups (author cite). Further, we note that our sample size is relatively small given the potential for there to be hundreds, if not thousands, of fan girls within IS Twitter groups. Future researchers in this area might consider a larger sample size.

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Notes

- [1] The fan girl phenomenon is not unique to females; the term ‘fan boy’ is also freely employed for young males.
- [2] This is what Von Knop (2007) refers to, in relation to women’s roles within Al Qaeda, as their educative function – rendering ideological motivations into stories told to inspire present and future generations.
- [3] Twitter was selected as the primary data collection site because of our interest in the IS. As other researchers have noted (Klausen 2015), Twitter appears to be the online milieu of choice for IS followers.
- [4] Our fourth study – in progress – examines the extent to which roles adopted by women in Al Qaeda networks cohere with roles identified for IS affiliated women.
- [5] The majority of accounts were coded as ‘baqiya’ – that is as regular members of the IS online community.
- [6] It has been suggested these posters may use emoticons because of Twitter’s 140 character limit on posts. However, in our larger, ongoing study we have found that older, more established Baqiyah members use emoticons with far less frequency and some eschew them altogether.
- [7] Two IS affiliated gunmen embarked on a shooting spree at the site of a ‘draw the prophet Muhammad’ rally in Garland, Texas.
- [8] Women within fundamentalist branches of Islam are meant not only to cover their hair but also to refrain from showing their face in public.

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