

Jihadi Brides, Prevent and the Importance of Critical Thinking Skills

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In this essay, I am not going to discuss the so-called Islamic State's (I.S.) raping, pillaging, beheading, regular kidnapping of hostages who happen to be journalists and aid workers, or predilection for throwing gay people off tall buildings. I'm not going to write about the ancient artefacts turned to dust, the historical civilisations destroyed in minutes. Many people are already well-informed about all of this. I will instead discuss a more fundamental and insidious part of I.S.'s strategy and how it is attempting to establish a foothold in Western countries, taking a not-insignificant number of British Muslims (a higher number than those who have joined the British Army) with it.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell once said:

In every walk of life, independence of mind is punished by failure, more and more as economic organisations grow larger and more rigid. Is it surprising that men become increasingly docile, increasingly ready to submit to dictation and forgo the right of thinking for themselves?

[Russell, 1917: 8]

His quote is particularly relevant to the situation of young men and women in Britain who are either radicalised or assessed as particularly vulnerable to being radicalised. In their book *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection Between Violent Extremism and Education*, Diego



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Gambetta and Stefan Hertog argue, in the words of Martin Rose, that it is:

the absence of critical intellectual tools, the inability to creatively cope with ambiguity, the predisposition to seek black and white answers, that sculpt the cast of uncritical binary thinking that, at its more extreme, is open to influence by malign binary ideologies.

[Rose, 7th November 2017]

This dilemma – and how it plays out with women, specifically radicalised women in their late teens and early twenties – was given a comprehensive examination in *Jihadi Brides*, the BBC 2 This World documentary, which aired on 27th December 2015. It focused on the stories of Glasgow-born Aqsa Mahmood, Mancunian twins Salma and Zahra Halane, and Londoners Khadijah Dare, Amira Abase, Kadiza Sultana and Shamima Begum – just a few of the women who have flown out to join I.S., married I.S fighters, and who are responsible for glorifying some of the most brutal acts of terror we see today. In this documentary, Dr Katherine Brown, Lecturer in Defence Studies at King’s College London, talked about her research. She examined the Twitter feeds of these and other young I.S. brides, and found cute kittens juxtaposed with the glorification of 9/11 (usually in a form of text-speak). It was particularly jarring for me to listen to the strong Glaswegian vowels of the actress playing Aqsa Mahmood; I spent part of my childhood in Glasgow and used to speak with a similar accent. Privately-educated Aqsa had every benefit a young British girl could ask for, yet still trod a path of subservience, dehumanisation, and collusion with barbarism. This was partly explained in the BBC 2 documentary through her fixation with a hard-line Internet preacher. Her lawyer, Aamer Anwar, also claimed that she was a victim of grooming (see Whitaker, 2016).

Deconstructing the ‘us vs. them’ narrative

While I absolutely don't doubt that the grooming explanation is true, it ignores the earliest stage of radicalisation: widespread propagation of the ‘us vs. them’ narrative, by some individuals and organisations who promote a version of Islam they have described as ‘normative Islam’. This phenomenon was superbly explained by my associate Manwar Ali: a former radical himself, he now teaches the importance of pluralism and non-partisanship at Ipswich-based charity JIMAS.¹ Not only does the ‘us vs. them’ mentality emphasise the ‘otherness’ of non-Muslims, but it also demeans and castigates people from Muslim backgrounds who happen to be different e.g. Shia, Ahmadi, feminist, LGBT, liberal or ex-Muslims. This narrative makes it much easier for young Muslims to be radicalised in the first place. It even dehumanises the individuals who violent extremists claim to be acting on behalf of. As Shiraz Maher, a counter-extremism expert at King's College London, wrote in the *New Statesman* in 2014: ‘A callousness towards the concerns of ordinary Syrians had also crept into the attitude of these fighters – the constituency in whose defence they once claimed to be acting.’ When asked what he thought of those Syrians who opposed I.S., one fighter conceded: ‘There are a number of them that dislike us. However, the lands belong to Allah's [sic] not them. Also, I [came] here to please my creator and not them’ (as quoted in Maher, 2014). This is a chilling snapshot of how barbarous ideological movements can use the Godhead – and the capricious, megalomaniac, and often cruel motives attributed to it – to manipulate their followers. It is also, of course, an ugly reflection on the people who can so easily attribute these qualities to their conception of God and actually go on to take up arms in its name. Other British fighters have displayed a similar attitude. One of them tweeted a picture of three captured Syrians with the caption: ‘Got these criminals today. *Inshallah* [God willing] will be killed tomorrow. Can't wait for that feeling when u just killed some1 [sic]’ (as quoted in Maher, 2014).

As someone with a background in equality and human rights who was a practising Muslim for 12 years, it makes me sick to the pit of my stomach to see members of the new generation signing up to a version of Islam that is so anti-human, un-egalitarian, and brimming with hate – and this is before they even fall into the clutches of I.S. itself.

As Dr Brown confirmed in the *Jihadi Brides* documentary, many of these girls are clearly intelligent: the Halane twins had 28 GCSEs between them and Aqsa Mahmood wanted to become a doctor. However, academic achievement ALONE is no substitute for becoming a well-rounded individual with highly developed critical thinking skills. Too often, especially in minority communities, education is just seen as a means to an end – with the end in question relating to professional milestones rather than personal fulfilment. Young British Muslims are caught at the crossroads between their parents' identity (which they don't fully relate to, as second and third-generation minorities), a wider society whose values are ostensibly different from the ones they grew up with, and a dominant interpretation of Islam (usually transmitted online) that does not conform to modern equality and human rights standards.

In order to make sense of these confusing (and often competing) facets of reality, young people must be trained in logic, argument, reason, and the ability to weigh up different truth claims. They also need to feel empowered by strong female leadership in Muslim communities, both in civic terms and religious terms.

An example of the former is the civil society organisation Inspire, who completed a series of roadshows across the UK in 2015 entitled 'Making a Stand'. They equipped Muslim women with the skills to just say 'No' to

extremism, bigotry, and patriarchy in all its forms. An example of the latter is where individuals like Dr Amina Wadud – a Muslim convert and American professor who specialises in Islam and gender – come in. In 2015, Wadud stated:

This is a powerful wake-up call: just because people say they are doing something in the name of Islam does not mean you have to agree with them. And as soon as you have the freedom not to agree with an interpretation of Islam, then the question of interpretation comes up and that's my life right there – talking about how Islam has always been filtered through the interpretation of people who have the power.

[as quoted in Khaleeli, *The Guardian*, 13th April 2015]

The role of the Prevent programme

Back in 2010, I spoke at the *Beyond Prevent: Achieving Security and Challenging Extremism* conference in the House of Commons. I was critical of many of the surveillance aspects of the previous Government's Prevent strategy such as Project Champion, which placed security cameras in majority-Muslim parts of Birmingham (see Lewis, 2010). However, in the last seven years, initiatives like these have been scrapped, as the Government has made strong efforts to listen to practitioner feedback. The entire Prevent strategy has undergone significant reform. As of Summer 2015, it is now a statutory duty for schools, prisons, local authorities, and NHS trusts to 'have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'.

The strategy also includes non-violent extremism, which has been defined as 'opposition to fundamental British values', including 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and

tolerance of different faiths and beliefs'. It is critical to actively uphold British values, use them to present a robust counter-narrative to extremist voices, and highlight the commonalities between British values and Islamic ones. A strong example of the latter point was the Islam and Citizenship Education Project, a curriculum for madrassahs and Muslim-majority schools. This project emphasised shared values in areas as diverse as volunteering, women's engagement in society, and the importance of being a good neighbour.ⁱⁱ

Behind the spectre of non-violent extremism lurks religious fundamentalism, which has been defined by Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) as 'modern political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power, whether working within – or in opposition to – the state'.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, there are movements embedded in the social fabric of Britain that are actively hostile to British values and systemically work to undermine them. This is why OFSTED, the schools' inspectorate, is absolutely correct to prioritise the spread of shared values next year, as well as to seek new powers to close illegal faith schools.

What do we mean by hostility to British values? As my associate Kalsoom Bashir, formerly with Inspire, said in an interview for *The Guardian* in 2015:

When you have ideologies out there – that homosexuals are going to be condemned to hellfire, that you mustn't talk to [gay people], or that if this was a Muslim state they wouldn't be allowed – I do have a problem with that. I'm proud that the interpretation of Islam I adhere to is inclusive; it does not promote hatred or violence, or sow the seeds of division or suspicion. There are other [interpretations] that

sit across the spectrum ... and I don't want my children to go down those paths.

[as quoted in Khaleeli, *The Guardian*, 23rd September 2015]

Bashir is responsible for delivering Prevent training to police officers and teachers in Avon and Somerset, with the aim of making sure that children are kept safely in their families and are getting the best out of their educational experiences. Rather than asking professionals to 'spy on' their charges, or single out particular incidents, the aim of the strategy is to get them to look out for a whole range of concerning behaviours. It is part of the pastoral care that all good teachers take seriously, and makes sense because pupils spend more of their waking hours with teachers than with their parents. Children who are deemed to be vulnerable to radicalisation are sometimes referred to the Government's anti-radicalisation Channel programme, which has seen more than 4,000 referrals between 2012 and 2016 (see Halliday, 2016).

Furthermore, there are many examples of Prevent successfully turning young women (and men) away from a path of extremism and disillusionment with mainstream education. The article by Khaleeli (23rd September 2015) details the story of a young woman in Bristol, who started wearing a headscarf in sixth-form, then disengaged from lessons and distanced herself from friends. Any one of these changes taken in isolation may not have been a concern, but when seen as part of a whole – along with the underlying reasons for the changes – they presented a worrying picture. Her teachers spoke to her friends, who conveyed that she had described them as 'not good Muslims anymore'. The young woman said she just wanted to 'focus on Islam' and thought that voting made one complicit in a 'kuffar' system. Once she was referred to Channel, a female theologian spoke to her about faith and identity in a nuanced way, which did not treat the young woman's British identity as

being in conflict with her religion. The young woman had never been exposed to this kind of interpretation of Islam, either in her family or elsewhere. Eventually, she returned to the sixth-form and ended up completing her A-Levels.

A second example is of the Muslim boy at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham who not only demanded a prayer room on a field trip, but expressed what teachers euphemistically described as an ‘alternative’ view on the Charlie Hebdo attack, and insisted that female Muslim pupils needed to cover their faces with a headscarf (see *The Telegraph*, 12th October 2015). One of these incidents on their own might not have been a concern, but when taken as a whole – coupled with the fact that the boy was behaving differently on his field trip than in the classroom – it warranted a referral to the council’s Prevent Support Team. According to the news report, a roundtable discussion took place with the pupil’s parents, who were very supportive and understood the teachers’ concerns. The school was then able to move forward with the parents and the pupil, in terms of encouraging critical and caring thinking on these hot-button issues.

A third story related to the 15-year-old, Yusra Hussein, who went missing from Bristol and ended up in Syria (see Sanghani, 2014). Other girls in the vicinity ended up sympathising with her, after being dumped by Muslim men who they’d had unmarried sexual relations with (*ibid*). This ties in nicely with the academic Mia Bloom’s research on redemption, and the fact that some people view membership of an extremist group as providing a means of redemption for committing so-called ‘sins’. Bloom’s research on the motivations of female terrorists focuses on the four ‘R’s: revenge, redemption, respect, and relationship. On the redemption point, Bloom notes that whatever a woman has done in her life, the

‘slate can be wiped clean’ in some communities through the commission of terrorist acts, particularly suicide bombing. This is because she can reinvent herself as a martyr and gain the third ‘R’: respect from her community (see Fillion, 2011).

On the sex and relationships point, Kalsoom Bashir led a workshop with Year 10 and Year 12 students on relationships between men and women in a faith context. This took place in April 2016 at the North Bristol Post-16 Centre, with the poet and activist Shagufta Iqbal. In the workshop, Bashir said it was natural to be physically attracted to people, but that the young women shouldn’t feel pressured into doing anything they don’t want to do. The Year 12 students acted as mentors to the younger ones, who worked through misconceptions about their expected roles as Muslim women in British society.^{iv}

Critical thinking skills in the classroom

Far from shutting down debates on controversial issues, this is an example where Prevent created a space for hot-button issues to be discussed in a safe and secure environment. The facilitator was careful to foster both critical and caring thinking, as in how we relate to others around us, which fits in with OFSTED good practice guidelines as well. This approach has benefits that extend beyond the classroom: students gain confidence and tolerance when they are able to ask their own questions and listen to perspectives that differ from their own. They are also better able to deal with disagreements and conflict, which in turn leads to a reduction in bullying.

The need to tackle the rhetoric of Islamist groups (including their interpretations of Islam, and how these manifest) is more pressing than

ever. This must happen in a variety of fora, from university Islamic societies to some madrassahs and Muslim-majority schools, as well as in traditional media outlets and social media. Legal challenges are also hugely important. In a case brought by OFSTED in October 2017, a significant Court of Appeal judgement ruled that the Al-Hijrah School in Birmingham had caused unlawful discrimination by separating girls and boys in a co-educational school. Lady Justice Gloster's dissenting judgement went a step further: she argued that the school's segregation posed a greater practical impediment for girls than for boys: 'What possible justification could there be for always requiring girls to wait for their mid-morning snack until such time as the boys had finished theirs?' she opined (see Adams, 2017). Any school which expresses such viewpoints on the differing status of girls and boys, and goes on to treat girls – and it is usually girls – less favourably as a result, must be reprimanded with the full force of equality law.

The most important thing is to enable young Muslim women to reconcile their identities as female, British, and Muslim. I am confident that the Prevent programme has advanced enough to make way for these exchanges. Unfortunately, both state institutions that deliver and work on Prevent, as well as Muslim civil society practitioners who do Prevent work, receive opprobrium for this in Muslim communities. Examples include OFSTED winning the Islamic Human Rights Commission's 'Islamophobe of the Year' award in 2017, and Naz Shah MP describing Inspire as 'one of the most loathed organisations in Muslim communities' and implying, during a Home Affairs Select Committee session in November 2015, that their work had Prevent-preferred status from the Government (Shah, 2015).

Contrary to what these groups and individuals claim, major conflict between civil society groups and the Government is not inevitable in counter-extremism work. While we should not hesitate to correct state institutions when they make mistakes, we should not automatically see them as the enemy, when they are our partners in safeguarding.

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ⁱ JIMAS is the full name of an Ipswich-based educational charity which aims to teach Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam, and does bridge-building work with both Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Suffolk. Manwar Ali is the Director of JIMAS.

ⁱⁱ For further information see the Islam and Citizenship Education website: <http://www.theiceproject.com/index.php> [Last accessed 22/06/2018].

ⁱⁱⁱ To read more about Women Against Fundamentalism see http://womenagainstofundamentalism.org/?page_id=4 [Last accessed 22/06/2018].

^{iv} For more information on these sessions, see 'Inspire inspiring at North Bristol Post-16 Centre' on the *Inspire* website, available at: <https://wewillinspire.com/inspire-inspiring-north-bristol-post-16-centre/> [Last accessed 22/06/2018].