



Inside the Islamic State's Radicalization and Recruitment Machinery of Sudanese Medical Students

JAN HAVLICEK



Middlebury Institute of
International Studies at Monterey

Center on Terrorism, Extremism and Counterterrorism

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Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism

Middlebury Institute of International Studies

460 Pierce Street

Monterey, CA 93940, USA

Tel: +1 (831) 647-4634

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ABSTRACT

The organization known as the Islamic State (IS) was on the rise from 2013. In the following years it was busily recruiting professionals, not only fighters, from across the world. IS was particularly in need of doctors—both male and female. It turned out that the Sudanese medical college was an exclusive source of such recruits, especially if approached in a sophisticated manner by individuals such as Mohammed Fakhri. The following study consists of both theoretical and practical frameworks in which media articles, relevant publications, and manifestos are analyzed. Qualitative field research was also conducted in Sudan between December 2016 and January 2018. It consists of interviewing three key individuals who were in different ways related to the recruits and recruiters. The introductory sections provide the necessary context and history of terrorism-related activities in Sudan. They also describe research methodology and elaborate on the rise of IS in Sudan, which dates back to late 2013. The central portion of the study further analyzes the environment that allowed radicalization and recruitment to take place and proceeds to address particular cases of key recruiters, the role of radical preachers, the stories of affected recruits, and aspects of radicalization and recruitment. These aspects are analyzed from cultural, religious, social, and psychological perspectives. Overall, the paper aims to analyze the process of radicalization and the Islamic State’s recruitment of elite medical students in Khartoum, Sudan. It tells their stories and tries to clarify myths about the lure of Muslim youth to extremism.

Key words: Islamic State, Sudan, radicalization, recruitment, Libya, Syria, Mohammed Fakhri, UMST, ICA, medical students

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List of abbreviations

UMST — University of Medical Science and Technology (Khartoum, Sudan)

ICA — Islamic Cultural Association (religion-oriented club within UMST)

IS — Islamic State (in Syria, Iraq, or Libya), also known as ISIS or ISIL

NISS — National Intelligence and Security Service (powerful Sudanese intelligence agency and secret police)

Preface

“No one in their right mind would think something like IS would happen. What did we know? We were all just kids. One day, they skipped class, and we knew they’d left. After that, we got used to it. Whenever our somewhat religious friends’ phones were closed, we knew they had left” (Rania, personal communication, December 2017).

In Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, intensive efforts were made to disrupt the Islamic State’s recruiting machinery. The Ministry of Interior announced that about 70 Sudanese had gone to join IS branches in Libya and Syria (Townsend, 2017).

After more than a year of living and studying with radical Muslims in Sudan, one could assume to know how these people reason. Nonetheless, when you try to empathize with another person’s psyche, you cannot resist projecting your own ideas, attitudes, and values onto that person in some way. That being said, no one should claim to know how another person thinks. One should only strive for understanding.

The international community, as well as the local community in Sudan, were unable to understand the patterns of radicalization and recruitment processes occurring. While focusing on “petty criminals” and “disillusioned individuals” lured by the Islamic State’s sophisticated online propaganda, the role of religion was underestimated, as well as cultural background, interpersonal relationships, and elementary human emotions. As a result, communities failed to prevent highly intelligent and compassionate medical students from joining one of the most atrocious terrorist organizations ever formed.

Introduction to Terrorism in Sudan

Sudan has a long history of terrorism-related activities. Sitting at the crucial crossroads of the Arabian Peninsula, northern Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan is strategically vital. Its stability has had far-reaching consequences not only for Africa but also for North America and Europe. Sudanese society has become more religious since the establishment of the Sudanese Islamic movement in the 1950s. Sudan then became famous in connection with Hassan al-Turabi, a respected legal scholar and ideologue who was educated in France (Abdo, 2015).

Originally, Sudan's name became associated with terrorism in the 1990s, when Osama Bin Laden and his followers came to the country to set up training camps as well as business and financial infrastructure. At that time, Sudan was deliberately supporting and harboring terrorists and terrorist organizations. As Bin Laden freely walked on the streets of Khartoum, terrorism was fully introduced to Sudan (El-Said, 2015).

After the 9/11 attacks, Sudanese leaders seemed to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Harboring Bin Laden wasn't the best image that one would want to have. At least on the outside, Sudan demonstrated its alliance with the US in the global fight on terrorism. Sudan ceased to be a safe haven for terrorists and jihadists, in particular. That fact, however, did not prevent the nation from overlooking, ignoring, and potentially even supporting radical Islamic preachers and recruiters.

Research Methodology

This paper draws from primary and secondary sources: analysis of available literature, and findings from interviews conducted as part of field research. At a starting point, it should be noted that the available literature, especially media sources, is unusually limited. Regarding IS activities in Sudan, and especially with emphasis on radicalization and recruitment, very few reports have been published. *The Guardian* and *BBC* predominate those reports. No serious academic research has been done so far. In addition, it should be emphasized that media reports often provide repetitive, misleading, inaccurate, contradictory, or simply incorrect information. Some of the cases are mentioned in this paper.

Media sources have been evaluated along with the findings obtained from field research and interviews. The field research was conducted for a period of one year between December 2016 and

January 2018, with some additional questions through online messaging after this timeframe. The interviews were conducted with both active students and recent graduates of UMST. When reaching out to the returnees from the Islamic State in Libya, the questions were asked through an intermediary due to security reasons.

The qualitative research is based on personal communications (interviews) with three key individuals—Layla, Rania, and Idris. All spoke to the author on the condition of anonymity; thus, their names are fictional.

“**Layla**” is a current female UMST student and a friend to the recruited sisters Abrar and Manar. Layla’s major contribution is mediating access to Abrar—a woman who managed to return back from IS territory in Libya.

“**Rania**” is a former female UMST student. She was part of “Batch 19”—a cohort of students that entered the college in 2012 and graduated mainly in 2017. It is the cohort which included the majority of recruits. Therefore, Rania personally knew several recruits and recruiters, for example Ahmad Gasim, Thuraya Salah al-Deen and Aya al-Laythi. She was a close friend to Lena Abdel-Gadir and was able to describe her radicalization process. Rania is also familiar with the activities of the Islamic Cultural Association (ICA) that served as a vehicle for radicalization.

“**Idris**” is a former male UMST student. As a member of ICA, Idris provided critical insight into the activities of the association as well as drivers for other members’ radicalization. Idris was also a close friend to Mohammed Fakhri—president of ICA and a key individual who is understood to have played a critical role in the process of radicalization and recruiting students to the Islamic State.

Rise of the Islamic State in Sudan

“The Islamic State rose on the UMST’s Exhibition Day, and no one batted an eye.”

Although there has been less extremism in Sudan than in neighboring countries due to the nonviolent traditions within Sudanese society, it is hard to imagine that Sudan would be exempted from the global call of the organization known as the Islamic State (IS). This paper aims to illustrate a story of the appeal of the Islamic State—a story that tries to clarify myths about the lure of Muslim youth to extremism. Bright students of the University of Medical Science and

Technology (UMST), an elite university in Khartoum, have been radicalized and recruited to jihadist territories in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

The rise of IS in Sudan dates back to December 2013¹. Every year, UMST has an exhibition for all faculty and associations within the school. The event is called Exhibition Day, or just “Expo.” One of the associations that was presenting its activities was the Islamic Cultural Association (ICA). The inconspicuous religious group was founded in 2006 to assist international students in getting closer to their original religion—Islam. The majority of UMST students are foreign nationals with Sudanese roots—children of Sudanese immigrants in the UK, USA, or Canada, for instance. Parents of the students sent children to Sudan so that the children could get closer to their cultural and religious roots. ICA was a useful tool to fulfill this need. A few years later, the seemingly benign organization, however, was accused of being the machine from which IS used to recruit its members (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

At the Expo, ICA had its own stand. Rania, one of the key respondents for this paper, and a former UMST student, attended the Expo and also visited ICA’s table. She recalls, “It was separated: one [stand] for men and one for women. The female one was covered, and the voices were barely heard. I walked into the guys’ one unknowingly and they kicked me out. Because I still shook the hands of men, didn’t cover my face, and didn’t wear an abaya.²” Then she was approached by one of the “coordinators” (further described as a recruiter in the paper)—named Ayman Aziz. He apologized to her and asked her to go into the women’s section. Rania describes her experience at the women’s stand. “Propaganda videos were playing in the background, and they kept talking about how I’d go to hell. I was a hijabi³ at the time, and they were trying to get me into what they were preaching. They spoke of a near day where a fully Islamic state is coming to rise and that we will regret not joining it” (Rania, December 2017).

Similar testimony was also given by a relative of one of the recruits. According to him, IS targeted the medics “long before the caliphate came into being” and “the idea was that there is a pure Islamic state forming in the future and that there will be a signal given when they can go [there]”

¹ By that time, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered the disbanding of ISIL, putting al-Nusra Front in charge of jihadist efforts in Syria. However, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri’s order, and his group continued to operate in Syria. A few months later al-Qaeda publicly disavowed any relations with ISIL.

² Abaya is a simple robe-like dress that is considered to be a more conservative clothing style of Muslim women. Wearing abaya is typical for Saudi Arabia, for example. It is considered to be more conservative than wearing only *hijab* and pants or skirt, but less conservative than wearing a *niqab* or *burqa*, that cover the entire face and body.

³ *Hijabi* is a person (woman) who wears hijab—a veil that usually covers the hair and chest. It is considered to be a more conservative expression of faith than not wearing anything, but less conservative than wearing a *niqab* or *burka*.

(Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015). The Islamic State, which was known as ISIL during that time, started sowing the seeds of influence between 2011 and 2013. UMST's Exhibition Day in late 2013 was an official commencement of IS in Sudan. That day IS rose and no one batted an eye.

Institutions Involved

University of Medical Science and Technology (UMST)

UMST is a first-class private university in Sudan. It was founded during 1995 and 1996 when Sudan was undergoing modernization fueled by oil revenues. More than 5,000 students were enrolled at the school in 2017. UMST has fourteen faculties in total: faculties of medicine, dentistry, pharmacology, anesthesiology, engineering, information technologies, mass communications, and law, among others. Depending on the particular program, the tuition fee varies from \$3,000 to \$15,000 a year. Medicine is the most expensive one. The majority of the students come from abroad. The founder and CEO of the college is one person—Mamoun Homeida, the Secretary for Health of the Khartoum region. The university passively played an important role in the radicalization and recruitment process. This role is further addressed in the section describing cultural and religious aspects of the processes. However, UMST itself wasn't engaged in the Islamic State's machinery. This role was played by one of its student clubs.

Islamic Cultural Association (ICA)

The Islamic Cultural Association, in the text referred to as ICA, purportedly served as a vehicle for radicalization and recruitment of UMST students to various branches of the Islamic State. While not all Sudanese recruited to the Islamic State were members of the ICA, ICA was the source, facilitator, and means of delivery of the radicalization message. Friends of the recruits claim that ICA, a seemingly benign Islamic organization, was a well-oiled "base operation" for IS to recruit young medics (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

Founded in 2006, "ICA was initially a small group of students organizing events to raise money for charity, and volunteers within UMST would take part to help," argues Idris—a first-hand source for this paper, who was a member of ICA for several years. He continues in describing the primary role of ICA. "ICA focused its efforts on raising money for charities as well as giving *dawah*⁴ and bringing in religious speakers" (Idris, April 2019). The role of those "religious speakers" is further addressed in a separate section (The Role of Hidden Preachers).

⁴ The term means "invitation," it is the proselytizing or preaching of Islam.

Regarding the structure of ICA, Idris argues that the hierarchy was not very complex. "There was a leader and a few other positions such as the head of media, head of treasury, and positions responsible for bringing in speakers and organizing events, etc. There was no abnormal division within the organization" (Idris, April 2019). However, this might have changed from 2014 when Mohammed Fakhri, who was ICA's president at that time, rearranged the structure based on gender and level of religiousness. Similar accounts were reported by media articles as well. Townsend, for example, claims, "Open mic nights promoted by the ICA were held in an awkward atmosphere, women and men sat apart" (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015). In terms of membership, according to Idris, all that was required was for students to be active members and to volunteer "to support the efforts of the ICA" (April 2019).

ICA's activities and rhetoric of its internal meetings started transforming starting from 2011 when Mohammed Fakhri became the president. During his leadership, ICA has been gradually radicalizing. Regularly organized religious seminars were taking place not only within the university campus but also outside of the university. While those at UMST campus were mostly uncontroversial, the meetings that were held off campus would include, for example, screening of harrowing footage of victims from the Syrian regime's bombing of civilians (Sanford, Swann & Hashim, 2015). Later the broadness of Fakhri's activities within the association came to light. He was inviting radical preachers, most likely those who were the source of his own radicalization. Also, he constantly dissuaded members from pursuing their careers in the West.

The radicalization of the group members was apparent from their rhetoric and conversations. According to Townsend, "Light entertainment events became pious affairs. Applause was prohibited and poetry was celebrated with chants of 'Allahu Akbar' [God is greatest]." Rania too recalls engaging in conversations with ICA members. "Literally even conversations with them were scary. Mainly during their meetings after school, they spoke of how it was okay to spill non-Muslim blood in the name of spreading the Islamic message. At school, it happened [only] on specific occasions when they were trying to brainwash someone" (Rania, December 2017). Townsend reports similar accounts, "Some of the conversations between members of the inner circle depict heated arguments about how to kill sinners who have committed apostasy or adultery. Not if they should kill them, but how" (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

ICA used to have its own Facebook page. Admins of the page were posting a variety of common inspiring quotes and religious commentaries. More interestingly, however, the content was always

presented in both languages—Arabic and English. This aspect showed a clear intention of targeting a broader international audience. ICA also regularly published radical content. The statements included quotations of radical preachers such as Ahmad Musa Jibril⁵ or Anwar al-Awlaki⁶.

Three Groups Lured by the Islamic State

The Islamic State was busily recruiting professionals, not only fighters, from across the world. As part of an emerging so-called state infrastructure, IS was particularly lacking doctors—both male and female (Townsend, 2017). According to Idris, not all the recruits were from UMST; there were others from different universities, too, but UMST received the most attention (April 2019). Groups that are described below all consisted of UMST students and recent graduates.

1st Syrian Group

The first more significant group of medical students who traveled to Syria in March 2015 consisted of nine students and recent graduates, of which four were female and five male. Regarding their nationalities, at least seven of them were allegedly Britons. However, other reports claim that the entire first group was British-Sudanese. Two of the group members were detained in Turkey and sent back to Sudan. Those who reached Syria have been named as Ismael Hamadoun, Tamir Abusibah, Mohammed Osama Badri, Hisham Mohammed Fadlallah, Ahmed Khider, Nada Khider (Ahmed's younger sister), Lena Abdel-Gadir, Rowan Kamal Zine El-Abidine and Tasneem Suliman (Lowen, 2015). They are the single largest UK group known to have joined IS militants (Sanford, Swann & Hashim, 2015).⁷

The group allegedly entered Syria from Turkey. After crossing the border, all members were taken to the shari'a camp near the city of Raqqa, where they were further indoctrinated into the Islamic State's ideology. According to the media sources, the doctors were then spread across the caliphate. Some stayed in Raqqa at a specially built medical faculty near the Raqqa National hospital; others went to places like Al-Bab, Menbij, or deeper inside the former Islamic State's territory towards Iraq in Deir ez-Zor (Townsend, 2016). One of those who were stationed in Deir ez-Zor was Ahmed

⁵ Ahmad Musa Jibril is one of the world's most influential online preachers and recruiters of westerners looking to join IS. Jibril is an American citizen from Michigan of Palestinian origin. During the month of Ramadan of 2014, the ICA's Facebook page hosted eight videos from Jibril over two weeks (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

⁶ Anwar al-Awlaki was a hugely influential commander of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He was killed by US airstrike in 2011 in Yemen.

⁷ Picture of the members of 1st Syrian group is attached in the Annex – Figure D

Sami Khider, who later filmed a propaganda video (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

2nd Syrian Group

The second group of UMST students, again mainly British-Sudanese, departed for Syria in June 2015, three months after the first group and just a few weeks after the publishing of Khider's video. Reports indicate that the group consisted of 12 or 13 people (Lowen, 2015), possibly including an American-Sudanese and Canadian-Sudanese. Although nationalities were unclear, there is significant evidence that the second group included British brothers Mohammed Ageed and Ibrahim Ageed, aged 24 and 22 respectively, whose father works as a medical consultant in Leicestershire, UK (Gaffey, 2017). The brothers are further addressed in a separate section.

Reporters of *The Guardian* claim that some of the members of the second group joined up with Rowan Kamal Zine El-Abidine from the first group (Townsend, 2016). However, it should be pointed out again that the media's reporting about both groups have been often misleading or even contradictory. Also, according to all the sources interviewed for this research, many supporters of IS were left behind in Sudan and were expected to be coming back to the UK or other countries of residence. From those who went to Syria, many of them are reported to have been or believed to be killed. None of them managed to come back to Sudan.

Libyan Group

In 2015, *Sudan Tribune* reported, "Four Sudanese female students have secretly flown to Turkey to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria...the group which includes twin sisters have left the country to join the IS while other media reports claimed that they're five in this group" (Sudan Tribune, 2015). In a nutshell, this is a great example of a report that is entirely false. As it turned out, the group consisting of at least five people managed to fake their flight tickets booking and eventually went to Libya, not Turkey or Syria. The *Sudan Tribune's* report continues, "The names of the female students were among the list of the departing passengers on the Al-Arabiya Airlines heading to Istanbul via Sharjah in the UAE..." (2015). This part can be viewed as correct, considering that their names were, in fact, on the list of passengers, due to the fake booking. In reality, there were no such passengers on that flight.

The Libyan group consisted of at least five people—all affiliated with UMST. Their names are Abrar Abdel-Salam, Manar Abdel-Salam (Abrar's sister), Aya al-Laythi al-Hag Youssef, Thuraya Salah al-Deen, and Ahmad Gasim. Stories of these individuals are addressed further in more details in the text, since the two sisters—Abrar and Manar—managed to return back to Sudan from Libya

and were later interviewed for the interest of this paper. The journey was arranged by two individuals in particular: an IS local coordinator known as Omar al-Sudani (likely a nickname) and Ahmad Gasim (mentioned above as a recruiter). Gasim was in touch with Mohammed Fakhri, who helped him get to Libya after failing to go to Syria with the previous groups (“Tricked by Daesh, accompanied by her sister,” 2017).

Case Studies: From Recruits to Recruiters

Mohammed Fakhri—The Perfect Recruiter⁸

According to the UMST dean of student affairs—Dr. Ahmed Babiker—Mohammed Fakhri played a “major role” in recruiting students to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State (Gaffey, 2017). This fact was confirmed by Rania as well. “Fakhri was the mastermind behind the whole school. He graduated and was supposed to be long gone when I entered school, but he came back. I never saw him on the premises. No one even knew he was behind it all until news broke out” (December 2017). Fakhri’s crucial role in the entire process of recruiting the Sudanese medical students into IS was described by Townsend as well, who describes Fakhri as a “chief recruiter” (2017).

Mohammed Fakhri al-Khabass is a British national of Palestinian origin who grew up in Middlesbrough, north-eastern England. He has two older brothers. Fakhri’s father works as a doctor in Teesside and also runs an inner-city mosque in Middlesbrough (Townsend, 2015). Fakhri enrolled at Khartoum’s UMST in 2008, being part of “Batch 15.” In 2011, he became the president of ICA, which gradually developed into more radical and “increasingly hardline” under his leadership (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015). It is not clear when, where, and how exactly Fakhri got radicalized.

Fakhri was consistent in his conservative religious opinions. It can be observed from his leaked Facebook messages that his radicalization process was ultimately completed as late as in August 2014. Until then, he was still able to enthusiastically discuss his postgraduate thesis and pathology exams with his colleagues. In terms of his religious background, Fakhri resembled the cases of all other international students in Sudan. However, one aspect of his identity turned out to be critical. Fakhri was a British citizen of Palestinian origin and so had nothing in common with Sudanese society. This detachment and lack of sentiment towards the Sudanese people could have provided the stimulus for his recruiting activities within ICA.

⁸ His picture is attached in the Annex – Figure B

He quickly discovered the vulnerability of his peers and started exploiting them. Targeting Western students who were already overwhelmed with exploring their roots and culture, Fakhri began to manipulate them effectively. Townsend reports that witnesses described how often they saw Fakhri talking to female members of ICA, with one theory suggesting that he deliberately targeted female medics (Townsend, 2015). Other peers noticed that women wearing the full niqab met every Wednesday outside the university's Abdel-Kareem hall. They said that Fakhri was often present at such meetings (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

Fakhri's role was crucial within ICA. He invited radical preachers and altered the organization's structure. According to Townsend, after allegedly completing his own radicalization in August 2014, Fakhri divided members into classifications along the lines of gender, level of religiousness, and whether the member was Muslim or non-Muslim (2016). Some students described his role in spreading a highly politicized version of Islam within ICA (Sanford, Swann & Hashim, 2015), with emphasis on the necessity of joining the Islamic State.

In 2015, he was able to suspend his studies and go to Syria. Then he came back to Sudan, continued his studies, and encouraged other students to join IS (Townsend, 2017). No one else from the Sudanese medics managed to do the same. While two big groups of his recruits were already in Syria and other individuals were expected to follow, Fakhri became the perfect recruiter. In the second half of 2015, with the two groups already in Syria, Fakhri published three online essays in which he tried to persuade other British Muslims to come and defend the self-declared caliphate (Townsend, 2017). All three manifestos are attached to this paper in the appendix.

Intelligence agencies are especially keen to identify what has happened to Mohammed Fakhri (Townsend 2017). The general assumption is that Fakhri is now in Syria. It is unclear, however, whether he is dead or still alive. There are also opinions that Fakhri might still be alive and even back in Sudan (Sanford, Swann & Hashim, 2015). Idris, who knew him best from all the interviewees, admitted that he didn't know Fakhri's current location. "The last time I spoke to Mohammed Fakhri was when I saw him at UMST coming in to collect his certificate after he had traveled to Syria. It was a short hi-and-bye conversation that didn't go beyond the realms of 'How are you?' and 'Congratulations on graduating'" (Idris, April 2019).

The Role of Hidden Preachers

Radical Islamic preachers play a critical role in the process of radicalization. Without them, Islamic radicalization wouldn't be possible. Recruitment to terrorist organizations, including the jihadi ones, can take place independently of clerics, but that wasn't the case with the Sudanese medics. Religious aspects posed a critical role in indoctrination. Radical preachers were those who created and initially even delivered the message. Recruiters were the ones who arranged the environment and facilitated the delivery. While recruiters operated more or less publicly, preachers did not. Their influencing was clandestine and usually hidden behind the walls of particular mosques.

Islamic Cultural Association, a student club within UMST, frequently invited Islamic preachers to give lectures on campus. Those preachers included respectable Salafi sheikhs from Sudan and the Middle East. One such example is Mohamad al-Arefe, a prominent Salafi preacher from Saudi Arabia who spoke at ICA in September 2012. Rania recalls the week of Islamic lectures, although she didn't attend Arefe's lecture in person. "ICA had a whole week of lectures planned; Arefe came to Sudan and did speeches. He took it slowly but still made people feel bad about themselves. So many girls on campus showed up with scarves on the next day" (Rania, December 2017). Arefe was famous for calling young Muslims to jihad to fight in Syria. He advanced a very sectarian agenda and promoted anti-Shiism (Abdo, 2015).

Idris, who was a member of the ICA and regularly attended its meetings and lectures, confirmed that most of the Islamic sheikhs brought in to speak at UMST were well known preachers in Sudan. However, Idris rejects the claim that some of them would be directly supportive of IS. "There would be a speaker every now and again who some didn't agree with or considered to be strict or excessive, but not as serious as IS" (Idris, April 2019). Idris's argument was disputed by Rania, who told a very compelling story of a certain preacher, whom she remembered only as "Dr Ahmad" (December 2017).

"He came to school to give a lecture about jihad, appealing to the students to join IS. He brought the whole idea of like 'do you want to have a better future, do you want to guarantee your hereafter?' He reprimanded all the girls for not being decent, he called them hookers for not having scarfs on. The head of the university Mamoun Homeida had him kicked out and [later] dismembered ICA and banned them to ever bring a sheikh to school again, because of this guy. He was escorted by security [staff] off the campus and was never allowed in again. However, they [ICA members] still used to have lectures in his mosque" (Rania, December 2017).

It is not clear who this sheikh Ahmad really was and what his full name was. Similar accounts are reported by media as well. The reports talk about “firebrand” clerics who gave sermons supporting the Islamic State and called on people to “leave the bleachers and go to seats of martyrdom.” To give at least two examples—UMST hosted Sheikh Mohammed al-Jizouli (also known as Muhammed Ali El-Gazuli) and another jihadist preacher, Masa’ad al-Sidairah. Both were later arrested by the Sudanese secret service agency (NISS) (Abdelaziz, 2015; Abdo, 2015; Sudan Tribune, 2015).

Case Study: Ayman Aziz

While Mohammed Fakhri was the head of ICA, as already mentioned above, he wasn't always an active student. To lead the club on the UMST university campus, one has to be a student. Therefore, Rania would point out at another emerging leader—Ayman Siddeq Abdel-Aziz. “Fakhri was the head at ICA meetings but not at school. In my batch, Ayman was the head” (Rania, December 2017).

There was almost no mention in media sources about Ayman. However, Rania was confident about her memories from UMST's Exhibition Day in December 2013. Ayman was there, and Rania recalls the encounter. “He was the main speaker at the time, and the most 'religious' of the boys, yet not very aggressive in behavior. He was the most benign and friendly of them all. Whenever anyone had some religious question, they'd run to him. He either had an answer or would say, 'let me ask my sheikh and I'll tell you.' He was British” (Rania, December 2017).

Ayman's Facebook photograph is attached in the appendix (Figure A). It is apparent from the Facebook connection that Ayman knew Mohammed Fakhri and was likely his sympathizer and associate. Although little is known about Ayman, something can still be observed about him from Rania's statement. By the end of 2013, when the IS message had already started spreading through the college, Ayman wasn't the type of a brutal jihadi warrior. Indeed, this can be observed from the vast majority of the recruits. They did not seem to have bloodthirsty behavior before joining IS. According to *Sudan Tribune*, Ayman Aziz was killed in an air attack in the Iraqi town of Faluja in June 2016 (“Sudanese Jihadist killed in fighting in Iraq,” 2016).

Case Study: Ahmad Gasim (Libya)⁹

Ahmad Gasim al-Seed was the coordinator and member of the Libyan group. As mentioned above, we know that the group consisted of at least four other people: Abrar, Manar, Thuraya, and Aya. All were female UMST students. Ahmad Gasim was close to one of them—Aya al-Laythi. It is likely that Ahmad was the initiator, and Aya passed his influence onto the other women. According to Rania, Ahmad was present at the Exhibition Day of UMST in December 2013. She recalls an incident in which Ahmad was involved. “He cut another Christian boy's headphones in half with a Swiss Army knife because the boy was listening to music during *azaan*¹⁰ time. He went too far” (Rania, December 2017).

Ahmad’s transformation can serve as a great example of how a completely innocent person can be completely radicalized. Rania knew Ahmad very well. She goes on to describe him. “Ahmad had the funniest laugh that always got him in trouble because it was an actual giggle.” According to Rania, his radicalization was too obvious. However, it was not only his religious opinions that evolved. His demeanor also changed. “Apart from getting radicalized, he became very impatient. He would immediately get upset, and any conversation would immediately go on the radical extreme side” (Rania, December 2017).

Regarding the term “going on the radical extreme side,” it can be hard to imagine a particular situation. Therefore, Rania recalled a heated conversation. “I remember one time they had a discussion with other boys in the class—regular boys, Muslims. He was telling them about the idea of jihad, and how everybody should go to jihad. Things started getting heated and their voices getting loud, so everyone was looking at them. Ahmad, out of the blue, said: ‘if you are killing a non-Muslim you can get away with it, and it’s ok because we are supposed to kill all the non-Muslims in the world, and this is how life goes’” (Rania, December 2017).

Anyone who may have missed Ahmad’s heated engagements couldn’t miss other indicators that showed how things had gone wrong. Ahmad started skipping classes and underwent gun training classes at a shooting range club from where he posted pictures. According to Rania, Ahmad also started cutting the bottom of his pants with scissors, reminding us that external indicators of radicalization don’t occur only in women’s clothing (December 2017). This habit is based on several traditions of the Prophet Mohammed—the hadith—and it’s considered to be one of the

⁹ His picture is attached in the Annex – Figure C

¹⁰ Azaan, also *adhan* – is the Islamic call to worship, recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day.

external steps towards living a more religious life (similarly to growing out men's beard, for example). It has been adopted among more conservative Muslims and Salafi Muslims in particular.

Abrar Abdel-Salam, who was part of Ahmad's group of recruits to IS in Libya, has been lucky enough to return to Sudan. She gave testimony, in which she claimed that Ahmad and Aya, by that time being married, were both killed in a single day during the bombarding of IS sites in Sirte, Libya. According to Rania, who is familiar with the story, Ahmad and Aya had a daughter called Lujain. She survived the bombarding, was rescued, and taken back to Sudan by Aya's father. Aya's parents currently take care of her (December 2017).

Case Study: Ahmed Khider (Syria)

Ahmed Sami Khider was one of the British-Sudanese recruits, who later became a recruiter for IS. Khider was raised up in south London; his father was a doctor. Ahmed graduated from UMST in 2014 before disappearing as a member of the first group of medical students recruited by IS in March 2015. He left for Syria with his sister Nada. After arriving to Syria, Ahmed was assigned to Deir ez-Zor, a city located deep inside IS territory (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015).

Ahmed Khider's story is addressed in this paper especially for one important reason. He represents the type of recruit who evolved into a recruiter over time. In other words, he gradually went from being a victim to an offender. This transformation reminds us of a very fine line between the recruits and recruiters. Apart from Ahmed Khider, similar transformation could be observed in the case of Ahmad Gasim. The recruit becomes a recruiter when they stop just going with the recruitment flow and start to actively participate in the recruitment process and draw other people to the group.

Nonetheless, Ahmed Khider was initially also a victim. Interviewees who knew him personally described him as easy-going, smart, and influential among his peers. He became a leader and an example for other students who carefully listened to his arguments. Idris recalls that Ahmed was "a kind and soft-spoken individual who was loved by everyone who knew him and was very polite" (April 2019). His initial radicalization allegedly occurred in 2013. As described by the interviewees, Khider withdrew into seclusion as well as became more serious and socially withdrawn. It has been assumed that during that time he was under the influence of extremists. His radicalization was unanticipated. As Idris concludes, Ahmed "would be an example of someone who I do not believe had a radical ideology" (April 2019).

Two months after Ahmed's arrival to Syria, in May 2015, he appeared in an IS propaganda video, appealing to other British medics for joining him in building "a new society". In that video, Khider complimented medical conditions within the Islamic State territory. "There is a really good medical service being provided here, lots of hospitals... pediatric hospitals, with specialized doctors." He can be seen teaching other medical students in the clip. The video ends with Khider's message to other Muslims. "Dear brothers and sisters, we as Muslims and as doctors have a great responsibility. All you are doing is sitting in the West in the comfort of your homes. Use your skills and come here" (Sanford, Swann & Hashim, 2015).

Ahmed Khider was killed by an airstrike in February 2017, when his IS convoy attempted to flee from the besieged city of Mosul in Iraq.

Case Study: Mohammed and Ibrahim Ageed (Syria)

British citizens and brothers Mohammed Ageed and Ibrahim Ageed, aged 24 and 22 respectively, traveled to the Islamic State territories in Syria as a part of the second group. Their father works as a medical consultant in Leicestershire, UK (Gaffey, 2017). While little is known about Mohammed Ageed, both Rania and Idris personally knew the second brother—Ibrahim. Idris recalls his impression of Ibrahim. "While he was not a close friend, it did come as a shock to me when I had learned that he was recruited, as he also did not strike me as someone with extreme ideology" (Idris, April 2019).

Rania confirms that both brothers left together to Syria and summarizes the transformation of Ibrahim, who she claims was her close friend. "From day one when 'Ibs' entered school, he wouldn't shake women's hands. But he would hang out with us, go to parties, and go to birthday parties. Ibs was one of the chill people, and we respected that he didn't shake hands. Then suddenly he started getting more and more quiet, not hanging out with us, but he would still answer our message or calls, so nobody thought of it [going to IS]. Then his brother [Mohammed] got superbly radicalized—skipping classes" (Rania, December 2017).

Additionally, Rania recalls the moments that came before Ibrahim left. "One day, we started the exams, and Ibrahim didn't show up. We knew that he left. I personally called him like a dozen times, but his phone was switched off. We knew that he left with his brother. It was the same with Sami [Ahmed Sami Khider, another recruit who later appeared in an IS propaganda video] and his sister Nada" (Rania, December 2017).

Case Study: Lena Abdel-Gadir (Syria)

“‘Ling-ling’ was her nickname, such a cheerful girl.”

Lena Mamoun Abdel-Gadir (also referred to as Lina) is a notably tragic case. Raised in a small rural Norfolk village in Ashwicken, UK, Lena was a daughter of two doctors with Sudanese roots (her father is a respected orthopedist). Lena graduated from the private Wisbech Grammar School (Townsend, 2015). According to her class teacher, Lena was an excellent and focused student, always with brilliant results. She was engaged in the Student Council and played hockey. Her teachers commented that Lena's life desire was helping other people.

Lena's parents were keen on reconnecting her with Sudanese culture. Therefore, encouraged by the parents, Lena selected UMST college in the Sudanese capital for her medical studies. According to Graham-Harrison, the last time her father saw her was when they had dinner together in Khartoum, "She seemed happy with her progress in the long slog to become a doctor" (2015). During her studies at UMST in Khartoum, Lena lived with her grandmother.

According to the interviewees, she had been a purposeful and dedicated student before the radicalization occurred. Rania was Lena's good friend. "'Ling-ling' was her nickname, such a cheerful girl," she said. "She was crying because she told her parents that she had become a niqabi¹¹" (Rania, December 2017). Based on the extensive research done on Lena's case, it is likely that Mohammed Fakhri had deliberately manipulated Lena. Fakhri effectively exploited Lena's weakness—the desire to help other people. Lena may have been deeply touched by ICA's screenings of the mass suffering in Syria.

Lena's transformation could have been well-observed from her Twitter account. Pictures of flowers, pastries, jokes about Nutella, or expressing reluctance to getting married¹² was gradually replaced by tweets defending Charlie Hebdo attackers. Lena started following accounts related and supportive of IS,¹³ with a particular interest in radical Islamic cleric Ahmad Musa Jibril (Graham-Harrison, Townsend & Zambrana, 2015). She began sharing his videos. Jibril is a celebrity among

¹¹ *Niqabi* – person that is wearing niqab (garment of clothing that covers the head and face), it is considered to be more conservative than wearing a hijab.

¹² Lena was following, for example, Twitter profiles of The Economist magazine, the comedian Frankie Boyle, or humorous page called @ThingsAKidSaid (Graham-Harrison, Townsend & Zambrana, 2015).

¹³ For example, @VeiledByChoice – a site that openly supported IS (Graham-Harrison, Townsend & Zambrana, 2015).

European and American jihadists. It seems that mainly his videos might have been a turning point in Lena's radicalization.

Lena was one of the seven British nationals recruited to IS from UMST as part of the first group that left Sudan in March 2015. She was 19 years old. Another interviewee—Idris, who "knew Lena by the name of Lina Gadir," provided an additional context of Lena's recruitment. According to him, Lena got married to a guy who was also recruited, Ismael, before leaving for Syria. "[Ismael and she] had spoken about marriage before leaving for Syria, and I was aware of this. It became apparent to me later that they might have been arranging this marriage for them to travel together.¹⁴" Idris concludes that it would not be permitted for a woman to travel unaccompanied, which is the reason why other women also got married within the group or traveled with their brothers¹⁵ (Idris, April 2019).

Lena's trip to Syria began at Khartoum airport in the early hours of March 12th, 2015. "The group boarded Turkish Airlines flight 681, which left for Istanbul at 3:20am and arrived about three hours later. After the overnight flight, they took a long bus journey overland—the route usually favored by would-be jihadis to avoid both the cost and possible scrutiny of an onward flight. That drive would have taken the better part of 24 hours, with the exact time depending on where they aimed to cross over the porous border" (Graham-Harrison, Zambrana & Aydemir, 2015).

On March 13th, just hours before Lena and her group crossed the border between Turkey and Syria, Lena sent a text message to her sister. "Don't worry about us; we've reached Turkey and are on our way to volunteer to help wounded Syrian people." She attached a picture of herself where she looked relaxed and happy. The text message was sent from the bus shortly before Lena and her group vanished. Lena's good-hearted intentions were confirmed by a Turkish politician, who assisted the recruits' families in tracing their children to Syria. "Let's not forget about the fact that they are doctors; they went there to help, not to fight" (Graham-Harrison, Zambrana & Aydemir, 2015). Lena's fate is unknown.

Case Study: Abrar and Manar Abdel-Salam (Libya)

Two Sudanese sisters—Abrar Abdel-Salam and Manar Abdel-Salam—represent another special case of the process of radicalization and recruitment that was taking place on Sudanese university campuses. Their story is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. Firstly, the Islamic State's

¹⁴ A guy called Ismael Hamadoun was allegedly part of the first Syrian group—see section "1st Syrian Group".

¹⁵ Refer to Ahmed Khider and his sister Nada in a separate section (Case Study: Ahmed Khider).

recruiters preferred to assign the sisters to Libya, not Syria or Iraq, unlike the majority of other recruits. Secondly, Abrar and Manar were lucky enough to survive and return to Sudan.

Interviewing Abrar—The Context

Although both sisters have been closely monitored by officers of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) after their return home, it was possible to approach one of them—Abrar—and interview her. The interview was conducted through an intermediary by the name of “Layla.” Layla, a female student of UMST, was a close friend to both sisters and therefore was able to easily gain access to Abrar. All women were formerly classmates at UMST and also attended the meetings of ICA. According to Layla, the meetings were led by Mohammed Fakhri at that time (October 2017).

Following is the paraphrased summary of Abrar’s testimony to Layla, divided into three phases. The questions were prepared in advance by the author of this paper, while some additional questions were asked during the interview between the author and Layla through WhatsApp communication. The interview took place in Khartoum in October 2017, as a part of the field research for this paper.

Phase 1—Journey to Libya

Abrar, 25, explains how she managed to deceive her family and travel from Sudan to Libya. Her group also included her sister Manar, Ahmad Gasim, Thuraya, and Aya. All were assisted by IS agents in Khartoum. They booked fake flight tickets to Cairo and Istanbul, in order to confuse their families that were already suspicious about the women’s intentions. The parents realized that both sisters had been radicalized and had been preparing to leave the country. Therefore, some relatives allegedly booked the same flight tickets in order to follow the women and prevent them from, what they believed, was joining the Islamic State in Syria. However, the entire booking process was only supposed to cover up the real plan—traveling to Libya by road. Abrar describes the crossing of the porous Libyan-Sudanese border and concludes that once they reached Libya, there was no way of returning back.

Phase 2—Life in Sirte, work, and marriage

After arrival to Libya, both sisters were taken to work in a hospital in the city of Sirte, which was under the control of the Libyan branch of the so-called Islamic State. They were receiving a monthly salary of 200 dinars (\$25) and were not allowed to leave the hospital at any time. They

were, however, provided with all the necessary comfort they needed, including Wi-Fi, which enabled them to keep in touch with their families back home.

Another Sudanese, a friend who traveled with them—Ahmad Gasim¹⁶ advised them to get married to two of his friends: Jafar Mohammed alias Abu Mujahid, who worked as an IS police officer, and Abu Ja’la—an IS commander. Marriage would allow them to live with their husbands in houses outside of the hospital in Sirte. The sisters agreed. According to Abrar’s testimony, both men were allowed to see the brides shortly without niqab, before the wedding ceremony started. In fact, both women subsequently moved into their husbands’ houses and soon got pregnant. Meanwhile, Ahmad Gasim married another woman from the same batch of recruits—Aya.

Phase 3—Experiencing hell

When the war burst out in Sirte, the families were forced to move to several other places. Whenever the war reached them, they had to move again and again. Abrar’s child passed away shortly after birth due to dehydration. Manar’s child died during bombardment of the city. Both husbands were killed on the frontlines. Both sisters once again escaped to another town before finally being arrested. They spent one year and half in prison before being released and sent back to Sudan. Their release was most likely the result of joint efforts by their parents and the Sudanese authorities, in collaboration with their Libyan counterparts.

While it was possible to interview Abrar, according to their mother, the other sister Manar has not yet fully physically recovered from her Libyan experience. Before joining IS in Libya, Layla recalled Manar as a very polite, kind and supportive person, who engaged in charity work. Layla described elements of Manar’s transformation, “She was wearing hijab before switching to niqab.” Layla also pointed out how striking the change in Abrar’s and Manar’s behavior was, which took place within “a couple of weeks” of attending the ICA meetings. According to Layla, physical changes could be noticed first. While men grew their beards, women radically changed their style of dress (October 2017).

Case Study: Aya al-Laythi and Thuraya Salah al-Deen¹⁷ (Libya)

As already mentioned before, additional members of the Libyan group of Sudanese students who joined the Islamic State were Aya al-Laythi al-Hag Youssef and Thuraya Salah al-Deen. Unfortunately, little is known about them, especially compared to the sisters Abrar and Manar.

¹⁶ Ahmad Gasim’s story is addressed in a separate section—“Case Study: Ahmad Gasim (Libya)”

¹⁷ Her picture is attached in the Annex – Figure C

They all were friends from UMST, with Aya in her third year of study. Luckily, Rania was a good friend to both of them. When asked about Aya and Thuraya, she said, “They were innocent children and then all of a sudden...They would literally go out with us to birthday parties, parties, and hangouts. Thuraya was the sweetest thing ever. So bubbly and alive, she was very close to me. She was a hijabi but wore skinny jeans and everything. Aya as well.” However, Rania immediately clarified that it was Thuraya who approached her on the Exhibition Day in December 2013 and later became the most aggressive in behavior (December 2017).

The Process of Radicalization and Recruitment

Given the conservative nature of Sudanese society, with a legal system based on Islamic Shari’a law, and the fact that the country is de-facto ruled by an Islamist regime,¹⁸ Sudan has always posed quite an exclusive environment for radicalization and recruitment procedures for radical Islamic organizations.

Several places, such as the International University of Africa in Khartoum, have become publicly known for such activities. Nevertheless, events that occurred at UMST between 2013 and 2015 showed an innovative approach to the processes of radicalization and recruitment. The UMST audience was composed of highly intelligent, liberal, and Western-minded students from a first-rate medical program. Therefore, the recruiters’ methods had to be tailored to such an audience.

Cultural and Religious Aspects

Still in their teenage years, most of the radicalized students were initially sent to Sudan by their parents from Western countries in order to get in touch with their original African and Islamic roots and culture. After the completion of their studies, the graduates were expected to come back to their respective countries, in which they held citizenships, and work there as doctors. United Kingdom predominated among those countries, followed by the United States and Canada. Abdo in his article claims that the kids were from wealthy families, held foreign passports and “barely [knew] Arabic or much about Islam” (Abdo, 2015). The latter point does not necessarily need to be true. The recruits allegedly knew at least the Sudanese dialect of Arabic. Regarding their knowledge of Islam, it essentially depends on how we define “knowing much about Islam.” They certainly attended the ICA meetings as well as lectures and were interested in learning more about their religion.

¹⁸ At the time of writing, Sudan has been undergoing a revolution that overthrew President Omar al-Bashir. Bashir was leading the Islamist regime and was in power for 30 years. At the time of writing, the country has been ruled by a transitional military government, with ongoing negotiations between the military, protesters, and opposition, that should lead to handing over the power to a civilian government.

Radicalization is closely connected with deepening one's faith. Especially compared to their schoolmates, it doesn't seem as if those recruited students would have had no idea about Islam.

The concept of sending young men and women to Sudan was highly anticipated by their parents. UMST was a much cheaper and yet prestigious alternative to British colleges. At UMST, students would receive a high-quality medical education in compliance with British standards, while at the same time being exposed to Sudanese and Islamic culture. One of the parents whose kid has been recruited to IS said, "We sent our children to study [in Sudan] so that they would be surrounded by their culture." But immediately added, "Their decision to go to Syria has been a shock for all of us" (Graham-Harrison, Zambrana & Aydemir, 2015). Not only the parents but even students themselves yearned for their Islamic identity while living in the West (Abdo, 2015).

UMST was considered to be an isolated island of freedom within the conservative Sudanese society. "At UMST you can wear whatever you want, unlike at other Sudanese universities," said Rania, one of the interviewees (December 2017). This factor made it easier for the incoming teenagers to adapt and survive the hardship of life in the Sudanese capital. Not only were male and female students allowed to study together, which is not guaranteed in Sudan at all from the religious perspective, but they also covertly partied together outside of the university. UMST life is famous for underground activities that included soft drugs and scantily clad women.

Nevertheless, some students who came to Sudan from Western countries were not able to adapt to the new environment. They were undergoing a crisis of identity—coming from two very different worlds, but not feeling a sense of belonging to either one of them. Abdo further explains how the Western community, where the students thought they belonged to, was very far from them. "As a result, they end up in the middle of nowhere, between their original culture and the other [Western] one. They are lost, and the best answer for them is to find God. They go to the mosque, believing that they will find God there. However, they will find radical sheikhs not Allah, and that is how the IS journey starts" (Abdo, 2015). Although Abdo's description of one's radicalization process is obviously simplified, the main principle is correct. It turned out that such disillusioned individuals were the most vulnerable to radicalization, especially if isolated and approached in a sophisticated manner by charismatic recruiters.

Social Aspects

Assuming that the recruit is culturally vulnerable, the initial step for launching their radicalization process is to isolate them socially. The recruiters would slowly isolate the recruits from their friends

and family members, so that they only trusted and respected the inner circle of their new fellowship (Townsend, Zambrana & Almahmoud, 2015). Such isolation would allow further psychological influencing and manipulation to take place.

The attempt to isolate the recruit socially appears to be the last chance to save the victim from deeper brainwashing and eventual radicalization. Rania recalls the moment, when IS recruiters almost gained control over one of her friends. “I saved one of my best friends from their talks; she was getting so deep with them in terms of her thinking, about the hereafter and how everything we do in this life is sending us to hell. I called her mom and kept hanging out with her every day at school” (Rania, December 2017). Rania most likely prevented another young medic from joining the group, as she contested and disrupted the isolation of her friend.

Internal changes always have to appear externally as well. In other words, psychological processes (as further addressed below) have to appear in the social behavior of the individual. Recruiters exert their influence upon both the internal and external behaviors of the victim. Therefore, in order to be able to stop the person’s radicalization, one should observe the external symptoms. In the case of the Sudanese students, the women, for example, switched from wearing hijab to wearing niqab. While hijab is the most common religious headwear among Sudanese women, niqab is extremely rare to see.

Rania recalls the switch in clothing among her close friends. “It took exactly a semester in 2013. Thuraya started wearing skirts instead of pants,¹⁹ but then slowly moved to abaya, niqab, and then gloves and dark socks. Aya as well.” Both Thuraya and Aya were part of the Libyan group. Rania adds, “Some of these girls wore belly-revealing tank tops first semester and then went on to covering everything and being very extreme” (Rania, December 2017). The same type of external social behavior can be observed in men as well, such as growing beards or adjusting the length of their pants.

As for other social aspects, great attention should be paid to personal relationships among the recruits. As Abdo points out, it wasn’t IS online propaganda or social media that played such a crucial role. Rather, it was personal relationships that caused one friend to follow another into the organization (Abdo, 2015). Moreover, such close personal relationships don’t necessarily need to

¹⁹ In the context of Sudanese culture and religious habits, wearing long shirt is considered more appropriate than wearing a close-fitting pants that somehow shape woman’s legs. More conservative than wearing a full skirt would be for example wearing abaya, or any other kind of one-piece long dress or frock.

be only between friends but can also be typically between siblings or partners. Such relationships are difficult to breach, so the ongoing recruitment can be hard to notice.

Psychological Aspects

When the person was isolated from family members and friends, the recruiter targets the psyche of an individual using a set of approaches. In the case of Sudanese students, these approaches included psychological manipulation based on religious and avenging arguments. They strongly appealed to the recruit's emotions such as shame, anger, or compassion. It perfectly corresponded to the composition of the audience, since all the students were young, intelligent, and compassionate future doctors. Additionally, they were obviously Muslims, which also played a role, as explained below.

According to Speckhard and Shajkovci, religious (in this case—Islamic) arguments can be effectively used when approaching a “true believer”—a person who “believes that the terrorist group represents the true Islam and, in the case of the Islamic State, seeks to help build its caliphate.” The same article also addresses a psychological manipulation towards an “avenger”—a person who “is angry over geopolitics, discrimination, marginalization and secondary traumatization, and believes the group can address these issues and will change the world for the better” (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018).

Both of these appeals were effectively used by the recruiters of UMST medics. As Speckhard and Shajkovci argue, the use of these approaches is often coupled with consumption of graphic images from the conflict zones that convince the recruit of ongoing injustice (2018). This finding is particularly important for the case studies of this paper too. The interviewees confirmed that screening of Syrians who suffer in their war-torn country was a regular part of the ICA meetings.

Mohammed Fakhri, the chief recruiter, used the psychological methods in practice, which can be illustrated in his statements. “How can you be calmly sleeping while knowing that Muslims are dying in Syria!” (Layla, October 2017) The section “Muslims are dying” represents the use of both—religious and avenging appeals. The full sentence also serves as a great example of approaching the individual's emotions, such as shame: “How can you be calmly sleeping...” Those are particularly effective if the recruit is an intelligent and compassionate person.

According to Matthew Kriner, a research intern at Valens Global, shame is a powerful emotion that is often effectively used by terrorist groups to help gather and radicalize followers. Kriner

emphasizes that although shame is often a taboo subject in modern society, it remains a highly powerful tool for manipulation. Shame is closely related to conscience and ethics. Therefore, being able to appeal to a person's conscience, especially if that person is a doctor, shame can be exploited in favor of specific beliefs and behaviors, including the justification of terrorist violence (Kriner, 2018).

Lastly, analysis of the individual recruit cases has shown a significant level of distress, caused by psychological influences of the recruiter. Such influence gradually created pressure and eventually pushed the recruit into action. In this respect, the key factor is the length of exposure to such influence. Speaking from the author's personal experience, the pressure can be manageable only if it doesn't last for a prolonged duration. The process of radicalization doesn't happen overnight. It needs weeks, more likely months. While the factors causing excessive anxiety could have been manageable if they occurred on a one-time basis, Sudanese medics were exposed to such influence for an extensive amount of time. Their indoctrination was gradual, intensive, and complemented with a deepening of individual religiousness facilitated by the ICA.

Conclusion

It is hard to imagine that the 2011 Arab spring uprisings would take place without a significant role of radical Islamist organizations. Indeed, jihadist movements have been on the rise across the Middle East since then. Although Sudan was exempted from the 2011 revolutions, the international context and growth of the Islamic State in the region have significantly affected the radical scene in Sudan. The fall of Arab regimes unleashed militant groups that had been previously suppressed by powerful intelligence and law enforcement agencies (Abdelaziz, 2015). Syria and Libya—two countries that are crucial in the context of this paper, pose a great example of such militant group activity. They became the final destination for dozens of young Sudanese recruits who were willing to join the Islamic State.

This paper illustrates how the cultural and religious backgrounds of the recruits played an essential role at the beginning of the radicalization process. The backgrounds alone, however, would not have been enough to radicalize nor recruit an individual. Radical preachers supportive of IS ideology needed a facilitator—someone, who would create the ideal conditions for radicalization and serve as a middleman between the source and the target. That was the moment where Mohammed Fakhri, a British national of Palestinian descent, emerged. He used one of the UMST

student clubs—Islamic Cultural Association (ICA)—as a vehicle for radicalization and recruitment to the Islamic State.

While reactive approaches have been continuously implemented by western governments to stop terrorists, more emphasis should be exerted upon proactive measures. Proactive measures target the processes of radicalization and recruitment. In a perfect world, the objective would be stopping terrorists from carrying out their attacks even before they start planning such attacks. Radicalization occurs at the very beginning of creating a terrorist. Therefore, the proactive approach should identify the root causes of radicalization, analyze and intercept its patterns, create counter-narratives and counter-messages, and prevent vulnerable audiences from undergoing it.


While studying the individual cases of IS recruits, one should realize that many recruits are just victims who were sophisticatedly manipulated into the organization. It was not their intention to join a bloodthirsty organization like IS nor were they forced to do that. However, the intention here is essential and should be taken into consideration when assessing individual cases of those who survived and wish to come back home. Individuals like Lena Abdel-Gadir, Abrar Abdel-Salam or Aya al-Laythi, as illustrated in the case studies of this paper, never wanted to harm anyone and never ended up doing so. Their religious affiliation developed into a political allegiance.

Deradicalization of returnees can be part of the proactive approach, assuming that they had not conducted any violent activities during their time in IS, which should be confirmed by a vetting process. Their first-hand experience would enhance their credibility. They could tell their personal stories and encounters with the brutality of IS. Their disillusion and disappointment should be used in discouraging others from joining IS and similar jihadist organizations.

Losing its "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq might weaken the organization's recruitment machinery, since ruling over a specific territory has been a crucial precondition for successful propaganda. Weaker propaganda should slow down the flow of foreign fighters and other recruits. Nevertheless, the tactics and techniques that IS used in radicalizing and recruiting its members might, and most likely will prevail.

Appendix

1) Mohammed Fakhri's Facebook statements


 **Mohammed Fakhri Deeb Al-khabass**
January 11, 2012 · 🌐

"Know that Allah gives life to the earth after its death! Indeed We have made clear the signs to you, if you but understand" 57:17 (English meaning of Quran)

The 'Allama Ibn Kathir says in his tafseer: "This Ayah indicates that He brings subtleness to hearts after they have become hard, guides the confused after they were led astray, and relieves hardships after they have intensified. And just as Allah brings life back to the dead and dry earth by sending the needed abundant rain, He also guides the hardened hearts with the proofs and evidences of the Qur'an. The light (of faith) would have access to the hearts once again, after they were closed and, as a consequence, no guidance was able to reach them. All praise is due to Him Who guides whomever He wills after they were misguided, Who misguides those who were led aright before. Surely, it is He Who does what He wills and He is the All-Wise, the Most Just in all that He does, the Most Subtle, the Most Aware, the Most High, the Proud."

Please take time to contemplate about this if your Heart is deviated from the path of Allah SWT...

👍 3

 **Mohammed Fakhri Deeb Al-khabass**
August 27, 2014 · 🌐

Salam Alykum. Just a Quick Reminder on using facebook
Allah (SWT) ordered the Men...

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ذَٰلِكَ أَرَادَ لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ

Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. (EMQ 24:30)

Therefore it is not permissible for a man, generally, to look at a non-Mahram women. Even if the sister is wearing Hijab or Niqab, it is still not permissible for him to look at her. The companions (RAA) would lower their gaze despite the sisters at that time wearing Hijab.

Also, remember that what is posted on your wall or timeline, is your responsibility... So make sure that your wall or timeline is void of any pictures of sisters. This includes your friends list and any sister that comments on your wall... that may be viewed by others, even if you are lowering your own gaze. Deleting the sisters comments or un-friending them may be difficult due to the offence that it may cause, but if that is what you must do then fearing Allah is the ultimate priority.

However, know that these sisters will thank you later on, if not in this life then in the next, that you cared enough for them that you did your job as a Muslim brother would do to his Muslim sister.

Finally, Any sister that has posted a picture of herself as a profile picture, (Even if you are wearing hijab), take this as advice from a brother that simply wants what is best for you... Change your profile picture to something that will please Allah (SWT). You may be getting sins even while you are sleeping or eating... as your Facebook account runs 24 hours seven days a week, even if you are not logged on. Likewise you can get 'Hasanat' all the time if you take part in a good sunnah of reminding your fellow sisters of the obligation of Hijab and leading by example...

👍 8

6 Shares

2) Mohammed Fakhri's online manifestos

All three manifestos of Mohammed Fakhri, the chief recruiter of IS in Sudan, were published on this website: <https://justpaste.it/>

However, it seems that the articles were blocked or removed. Please, contact the author of this paper to receive safe PDF copies of the manifestos, that were downloaded in 2017 when they were still available.

A) "HIJRAH TO THE ISLAMIC STATE"

- number of views as of 2017: 3,723
- date of publishing: **July 20, 2015**

B) “A MESSAGE TO THE HESITANT ONE FROM HIJRAH AND JIHAD—PART 1”

- number of views as of 2017: 1,912
- date of publishing: **October 16, 2015**

C) “A MESSAGE TO THE HESITANT ONE FROM HIJRAH AND JIHAD—PART 2”

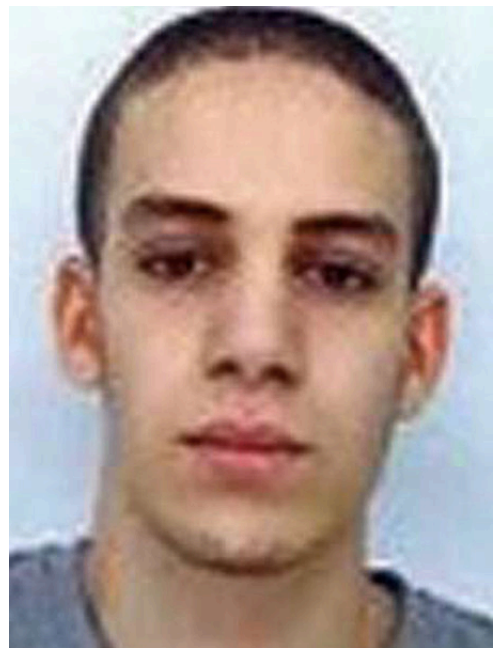
- number of views as of 2017: 1,648
- date of publishing: **October 26, 2015**

3) Photos of recruits and recruiters (case studies)

Figure A—Ayman Aziz²⁰



Figure B—Mohammed Fakhri²¹



²⁰ Retrieved from Ayman Aziz’s personal Facebook profile:
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000191737486>

²¹ Retrieved from Whitehead, 2015.

Figure C—Ahmad Gasim and Thuraya Salah al-Deen²²



Figure D—1st Syrian Group²³



²² The photographs of Ahmad and Thuraya were provided by Rania under the condition of preserving the anonymity of other people on the picture.

²³ Ibid.

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Jan Havlicek is an MA candidate in Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies (NPTS) at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, and Graduate Research Assistant for the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC). His academic research has focused on radicalization and terrorist recruitment, Islamic extremism, terrorism in Africa and the Middle East, and the use of predictive profiling as a threat assessment technique. In the past, Jan conducted long-term security-oriented field research in Kenya and Sudan, focusing on the topics mentioned above. Apart from his studies and research, Jan has spent the last nine years working as a tour guide and consultant in East Africa and building a school in Kenya that was completed in January 2019.

