

V. Book Reviews

Anne Speckhard. *Bride of ISIS: One Young Woman's Path into Homegrown Terrorism.*

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Reviewed by Anita Perešin

Anne Speckhard's new book "Bride of ISIS" is a timely and precious resource for those who want to understand how ISIS attracts and motivates young Western women over the Internet and lures them into abandoning a comfortable life in a developed country to travel thousands of miles to become the wives of its fighters in the dangerous territories of the Islamic State's proclaimed Caliphate, or to become homegrown terrorists in their own countries, ready to sacrifice their lives in the name of the "Great Jihad".

Dr. Speckhard, who is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Security Studies at Georgetown University in the Schools of Medicine and Foreign Service, narrates through a fictionalized story based on an actual terrorist (Shannon Conley), and offers a fascinating insight into the personal transformation and psychological trajectory of an American teenager morphed into a would-be suicide bomber. Inspired by a composite of real cases, the author uses the character of Sophie Lindsay, a seemingly "normal" girl and once a successful student from a well-established Christian family, but in reality traumatized and left without support from family and friends after a violent experience in her past. The case study shows the power of the propaganda spread on the Internet by savvy ISIS recruiters, delivered to vulnerable persons, and shows how an idealized online love affair with an ISIS fighter via Skype, can be the trigger of dramatic changes in her life.

The author describes how ISIS manages to convince young Muslims from the West to fulfill what they believe is their religious duty, by "joining a cosmic battle" for the utopian state that ISIS claims to be building in Syria and Iraq. Anne Speckhard explains how the Islamic State, with its proclaimed Caliphate, is able to inspire "End Times mentality," while creating at the same time fighters for the war theater of Syria and Iraq and grooming some of them to become self-organized homegrown attackers in the West. "The followers of ISIS believe this is all leading to the final cosmic battle and that Allah is calling them to the Great Jihad," she writes, showing us how dangerous people who believe in apocalyptic visions can become when eager to sacrifice themselves for their ideas of an imaginary utopian future.

In parallel with Sophie's life story with an ISIS fighter she had never met in person but who seduces her over the Internet into traveling all the way from home, the book presents the challenges that security experts from the Denver Fusion Center face, while working together to proactively identify and stop potential terrorists and other threats before they materialize. Adopting characters with expertise in jihadist extremism and working experience in the FBI and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Dr Speckhard explains through them, the fundamental features of ISIS structure, leadership, goals and propaganda.

The description of the events that lead to Sophie's terrorist attack and her father's commitment to justice and national security, are a contribution to the identification of one of the most effective paths to contain the threat: the collaboration with law enforcement of the families of the potential victims of indoctrination. In Sophie's case, as in the actual case of Shannon Conley, her father makes the agonizing call to the FBI to stop his daughter from joining the terrorists—resulting in her arrest and ultimate conviction in the case of Conley.

The author's strategy to explain this complex psychological process of the transformations of "normal" Western women into ISIS members through the use of a fictionalized case, but with a rigorous consistency

with the reality of such situations in our societies (endnoted throughout the book to alert the reader to events that are based on actual cases), is a brilliant solution as it makes the issue comprehensible, revealing the prevalently emotional drivers of the situations described. At the same time the book offers—through the discussion of the Homeland Security and FBI characters—an in-depth analysis of ISIS strategies and modus operandi and contributes to a better understanding and to the identification of the most appropriate instruments and methods to counter radicalization.

“Bride of ISIS” is a book that reads like a thriller but is at the same time highly educational and informative, keeping the reader spell-bound about the fate of one young girl led astray and seduced into terrorism by ISIS.

***About the Reviewer: Dr. Anita Perešin** is a Senior Adviser in the Office of the National Security Council of the Republic of Croatia and an Adjunct Professor of counter-terrorism at the University of Zagreb.*