

TIL DEATH US DO PART

What made three British Muslim schoolgirls throw away their bright futures to become “jihadi brides” in Syria? *Christina Patterson*, herself a former teenage religious fanatic, went to east London to find out



When they arrived in Syria, they were smiling. When they met the young woman who had been told to look after them, the three young girls from Bethnal Green Academy were laughing and making jokes. “They were,” said their minder, a young Syrian woman who later escaped to Turkey, “so young, so tiny and so happy to have arrived.” Amira Base and Shamima Begum were just 15. Kadiza Sultana was 16. The three girls, who had last been seen on security cameras at Gatwick airport on 17 February last year, were full of hope and excitement. They were starting a new life in a new land. Since then, they have all married, at least two of them have been widowed and one of them has died. ►►



VEILED THREAT
Below: Zahra Halane, a British teenager from Chorlton, Manchester, who fled to Syria in 2014 to become a "jihadi bride"

NO TURNING BACK
Opposite page, from left: Kazida Sultana, Amira Abase and Shamima Begum, the schoolgirls from Bethnal Green, at Gatwick airport en route to Syria in 2015

Earlier this month, Sultana's sister, Halima Khanom, told ITV News that her younger sister, who had been living in a block of flats in the Isis stronghold, Raqqa, had been killed by a Russian airstrike in May. The news bulletin showed a clip of Halima talking to her sister on the phone. "I don't have a good feeling," says Kadiza. "I feel scared." The borders, she explains, are "closed right now" and she will never be able to get through the territory held by the Kurdish forces, the PKK. Her hopes of escaping, she says, are "zero". You can hear the fear in her voice. "Where," she asks at the end of the phone call, "is Mum?"

Kadiza Sultana was, says the family's lawyer, Tasnime Akunjee, probably thinking of Samra Kesinovic, the young Austrian who tried to escape from Raqqa last year. On her final attempt, she was beaten to death with a hammer. Like Sultana, she was 16 when she left Vienna with her friend Sabina Selimovic in 2014. The girls left a note for their parents saying: "We are going to Syria to fight for Islam." On social media, they posed with Kalashnikovs in black burkas. Like Base, Begum and Sultana, Samra was expecting to marry an Isis fighter. She actively wanted to become a "jihadi bride". What she didn't expect was to become, in the words of her Tunisian housemate, "a sexual present for new fighters", passed between militants as a treat.

About 850 Brits are thought to have gone to Syria to join Isis. Around 70 are women or girls. Last year alone, 56 British females are believed to have made the journey. This year, as the risk of being detected or arrested has risen, the number seems to have dropped. Isis is losing territory in Syria and is encouraging young women to travel to places like Libya instead. It is also encouraging "lone wolf" attacks of the kind we have seen in Paris, Brussels and Nice.

Some girls, like the three from Bethnal Green, have strings of GCSEs. They have

What happened to the three girls?



Kadiza Sultana, 16

Married an Isis fighter in his twenties who died months later in combat. Earlier this month, she was reported to have been killed an airstrike; she had told her sister that she wanted to escape Syria.



Amira Abase, 15

Believed to have married an Isis fighter who was killed in combat. Messaging an undercover reporter, Abase mocked the minute's silence held for victims of 2015's Tunisia massacre.



Shamima Begum, 15

Believed to be in footage captured in May 2015, with Abase and Sultana, wearing burqas and carrying Kalashnikovs in Raqqa. The girls' families lost contact with them in January.

grown up in a culture where they can say what they like, get the education they like, follow the career they like and marry who they like, and they are going to a place where they can't walk down a street on their own; where they will be publicly flogged if they show a tiny glimpse of wrist, neck or hand.

I have been a religious fanatic. I know what it's like to believe that most of the world is going to hell. When I was 14, I joined a youth club in order to meet boys. The youth club was attached to a Baptist

church and soon I, too, was "accepting Jesus Christ" as my "Lord and Saviour". I thought it was my job to spread the "good news" of man's "salvation". I thought it was my job to save the world. But I didn't think I had to sneak my passport out of my parents' bedroom, get a flight to Istanbul and be smuggled over a border to marry a man who posts grinning selfies with severed heads.

Aqsa Mahmood, a privately educated radiology student from Glasgow University, was one of the first to go. She left her family in December 2013 to marry an Isis fighter. Since then, she has been a cheerleader for the so-called caliphate, posting poems in praise of bloody feats in battle, including the massacre of Brits on a Tunisian beach. When she isn't trying to persuade young women to leap on a plane and join in the fun, she is offering helpful tips. Last summer, she put a list on her Tumblr site, of things a prospective bride should pack for her new life. You should, apparently, bring "good quality" bras, "short dresses" to wear "around your husband", "fleece pajamas" and an Android phone, since Apple products "aren't allowed". You should also bring painkillers. Perhaps because an awful lot of these young women end up being beaten and raped.

So why do they do it? Why do healthy, educated, young women in one of the world's richest countries run off to a place with medieval values, to become the chattels of psychopathically violent men?

At the beginning of last year, at around the time the Bethnal Green girls set off on their adventure, I decided to find out.

In a cafe in Spitalfields, east London, I meet Fatima Begum. She is a few years older than the Bethnal Green girls, but like them, grew up in Tower Hamlets, a borough where there are now more Bangladeshis (of British Asian or Asian origin) than white Brits. Last year, she completed an MSc at University College London in counterterrorism, focusing on the stories of some of the young women who have been sucked in. "It's quite reductionist," she tells me firmly, "to call them 'jihadi brides'. They're facilitators, logisticians, propagandists. There's more to these women socially, politically, psychologically, culturally, that we don't understand and that we need to understand."

Her own parents, she tells me, came to London from Bangladesh in the late 1970s, and in those early years they would get faeces posted through the letter box and find urine in their milk. The racism stopped, she says, when they moved to Whitechapel, but friends tell her that they "still don't feel at heart British". She has a different view. "I don't," she says, "go searching to be the victim. I love being Bengali, female and British. If you ask me to order those in order of priority, I don't think I can."

There is, she says, "a massive cultural difference" between her parents' generation



RULE OF FEAR Isis fighters celebrate the declaration of an Islamic caliphate in Raqqa, 2014

and her own. Her generation is “more conservative.” They are also, she says, very keen on conspiracy theories. She has done a social-media analysis of the women who have joined Isis and concluded that “it’s a massive failure of multiculturalism, a feeling of not belonging”. What Isis offers, she says, is: “Come here and you will belong.”

Well, perhaps. But half a mile down the road, in Whitechapel High Street, it’s me who feels like I’m struggling to “belong”. Whitechapel has one of the biggest Muslim communities in the country. In the last census, 42.4% of the population said they were Muslim. Only 18.4% described themselves as Christian. So what do young women here think about “jihadi brides”?

It isn’t hard to spot the Muslim women in Whitechapel High Street because nearly all of the women I pass are wearing the hijab. I finally pluck up the courage to stop two pretty young girls. They are, they tell me, called Anisa and Thamila. Have they, I ask, heard about Isis? Anisa shakes her head. “I’ve heard of them,” says Thamila, “but I don’t know who they are.” When they hear stories of about people wanting to fight jihad, what do they think? Thamila pulls a face. “I don’t know.”

I stop two young women who are heavily made up. They both, they tell me, came over from Bangladesh when they were 15. Have they heard of Isis? “No,” says one. “I just heard of the war that happened. What was it? That country that’s against Palestine.” Israel? “Yeah, that’s the one, but I haven’t heard of the one you’re talking about. I’m going to go home and look it up.”

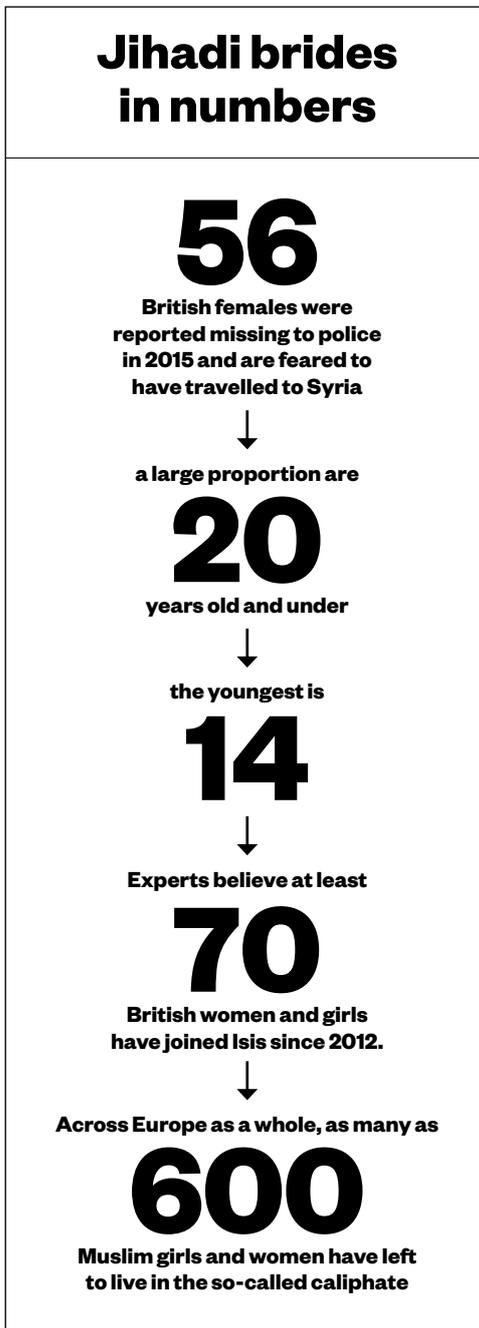
I try to hide my shock. In the months before we meet, there have been at least five beheadings of Isis hostages plastered all over the news and social media. “Jihadi John”, a grotesque figure in black robes, has been on all the front pages, looming over men in orange jump suits who know they are about to die. Millions watched the last moments of the journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, the British aid worker David Haines, the Salford taxi driver Alan Henning and the American aid worker Peter Kassig. And these girls *haven’t even heard of Isis?*

Finally, I find a young girl who seems to know something about it. Suleegha is 15. Her father is a doctor. She wants to be a lawyer. “I’ve been watching the news with my family,” she says, “and obviously when people stereotype Muslims as terrorists, it’s not a nice feeling. In our religion, we’re told not to kill unless there’s a specific reason. I think those people just take certain little parts of the Koran and they think that violence is the answer to everything.”

Like most people round here, Suleegha’s family go to the East London Mosque. Luckily, the mosque seems to be having an open day, so I take off my shoes, walk past an arrow saying “circumcision”, wind a scarf around my head, and join a tour. Islam, says the polite young man who is showing us round, is about peace and submission. He tells us about angels. He tells us about the day of judgement. Whatever happens, he says, God is behind it.

Upstairs, in the Maryam Centre, where women are allowed to go, I meet Josie Aaisha. A white British East Ender, Josie used to be a rapper, but after a car crash that nearly killed her she converted to Islam. Like many British Muslims, she peppers her speech with Arabic phrases. Unlike most of the girls I quiz in Whitechapel High Street, she has certainly heard of Isis. “I have”, she says, “only known Islam as beautiful and peaceful and loving, so I cannot understand where all this Isis thing comes from.” She looks so sad that I’m touched. I am less touched by the young men hovering nearby who watch me warily and then ask me why I’m there.

Ziauddin Sardar is the author of *Mecca, Desperately Seeking Paradise* and *Reading the Qur’an*. He is not surprised when I tell him about the girls on Whitechapel High Street who hadn’t even heard of Isis. “If they come from conservative homes,” he says, “they probably grew up with very sheltered lives. The middle-class conservative ones are only interested in getting their daughters educated and



Tweets from the caliphate

Aqsa Mahmood @ummmuawiyahh
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married. They want them to become a dentist, make lots of money, marry a wealthy person.” Many of the girls I met, I tell him, were quite highly educated, but seemed to know nothing at all about current affairs. “Most of them”, he says, “come from a scientific background. There’s no liberal education of any kind. They learn technique: how to fix a machine or write a code for a computer. Their education is totally one-dimensional. They do not understand the complexity of the world.”

Fiyaz Mughal, director of the interfaith organisation Faith Matters, agrees. He has run a number of projects to counter extremism and has talked to quite a few young women who have been tempted to go to Syria. Most, he tells me, are “not particularly religious”, but “in their minds they feel that they cannot flourish in ➤➤➤

an environment like the UK and think IS will be the answer to their problems". One young woman he talked to "feels that this is her chance to rebel". Well, yes, but it's one thing to stay out late or smoke a bit of dope, but quite another to start bragging about beheadings. Isn't it? Mughal sighs. "They compartmentalise the bad news and wash it away. They'll disregard anything that doesn't fit in with their vision."

For Haras Rafiq, MD of the Quilliam Foundation, the decision to fight extremism was triggered by a comment from his 11-year-old daughter. "Daddy," she said, "I don't want to be a Muslim because Muslims are always angry, and they're always killing people." Over a cup of coffee in a hotel in Bloomsbury, he gives me a potted history of the geopolitical background: of how the Muslim Brotherhood escaped Egypt and persecution and ended up in Saudi Arabia, among people who had "more money than sense". The Saudis, he says, "have a Salafi or Wahhabi philosophy that you need an enemy". Hundreds of billions of dollars, he explains, have been spent on the cause of a "caliphate" that's "a mixture of political and religious totalitarianism". "What we're seeing now," he says, "is a culmination of probably 80 or 90 years of radicalisation."

Rafiq has talked to many young Muslims who have gone to Syria. There are, he has concluded, "certain things" that they often have in common. Many of the boys, in particular, have issues with mental health. In Norway, for example, more than half of the convicted terrorists were found to have Aspergers. There is also often "either a genuine crisis or a perceived crisis". But doesn't every adolescent have a "perceived crisis"? Rafiq gives a wry smile. "Absolutely."

The girls, he says, are often "from culturally regressive, conservative backgrounds". For many, "the real world is the online world. They're feeling empowered for the first time in their lives. They've probably never had a boyfriend. They've got hormones all over the place. They're not allowed to the shopping centre on their own. This is their outlet."

Some outlet. But my own acne-ridden adolescence seeking a boyfriend and ending up with Jesus has taught me that an awful lot of what teenagers do has to do with hormones. I'm also aware that so many of the people who speak for Muslim women are men. So I talk to Shaista Gohir, chair of the Muslim Women's Network. She has followed many of the social-media accounts of the "jihadi brides" and has noticed that they talk about "the really soft side" of Isis that's "really into equal rights". These girls, after all, are as happy to tweet that they are "hanging with the sistas" as to post photos of their babies with AK37s. Muslims, she says, echoing what Ziauddin Sardar said, "are not brought up to question things". She worries



IDENTITY CRISIS Fatima Begum says that Isis can offer a sense of belonging

about what gets taught, particularly in after-school Koran classes. "A few years down the line," she says, "these kids go on social media. The foundations have been laid."

And there, of course, they would find an endless supply of videos, blogs and sermons, poisoning them against the West and urging them to join Isis. They might, for example, find the sermons of the British Muslim cleric and former solicitor, Anjem Choudary who has, after 20 years of anti-Western agitation, finally been convicted of inviting support for Isis. He will be sentenced next month.

"A whole generation," says Mona Siddiqui, professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh, "has grown up with their faith being associated with terror". That, she says, "is going to have a strange impact on them", but it doesn't excuse them "from not being able to think, 'Well, this is our home.'" She thinks parents bear a big responsibility. "These are children who have taken their passports, bought a ticket and obviously have the money to travel," she says. "If you are oblivious to that happening, then that's about the home environment."

She also thinks that some of the young women are as attracted to the violence as the men. Reports from the Khansaa Brigade, the all-female morality police of the so-called Islamic State, which

"When you're a Muslim and promiscuity is a sin, it's very hard to watch your non-Muslim friends doing that"

regularly doles out public floggings to any woman whose abaya, or robe, isn't deemed loose enough, would seem to back this up.

It is, I decide, time to go back to Tower Hamlets. I visit Mulberry School, a comprehensive in Shadwell that ought to be a prime target for the online groomers, since its pupils are nearly all Muslim girls. All the girls who pass me in the corridor have swapped a traditional uniform for a mulberry-coloured hijab and trousers or salwar kameez. Nearly all of them live in local-authority housing. More than three-quarters are entitled to the pupil premium (additional funding schools receive to support disadvantaged children). But, almost unbelievably, 86% go on to university. No wonder it was the school Michelle Obama chose to visit last summer.

When the three girls from Bethnal Green Academy went off to Syria, Mulberry's inspirational head teacher, Vanessa Ogden, decided to address the whole school. "I said there are ways," she tells me in her office, "of being able to enact your fantastic talent, and to give your skills to the world at large, without going to Isis." In spite of its demographic, Mulberry is "a secular school based on the whole concept of being a British citizen". She thinks girls are more likely to run away to Isis "if they can't see a productive and creative future for themselves, as part of a society that enables them to feel recognised and respected".

Ogden is, I'm sure, right to raise the issue of opportunity. Young people who feel they don't have much of a future are much more likely to risk it. But as I walk away from her school, I can't help thinking of all those GCSEs. Sultana wanted to become a doctor. Many of the girls who fled to Syria were straight-A students. Whatever else they may have lacked, it wasn't the hope of a job.

As I walk past the café where I met Fatima Begum, a former Mulberry pupil, I think back over our conversation. Sure, we talked about culture, racism and foreign policy. But then I asked her about sex.

There was a long pause and then Begum smiled. "Do you know what?" she said. "One of my male friends has said to me, 'These guys just want to get laid.'" There is a massive restriction in Islam about sex before marriage and fornication. When you're a Muslim and promiscuity is more of a sin, it's very difficult to watch your non-Muslim friends doing that. So they find a way on a path to 'actually, do you know what? Sex is what God wants me to do.'"

It reminds me, I told her, of the Christian couples I knew at university who got married practically as soon as they'd finished their exams. It was, as the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, "better to marry than to burn with passion".

And is it, I asked Begum carefully, just the guys who want to "get laid"? She smiled again and now she almost seemed to be blushing: "No." ■