

Episode Transcript

Episode Title:

Why women joined the Islamic State

Guest:

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Jon Alterman:

Azadeh Moaveni is a writer and journalist who serves as the gender project director at the International Crisis Group. She has had a long career in journalism, spending more than 20 years reporting throughout the Middle East. Her work has appeared in the Guardian, the New York Times, Foreign Policy, and the London Review of Books. She is the author, most recently, of *Guest House for Young Widows*, which tells the story of 13 women who joined the Islamic state. Azadeh, welcome to Babel.

Azadeh Moaveni:

Thanks so much for having me.

Jon Alterman:

You wrote a book about what I think a lot of people would think is an unusual topic. You spoke to women who joined the Islamic state. How did that happen?

Azadeh Moaveni:

It's a good question, because it is indeed a dark topic—and was a treacherous topic—to work on. I think two things drew me to recording this and writing the book. One, I was living in the UK at the time that ISIS started marching across the Middle East. I lived in London, I was teaching in London, and lots of young people from London—from communities like the one I was teaching in—were packing up to go and join the Islamic state and I thought it was extraordinary.

But I was teaching journalism—and I'm of course an old journalist—and the media coverage of what was happening, especially to young women who were being recruited by these very sophisticated, very canny ISIS recruiters—with the propaganda and the outreach that we knew was so savvy and bespoke—the media coverage of them really disturbed and upset me. Because many of these were young girls, they were teenagers. They were essentially being recruited to be child brides or to be sexually exploited. But all the language about them in the papers was “jihadi

brides going to be harlots for the caliphate.” The notion that they were being groomed, that they were being recruited for sexual exploitation didn't enter the debate. Even feminists who I would have imagined, would have been conscious of that didn't.

So, I thought there was a real racial element. I grew up as an Iranian, Muslim girl in the U.S. I felt a responsibility to tell a different story, especially about the young girls who were being recruited. And the second thing was, as an old Middle East hand, it was really evident that the march of women from across the region to join this jihadist group was unprecedented. To me it was really obvious that that lay in the failures and the experience of the Arab spring uprising. But again, I didn't see that in the coverage. The coverage seemed to be about religion as a toxic ideology and a bad brand of Islam. So, I guess I felt both personally and professionally when really compelled to theorize ISIS differently and especially these women who have been drawn to it.

Jon Alterman:

That's how it started. As you reported, as you met a lot of these women and their families, how did your ideas change?

Azadeh Moaveni:

I found—as I started spending time with the women that I was able to track down—I was struck by how many of them had simply been caught up in a war they hadn't joined voluntarily. Some of them hadn't even been seduced by any ideology. There were three girls, young women who are characters in my book, for whom Raqqa was their hometown, and they were still relatable. It was just astonishing spending time with them. I felt like I had so much in common with them. One of them was studying marketing, the other one was studying English literature, they read novels, they were on Facebook. And this militant group showed up in their hometown and it was like a mafia and it was brutal and

some of their families started collaborating and so they did too.

And I realized the sheer diversity of women's experiences and that's when I wanted to be able to make my book very character driven and write about all these girls. The girl who was studying marketing and she spoke English and she wanted to work in tourism—she ended up being the meet-and-greet woman, who would go to the border and bring these women from Europe into the Islamic state. It was those kinds of stories of women that we would have considered quite relatable, like young women who we would know, that make this seemingly terrible grotesque decision somehow understandable, given this precarious context in Syria.

Jon Alterman:

It strikes me that you came to this and you were able to build remarkable trust with the women you spoke to in your book. You would think from the outside from what people have read about ISIS, that you would be the last person that people would trust. You're American, as you said you have an Iranian background. There is so much hostility within the Islamic state to Shia Islam. How were you able to overcome it? Was there an initial resistance that you were able to overcome? Were people actually not that resistant to start with anyway? Did we read that wrong?

Azadeh Moaveni:

No, it's exactly the right reading. It was tremendously with most of the women that I ended up speaking to and writing about for the most part it was tremendously challenging. It involved multiple trips. I spent a lot of time in Tunisia, I went again and again. I had to build a lot of trust with intermediaries, because in the end, getting to these women required winning the trust of people that they trusted, that would get me to them. To be frank, I didn't immediately disclose that I was Iranian-Shia, until with many I got to a point where I felt safe

enough to be able to say that and I think with a good many I did, but from the outset I didn't.

I think what was important was that I came to their stories with the shared cultural and religious and historical understanding. I didn't start with the trauma or I didn't start with the salacious question. I very often started asking about the past. With a Tunisian young woman: "What happened to your parents under the dictatorship of Ben Ali? Were your parents harassed? Were they in prison?" With a young woman from Hama, who was a very fierce ISIS loyalist, I asked her about her family and how they had experienced Hafez al-Assad's siege in that city and what happened to her father.

I think it was very disarming to start in the past and to make really clear to them that we shared a literacy about how we had arrived at the moment that we found ourselves in. I think that was the most important thing. Because otherwise, I think that just the reactive hostility, the suspicion of someone who comes in, who has rigid ideas about what they've experienced, with only probing and poking at trauma or questions like sex slaves—I knew that wouldn't get me to the kind of relationship I needed.

Jon Alterman:

Do you think that the fact that these women had in many ways been traumatized by a very patriarchal group made them more willing to trust another woman? Do you think that maybe the reason they got into this is because they trusted other women, or that's part of how they navigated it, was by trusting other women?

Azadeh Moaveni:

Some yes and some no. I think many were led by men and were coerced by boyfriends or lovers or family members, brothers who had an over-bearing role in their lives. Some were very young women who were vulnerable or women who had mental health problems. I think there were some who were definitely—the Europeans I think—were recruited by women. Definitely those recruiting networks were very female, the

very skilled propagandists online were female. And actually in the Arab world too they were very accomplished in what they were trying to do to Saudi women who were known as jihadi poetesses and those sorts of things.

But also because I was a woman and I speak some Arabic I could ask those intimate questions about, "Did your husband make you use birth control?" Or "What was it like having to marry a man?" And I think being able to do that, sharing this religious cultural background, being able to do it in often the language that they spoke, made talking about that also a lot easier.

Jon Alterman:

In your experience, did their trauma make them more suspicious and less trusting? Or did it make them more vulnerable and more trusting when you were trying to explore some of these issues?

Azadeh Moaveni:

Yeah, that's a subtle, really good question. Some of them I had continuous relationships in periods where they were still basically stuck in this situation. With one woman, for example, that I had a two-and-a-half-year relationship with over WhatsApp and once she escaped ISIS she didn't make it back to Germany where she was from. She was living in this town village in the north of Syria semi-captive by the Free Syrian Army. So her ordeal really wasn't over and she was very vulnerable. I became someone that she asked medical questions from and I was very aware that she was quite vulnerable. And it was really hard navigating that professionally, deciding how much to probe, knowing that I had established this relationship with her where I was almost indispensable, because she was essentially still being human trafficked.

Some were traumatized I think in a way that they had just shut down completely and it was quite hard to talk at all. Some were very cunning and knew what to say and even though

they were traumatized, I felt like they were still very able to spin a story. And then some, I think, still had that way of coping with trauma which is to just process and want to talk and just talk about what had led them to leave Tunisia, for example, or what had happened in their lives—the state abuse or whatever torture that one young woman in Tunisia had experienced. I think there was also that too and that was always really a great outcome when it felt like talking helped the young woman and I felt like I wasn't endangering her by having the conversation.

Jon Alterman:

There is also the issue of these women as mothers. You have a lot of—not only women who are mothers—but women who are mothers of stateless children. Their fathers are dead, they may have been from any number of countries. How do you think western governments should unpack the issue of the potential of radical mothers raising a new generation of jihadis perhaps in the middle of Europe? Do you think there's a way to deal with that issue, to handle that issue, to understand that issue?

Azadeh Moaveni:

Well, a lot of governments in Europe are actually just trying to bring back the children and leave the mothers there. That seems to definitely be a very popular policy approach here, which we see certainly in the UK, which has stripped most of its women, for example, in these camps from their British citizenship. So, I think trying to bring only the kids back is one solution for a lot of governments. Although that kind of family separation may not be in the best interest of the child—it's quite tricky.

But I think a lot of times still when mother and child are brought back that the mother either serves time in prison where often the child is taken away and left with other family members. I guess you could say, "Well, that family produced that mother so how trustworthy can they be?" Or they go into foster care though. So

this idea that they're brought back as this contained unit and that kind of process could go on usually doesn't happen. And if they come and the child is left in their family there's such a long period of separation or such close oversight by social care and social workers that I think the eye on them is very sharp.

Jon Alterman:

Let me ask a strange question which I'm sure you have dealt with a lot because the nature of your reporting but I think most people don't appreciate when they're looking at the Islamic state from afar and that is, it wasn't clear that all these women could speak the same language. They sometimes couldn't speak the same language as their husbands, a lot of them don't speak Arabic, a lot of them don't speak English. How did these groups work when there wasn't a language that unified them, that in many cases people within the group would need translators to operate within the group?

Azadeh Moaveni:

Yeah, it's a really good question because it gets to one of the I think most ironic aspects of the Islamic state and I don't mean to say that lightly. But because it's this utopian project and it promises Muslims from across the world that it would erase the boundaries of race and nationality and everyone would be equal. And people from all over the world streamed there because they were expecting that exactly once and they thought that there was this utopian, great, cosmopolitan state waiting for them. But in practice, it just ended up descending into power cliques. The Arabs obviously had the upper hand over everyone because they could navigate the Syrian and Iraqi terrain, they could get the best houses, the best villas, the best cars. And that created a lot of resentment from the Europeans, the Chechens, and the Kazakhs, and people from Central Asian countries were known as good fighters and often they came with that. So they have that cache but so there was a lot of backbiting and gossip between

these cliques based around language and nationality.

Essentially, I think a lot of the Europeans especially were sent as cannon fodder to the front because they weren't skilled in combat and they were just expendable, and their women sat out. I mean, they didn't really join state building enterprises whereas women from Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, women from the Arab world were really able to participate in some of the media arms, the administrative, they taught, the initiation classes that women went upon arrival they taught Arabic. So roles were very much variant on whether you could speak one of the local languages and I think if you didn't you, ended up being quite marginal to this great project that had promised erased borders.

Jon Alterman:

One of the themes that comes through your book is why women ended up in this situation because there was something that made them unhappy. Do you see, based on what you know about the women, their situations, what their current conditions are, do you think any of these women can find happiness now going forward? Is there a way for them to get to a good place given what they've done and what they've seen?

Azadeh Moaveni:

I think many of them, if they're able to get back home—I'm thinking of the Tunisian women because Tunisia sent a pretty big cohort of women to ISIS, 1500 women by some accounts, at least several hundred but by the lowest—I think they went there feeling that Tunisia and the revolution there—the Arab spring revolution there—had not achieved any of its aims. That they didn't reach political inclusion the way that they imagined, that there were still corruption. I think if they can ever get back—and some of them have gotten back—I think they will reach quiet resignation. In countries like Tunisia, which is better off than of course its neighbor, Libya, have not really

politically liberalized or economically liberalized and are still very vulnerable.

So I think, for women who left because they felt like life was really, really hard for them as a jihadi in Tunisia, for example, I think they will go back with a radically different perspective of what mistreatment is by a state. And that might be a grim metric but I think that they will consider themselves very lucky and very fortunate just to be safe again in a country where they can walk down the street and there won't be bombs dropped on their head and there won't be crucifixions. So in a way I think they can if they can get back.

Jon Alterman:

Azadah Moaveni, author of *Guest House for Young Widows*, thanks so much for joining us.

Azadeh Moaveni:

Thanks. It was great to talk to you.