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Online Dating of Partners in Jihad: Case of the San Bernardino Shooters

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Synopsis

The San Bernardino shootings highlight the emergence of the online dating platform as a means to unite potential jihadists or to radicalise future partners. This represents an additional dimension of the cyber space exploitation to spread jihadist ideology.

Commentary

THE SAN Bernardino shootings on 2 December 2015 raised some interesting questions about the radicalisation process of a reclusive Muslim couple in California. Tashfeen Malik and Syed Farouk stand out from similar attackers because they were a married couple, who perpetrated the attack in unison. However, one overlooked aspect of this attack is the online dating platform that possibly acted as a channel for the eventual incident.

Farouk and Tashfeen were unknown to each other two years ago. Farouk, born in Illinois, was a religious man, who worked as an environmental health specialist, prayed five times a day and preferred to remain in solitude. He was allegedly linked to a group of would-be jihadists, who were arrested in 2012 while attempting to travel to Afghanistan to link up with Al Qaeda. In the same year, Farouk and his friend also planned to conduct an attack in the U.S. However, these plans were abandoned after a spate of Al Qaeda-linked arrests.

Match Made in Cyber space

Thousands of miles away was Tashfeen, who was born in Pakistan and had spent most of her life in Saudi Arabia. She travelled to Pakistan to study pharmacology in

the Bahauddin Zakariya University, where she was enrolled part-time in the Al Huda institute. During this period, Tashfeen donned a hijab, refrained from communication with the opposite sex, and spent most of her time studying the Quran.

What brought these two individuals together to kill more than a dozen people? Despite the geographical distance and lack of common friends, the two deeply religious individuals met, ironically, through an online dating platform.

Cyber Domain: Emergence of Online Jihadi Dating

The strategic incorporation of the cyber space to spread extremist propaganda, recruit members and incite fear is not uncommon. The first wave of cyber domain utilisation came through Al Qaeda's propagandist forums, chat-rooms and websites that disseminated calls to jihad. The second wave was ISIS' revolutionary incorporation of social media portals, such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and private messaging applications, including Telegram for recruitment purposes. Another aspect of the second wave lay within the coincidental exposure of the San Bernardino perpetrators through cyber dating. Even though it has been ascertained that the couple had no links with ISIS, the group itself has already made use of online dating sites.

For instance, in 2014, it was reported that a 15-year old British teenager, Yusra Hussein, joined ISIS after contacting a jihadist through the group's online dating service known as 'Jihadi Matchmaker'. The latter was a Twitter account that attracted hundreds of young women who were infatuated by the idea of being with an ISIS 'jihadi'. However, the case of the San Bernardino Shooters suggests that radicals, ISIS sympathisers or otherwise, might be avoiding prying eyes by seeking their potential partners through actual dating sites. These sites provide an individual with a better chance to meet someone of similar interest. As such, it makes it easier for radicals to seek each other since the dating site provides the necessary tools to find one themselves.

Partners in Jihad

After maintaining an active presence on online dating platforms for a substantial period, it was in 2013 that Farouk came across his future wife. Farouk had profiles on multiple dating forums including iMilap and Dubai Matrimonial, which stated that he was a religious man, looking for a hijabi who was willing to live life to the fullest. On a more ominous note, his profile added that he enjoyed target shooting with friends in his spare time. After talking to multiple women, Farouk finally came across Tashfeen, and developed a close relationship. They decided to marry less than a year afterwards.

According to the FBI, both individuals were discussing jihad and martyrdom online before they met and eventually got married. This love story, which now lies tainted with the blood of their victims, suggests the possible utilisation of online jihadi dating by other attackers.

While jihadi matchmaking through dating sites might represent a love story for some, for others it could be a façade. Recently, Afsha Jabeen, a 38-year old woman, living

in Dubai with her husband and three children, had a fake online presence as a young Christian convert to Islam. Salman Mohiuddin, who was from Hyderabad in India, fell in love with the fake online persona, and was convinced to crossover to the dark-side by joining ISIS. Even though this incident took place on social media, it does not negate the possibility of similar replications on online dating sites.

However, online dating is not solely a source of radicalisation for potential and would-be jihadists, similar to social media platforms. Instead, it could simply act as a channel for bringing like-minded radicals and extremists together amidst their search for a life partner. Hence, the partner could either act as the impetus for engaging in jihad, or one could find a partner in crime with similar interests and perpetrate an attack together. Tashfeen and Farouk apparently fell in the latter category.

Possible Lessons

The lack of attention paid to the cyber aspect of this attack is a cause of concern. Avenues and tools in the internet sphere are being manipulated by extremist groups. There is no consolidated framework to counter online websites, nor is there a coherent policy to confront the social media presence of extremist groups and individuals. In fact, all security checks conducted before Malik was granted the US green card were unable to pinpoint her extremist leanings because she openly discussed them through Facebook. This information, alongside Tashfeen and Farouk's communication via an online dating site, was only revealed after the attack. While official responses are reactive rather than preventive terrorists are thriving on the innovative use of these online avenues.

It is likely that extremists and radical individuals will make increasing use of online dating platforms to search for their soul mates or recruit others to their cause. This platform permits unmonitored conversations between two people, separating this medium from the likes of Twitter, Facebook and Ask.fm. Unless, a specific framework to counteract the presence of radical and extremist individuals online is present, this strategic exploitation of the cyber space is bound to grow.

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