

# Commentary: Yes, I tell jokes about Islamic State



Fighters with Islamic State are seen marching in Raqqa, Syria, in an undated photo posted on an extremist website Jan. 14, 2014. (Militant website via AP)

By **Shazia Mirza**

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**I** used to tell jokes about my lady mustache.

I thought it was important to let everyone know about my struggle to rip follicles from the root of my face, armpit and chest every three weeks at a cost of 50 pounds a go. It was a frivolous routine, but that's how I liked my comedy then — apolitical and areligious. As a British woman of Pakistani Muslim descent, there was always a pressure to explain "my people" — so occasionally I'd liven it up with a few jokes about suicide bombers or arranged marriage, but mostly I stuck to the superficial.

One day after doing a show that I thought was funny, a journalist asked why I was making jokes about something as trivial as my mustache.

This certainly wasn't the first time someone's expected me to be a professional full-time representative of my religion, and, as always, it was too much. I wanted to joke about what I wanted to joke about. So I continued to

seek refuge in my mustache and revert to mundane material. I was just like everyone else, which is exactly what I wanted.

It went on like this until February 2015, when three teenage girls from London packed up their bags and went to join the Islamic State. The news created a media firestorm across the United Kingdom. Most teenagers were reading "Harry Potter" or watching "RuPaul's Drag Race," but these girls decided to join the world's worst most barbaric terrorist group?

The story, however, rang differently for me. I immediately thought I knew why they had gone, and felt I had to say something. So I made it an entire comedy routine.

I had known girls like this. As a native Brit, I had been brought up like these young women, and I instinctively realized that their rash decision had nothing to do with religion. This feeling was confirmed as I watched one of the girls' sisters explain. "My sister was into normal teenage things," she said, "She used to watch 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians.'" Yes, I thought, that's probably exactly why they left.

I wrote a show about the episode — dubbed, of course, "The Kardashians Made Me Do It" — and based my material on actual things the girls said and did. For instance, police investigating the families' homes found a handwritten checklist one of the girls made of things to buy before she left: makeup, body lotion ... and an electric hair remover. "Wait, you're going to join a sixth-century barbaric terrorist organization, and you are thinking of doing your bikini line? They're not going to let you out of the cave, never mind let you shave your legs. And if you're doing your bikini line, you're probably too old for them anyway."

In this way, my show makes clear that the reason I think these girls have gone is not radicalization; it's sexualization. They've seen these ISIS guys on TV, and yes, they're barbaric. But they're also macho, they've got a rebellious cause — they're hot! These girls think they're going to get an AK-toting Muslim version of Brad Pitt. Oh how wrong they are. There's nothing new about being attracted to the bad boys, even if they are barbaric men. They're just the latest to join the unfortunate club.

After taking the show public, I expected hate mail. Instead, the overwhelming response to my show has been audience members telling me things like, "I never saw it that way, you made me see things differently," or "I was laughing. ... I didn't expect to be laughing at this!"

The only serious backlash I've received for the show has come from the right-wing media, who have suggested I was a terrorist sympathizer.

Ironically, those same right-wing mouthpieces expect "my people" to condemn violence committed by any Muslim-identified terrorist anywhere in the world. Yet when I speak up to belittle and satirize ISIS for the absurdity of the fake jihad-chic lifestyle they sell, I get told to shut up.

It made me realize that when media talking heads say, "Why aren't Muslims speaking up?" they don't really want us to speak up. We ruin their tidy us-vs.-them narrative. It's not that they don't want to hear jokes about ISIS; it's just that they want to hear them from comics like Louis C.K., Bill Burr and [Daniel Tosh](#) — safe white

guys they can relate to and feel comfortable with. I'm a brown Muslim woman who is suggesting other ways to look at these situations.

Fortunately, freedom of speech — that valuable touchstone of Western democracy — usually comes around to making room for new voices. This is especially true in comedy. The Jews were able to make fun of the Holocaust. The Irish were able to make fun of the Irish Republican Army. Now it's time for Muslims to be funny. Let us fight the war on terror with laughter — it may work even better than the bombs.

*Zocalo Public Square*

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