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ISIS

How a British College Student Became an ISIS Matchmaker



SIMON COTTEE

Dec 20 2016, 8:25am

The story of Tooba Gondal's transformation into Umm Muthanna al-Britannia, in her own words.

This post originally appeared on [VICE UK](#)

In March of last year, less than two months after arriving in Syria, Umm Muthanna al-Britannia tweeted a picture of herself wearing a burqa and brandishing an AK-47. It was captioned: "Living the life of real freedom." Yet not so long ago she was enjoying a very different kind of freedom, hooking up with guys, wearing make-up, and listing her favorite activities online as: "Jamin wid my gyalsz, Sleepin, Munchin, & SmoOkiin."

Umm Muthanna's real name is Tooba Gondal, a 22-year-old French-born, British-Pakistani woman who grew up in east London. Until late 2014 she was a

student at Goldsmiths University, working on a degree in English. Today, she is in Raqqa and a widow to a husband who died last year fighting for ISIS. Her father, Mohamed Bashir Gondal, has told reporters that his daughter is alive and in Syria, but has said little else, and hasn't responded to several interview requests for this article.

A prolific Twitter user, Umm Muthanna hasn't posted since mid-March, but in one of her last tweets she paid homage to her deceased husband, Abu Abbas al-Lubnani, an ISIS fighter from Lebanon and ringleader of an **online recruitment operation** that targeted women and girls in Britain, encouraging them to fly to Syria to become "Jihadi brides" and give birth to the next generation of ISIS militants. Like fellow British citizen **Sally Jones**—AKA Umm Hussain, the former punk from Kent who left for Syria in 2013—Umm Muthanna is a propagandist and recruiter for ISIS. "Sisters," she tweeted last September, "if you're serious about *Hijrah* [migration to the Islamic State] yet stuck in *Dar ul Kufr* ["land of disbelief"] for whatever reason, know there is a way out for you. Contact me privately."

Earlier this year Umm Muthanna enthused about attending a military training camp where she had practiced using firearms. Now ISIS has **reversed its policy** on sending female recruits into battle, there is a very real possibility she'll get to put that training into practice—something it appears from previous tweets she would be keen to do. On the evening of the Paris attacks last November, in which 130 were killed by ISIS operatives, she took to Twitter to announce: "Wish I could have seen the hostages being slaughtered last night with my own eyes. Would have been just beautiful."

Umm Muthanna al-Britannia, in other words, is a piece of work. But who is Tooba Gondal?

This remains something of a mystery—and even more unclear is how Tooba transformed into Umm Muthanna al-Britannia. According to an anonymous former classmate quoted in the *Mail* on Sunday, Tooba smoked at school, had

secret boyfriends, and adored boy bands. Then, about two years ago, "she started posting verses of the Koran on Twitter, and talking about religion."



Tooba Gondal. Photos via Gondal's deactivated Bebo account

What is clear is that Tooba, **like many ISIS recruits**, is a "born again" Muslim, living a secular life before returning to Islam. "Alhamdulillah for Islam," she tweeted in November of 2014, "how lost and astray I was before I had this blessing in my life, and how everything makes sense..." Her Facebook page—which is still active at the time of publishing—marks the exact date of her religious awakening or rebirth: "November 16, 2012: The day Allah guided me to Islam, Alhamdulillah."

This awakening was a hinge-moment in her life, the point at which it changed forever. And it was so full with meaning and significance that she made an audio-recording in which she tried to convey exactly what it meant to her. She made this available on personal request to scores of her Twitter followers in 2013, two years before she left for Syria. I obtained a copy from someone who received it at around that time. Approximately 40 minutes in length, it provides a vivid insight into the early days of her metamorphosis, and intimates at the strong-headedness and emotional volatility that can be discerned in her subsequent persona as Umm Muthanna.

"Firstly, I will give some background on how I used to think and behave, without revealing my sins too much," she begins, recalling that it was "Year 9 [age 13 to 14] where I started to, you know, go totally off track. I started smoking, got into the

habit where it became addiction. And then hanging around with bad company and guys and doing all sorts of *haram* [forbidden] things. But it wasn't to such a bad extent until I got to college. Then I had that freedom, you know? I wore whatever I wanted. As time went on it was getting worse—piercings—without even thinking what I was doing. You know, there was no *haya* [modesty], no limit."

In the recording she notes that her family are practicing Muslims. "But I was never home to realize this; I never connected with them," she says. "I believed in Allah and that was it. Nothing resembling a Muslim. Now I realize, of course, I was lost. Every time I thought about Islam I would put it to the back of my mind, and every time I thought about covering up I would put it to the back of my mind and think, *Nah, that's not me, that's not who I am.*"

It wasn't until that day in 2012, when she would have been 18, that Tooba reverted to Islam. She was in a college tutorial on animal welfare and slaughter for the fast-food industry, and took issue with her "atheist teacher" saying electrocution was the most humane method to kill an animal.

"The halal way is best," she said in response. "Then, as the argument proceeds, we both get very passionate [...] It gets so heated that he takes it to another level, *Subhanallah*. He says these exact words, which I cannot forget. Ever. To this day I remember, and every day I think it sinks in my heart so deep. He goes: 'Who are you to say anything about Islam when you choose what you want to follow and disregard everything else?' Next thing he said: 'Do you pray five times a day?'—this is in front of the whole class—and I sit there shocked. And then I'm like, 'How dare you ask me this question? I will not answer to you, I will not answer to you. I will only answer to Allah on the day of judgment!'"

At this point in the recording, Tooba bursts into tears. "Never have I said these words before," she says. "As soon as these words came out of my mouth my heart sank, and then straight away, at that moment, the bell went and I quickly left the classroom alone. I looked down at what I was wearing and I started thinking, 'How will I stand in front of Allah like this? I've never done anything good in my life.'"

Later that day she approached a fully veiled Muslim from her class and asked her questions about her faith and her jilbab, the long and loose-fitting garment she was wearing; Tooba liked the fact it was "tailored." The following day her friend brought one in for her to try on, as well as a headscarf. "I literally fall in love," she recalls of the moment she saw her reflection in the mirror. "I feel like a new person... I felt so pure and clean and happy."

In May 2013 Tooba was tweeting about how she pitied "poor atheist souls," but by the end of 2014 she was justifying the slaughter of non-Muslim civilians.

Before leaving the toilet she took the cigarettes from her bag and threw them in the trash. Then she took all her piercings out and discarded them, too. Her first walk through college dressed in the jilbab was difficult. "I got so many looks," she recalls. "But at the college gates I see my best friend. This is the tightest girl—I've been through thick and thin with her. I thought, *Hold on: just this morning I was just like her, chilling with the guys, smoking, dressed like that—so how would she react when she sees me?* But I just thought, *I have to do this, I have to face her.* As soon as she saw me she said: 'What the fuck are you wearing?' to my face. And I went quiet; I didn't have nothing to say to her. But then in my head I was thinking, *How dare she say this to me—she's meant to be my friend.*"

She remembers one of the boys in the group telling her she wouldn't last two days. "I said to him, 'OK, we'll see,' and then I walked off. Allah showed me exactly who my real friends are. Since that day," she says, "I stopped everything that was haram."

But at what point did Tooba start believing in ISIS's hallucinatory version of Islam, and what was the epiphany or turning-point, if any, that led her to embark on her journey to Syria just over two years later? The recording provides no clues, but what's certain is that this didn't happen overnight. In May of 2013 Tooba was tweeting about how she pitied "poor atheist souls," but by the end of 2014 was justifying the slaughter of non-Muslim civilians. In the six months prior to leaving for the caliphate there is a discernible change in the theme and tone of her tweets. They are mostly about Syria and show a new and unguarded

belligerence, with some openly condoning ISIS atrocities, including the beheading in October of 2014 of Alan Henning.

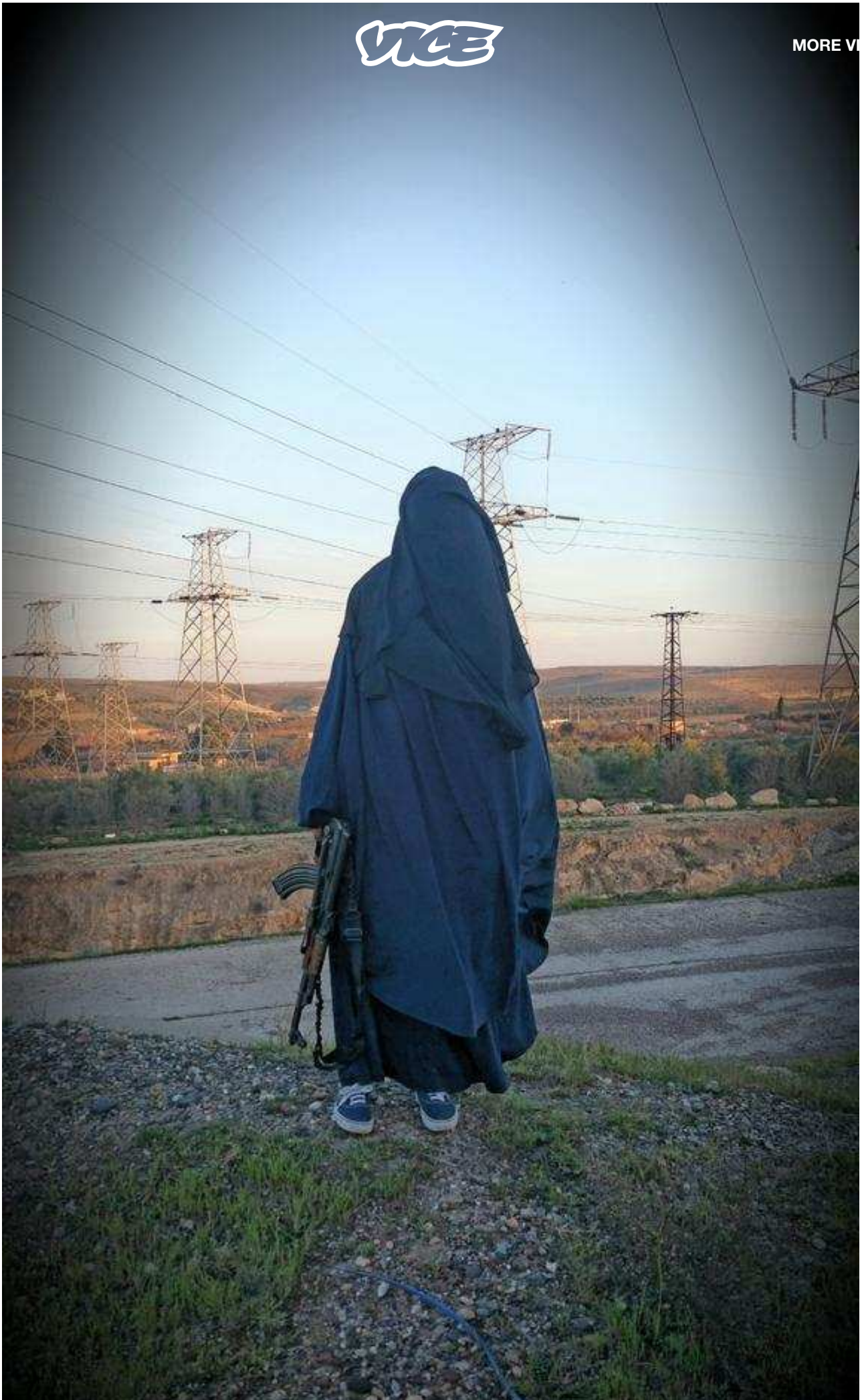
At some point in 2014 she began to hero-worship the American jihadist cleric Anwar Awlaki, disseminating his theological and political statements on Twitter. Awlaki, a member the al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen, was killed in a drone strike in 2011. Tooba's admiration for Awlaki brought her to the attention of the now disbanded US State Department's Center for Strategic Counter-terrorism Communications (CSCC), whose role was to "counter-message" ISIS and its vast cadre of online supporters. In a tweet about Awlaki, dated October 29, 2014, Tooba said, "We will never forget you! America killed you but you are in highest ranks." The CSCC tweeted back: "Awlaki—another hypocrite held up as a model of piety—visited prostitutes at least seven times."

By the end of 2014 Tooba had fully absorbed ISIS's ideology, and her estrangement from mainstream British society was total. What's unknown is which came first: the estrangement or the ideology. In **a flurry of tweets** on November 21, 2014, she reported on an incident in one of her college seminars. The subject under discussion was feminism, and when the tutor asked the feminists present to raise their hands, Tooba's un-raised hand drew attention.

"Everybody turned to me basically," she wrote, "I explained if you knew your place as a woman, if there was Sharia implementation... These feminists are deluded!" Referring to the icy reaction of her fellow students, she wrote, "they already think I am an alien, being the only Muslim woman covered from head to toe so who cares." It is evident from this, and many other telling tweets, that she felt she didn't belong in Britain and that her place as a pious Muslim was constantly under scrutiny and suspicion.

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Umm Muthanna al-Britannia in Syria. Photo: Twitter

A persistent theme in Umm Muthanna's Twitter postings is worldly corruption. In February of 2013 she even uploaded to an audio-file sharing site a nine-minute recording in which she passionately warns against what she sees as the dangers and seductions of the material world—or "duniya," as she calls it.

"As a Muslim," she says, "I have to live within certain limits; I can't just do what I want to do and what all my desires tell me to do... I will not allow the materialist world to become my sole source of happiness and fulfillment [...] Why is it we find Muslims committing these sins and wrongdoings, violating the laws of Allah, using intoxications, going gambling, going to clubs? Is it because we put more emphasis on this duniya? [...] We have to keep strong and firm—we must obey Allah, even if it's against our own selves."

Another recurring theme in her online posting is sexual propriety. On September 19, 2014, she went on Facebook and shared the following post: "I have ZERO men on my Facebook and I will keep it that way. Why allow any males to be my 'friend' on here only allowing them to comment and inbox me. If it can all be avoided that is better, rather than complain later as to why men keep interacting. I don't get any interaction from males of any kind on here. #NoFreeMixing applies online as much as it does anywhere else. Same goes to the lowering of the gaze."

This, you sense, has a deeply personal element to it, reflecting a revulsion against the person she once was: a carefree party girl who was more interested in dating than *dawah*, or proselytizing. In *The True Believer*, published in 1951, Eric Hoffer wrote that "a mass movement, particularly in its active, revivalist phase, appeals not to those intent on bolstering and advancing a cherished self, but to those who crave to be rid of an unwanted self," and who "see their lives as irredeemably spoiled." This, you also sense, is what ISIS meant to Tooba: an escape-route from a reviled self. Redemption. Yet another rebirth.

It is suspected that **Shamima Begum**—one of the three east London schoolgirls

who left for Syria in February of 2015—had, just days prior to her departure, communicated with the notorious ISIS recruiter Aqsa Mahmood (AKA Umm Layth), a young Scot who was one of the first 60 or more British women to defect to ISIS since 2013. Tooba's Twitter feed in the weeks prior to her departure suggests that she too may have been in contact with Mahmood. It seems unlikely that Mahmood radicalized Tooba, but she may have helped her plan her trip. It also remains unclear what role the ISIS recruiter Abu Abbas al-Lubnani, who Tooba married, played in both her radicalization and journey to Syria.

In September of 2014 Tooba launched a blog entitled "From Darkness to Light". On the opening page she described herself—in florid script over a photograph of the Eiffel Tower—as a "student, a sister, and most importantly a *muslimah*." In her first post she promised: "My unique and very much emotional story of how I came to Islam will be released. Stay tuned guys..."

It never came. She abandoned the blog, only to return to social media just months later as Umm Muthanna al-Britannia, poster-girl for the so-called Islamic State.

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