

the SCENE

Viewing the latest news through the lens of Scripture

Three Colorado girls—ages 15, 16, and 17—skipped school on October 17. What makes this act of truancy newsworthy, however, was their intended destination. They were not headed for a shopping trip or to catch a premiere of a new movie. Rather, they intended to go to Syria to participate in the Middle East conflict by joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The three teens stole their passports and \$2,000 in cash from their parents, skipped class, and boarded a flight to Turkey by way of Germany. From Turkey, they probably would have crossed the border into Syria. After their parents discovered the girls were missing and told authorities, FBI officials apprehended the runaways at the Frankfurt airport. The girls have been reunited with their parents.

According to CIA estimates, thousands of Westerners have traveled to Iraq and Syria via Turkey to join ISIS. Recently teen girls have been targets of Islamic recruiters. About the same time the Colorado teens ran away, three Canadian girls traveled to join ISIS. A month before, another Colorado teen—19-year-old Shannon Conley—pleaded guilty of conspiring to join the terrorist group last spring. In early October, two Austrian teens who had joined ISIS managed to get word to their parents that they had made a terrible mistake and wanted to return home.

But why are ISIS leaders so successful in leading Western teenage girls into jihad? Nader Hashemi, the Director of Denver University’s Center for Middle East Studies, credits a strategy that is centered on social media and online recruitment videos. He says ISIS now uses romance and a sense of security to lure girls to join the terror group. “[Western girls are] looking for a cause; they are looking for companionship and romance,” Hashemi said.

Others point to campaigns preying on Western youth who are disillusioned and have no sense of purpose or belonging. “The general picture provided by [ISIS] of their lives in Syria suggests camaraderie, good morale, and purposeful activity, all mixed in with a sense of understated heroism,” noted Richard Barret, an adviser to international organizations on security issues. But of course, it is mere propaganda.

Former CIA officer Aki Peritz agrees. “What the jihadists are actually pushing is a specific narrative: Our people (Muslims) are being oppressed in this place called Syria, and your government is doing nothing. Why don’t you join the fight?”

As students arrive, give each of them a copy of the above news story to read. After all teens have had the opportunity to read the article, discuss it in this way:

What is your reaction to these events in the news? What would it take to persuade people you know to travel to a foreign country to be involved in a war there? How can a person understand the real purpose?

In your experience, what does it take to persuade people to join any cause or movement? List some characteristics of leaders who are able to get people to follow them.

The sophisticated recruitment campaigns aimed at leading Western teens into jihad have obviously had some success. But what does it take to lead people to accomplishing more noble tasks? The Bible tells us about Deborah, a woman of faith who was able to lead her nation out of bondage.