Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS

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Abstract

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has recently been able to recruit hundreds of women from around the world. This development may pose a severe threat to international security. This paper addresses the question: Why should Western women want to join a political struggle like the ISIS that so blatantly oppresses them? Based on the concept of female Jihad women do not seek the male's honor (sharaf) through martyrdom but take up mainly non-combatant roles. Following this notion, it can be hypothesized that through female Jihad these women aim for a form of emancipation in the new Caliphate. Along the Merriam Webster's definition of emancipation, the women's motivation to join ISIS as a form of emancipation is analyzed with very recent accounts from women in Syria over social media as well as experts' evaluations. The findings reveal that from a Western point of view the women participating in the ISIS often seem to be instrumentalized in order to enforce misogynistic ideologies, and thus, are still acting within a strongly patriarchal system. Yet, the emancipation is very real for many women that do take the journey (hijra) and perceive the confinements of such a system not as restricting. The paper underlines the importance of understanding the mechanisms within female Jihad and the security threat it poses. Female jihadist propaganda may be especially dangerous because we do not take these motivations as valid nor female Jihad as serious as the (predominantly) male suicide bombings.

Keywords

Caliphate, female foreign fighters, female Jihad, international security, ISIS.

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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has recently been able to recruit hundreds of fighters from around the world. Even more compelling is the fact that over 550 Western women have joined the radical Islamic organization who proclaimed its Caliphate in 2014 (Neumann 2015). This unprecedented number of female recruits to ISIS has attracted much media attention, and the organization's treatment of women as well as its social media propaganda has been intensely debated. Numerous scholars have tried to uncover the driving forces that lead these women to take on the journey (*hijra*) to Syria/Iraq, yet, many misperceptions concerning the roles the women take up in ISIS persist.

This paper addresses the question: Why should Western[47] women want to join a political struggle like the ISIS that so blatantly oppresses them? Based on the concept of female Jihad women do not seek the male's honor (*sharaf*) through martyrdom but take up mainly non-combatant roles. Following this notion, it can be hypothesized that through female Jihad these women aim for a form of emancipation in the new Caliphate. Along Merriam Webster's definition of emancipation, the women's motivation to join ISIS as a form of emancipation is analyzed with very recent accounts from women in Syria/Iraq over social media as well as experts' evaluations. From a Western point of view, the women joining ISIS often seem to be instrumentalized in order to enforce misogynistic ideologies, and thus, are still acting within a strongly patriarchal system. Yet, the emancipation is very real for a large number of women that do take the journey and perceive the confinements of such a system not as restricting.

For many Muslim women joining ISIS is a duty they have to fulfill due to the call for Jihad. This paper however, focusses on the underlying pull-factors of female empowerment that serve as additional motivators to some of the (especially younger) muhajirat (female migrants) and does not intend to denounce any individuals whose motivation may go beyond this pure sense of duty, rather, it wishes to investigate the phenomenon from a gender-perspective.

In the light of these developments there is a stark need for identifying and understanding the mechanisms within female Jihad and the threat it poses to international security. Research combining gender and conflict studies becomes indispensable as a gender-specific interpretation of Jihad is key to understanding the driving forces for women to join ISIS. Such an approach does not only hold essential scientific but also central practical relevance within the current political and societal landscape. Particularly the female jihadist propaganda is dangerous, firstly, for we do not take such aspirations as valid, and secondly, because female Jihad due to its less violent nature is not perceived as very serious in comparison to the (male) suicide bombings.

[47] The analysis covers Western women due to language abilities. The bias this may cause will be discussed under section 'Method and Data'.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of young women traveling to Syria and/or Iraq to join ISIS is a very new one. Hence, there are still many mechanisms within this current development that require investigation in order to not only better understand but also recognize whether and what kind of threat these dynamics could pose to international security.

Much research has focused on the motivation of (Western) Muslima to join ISIS (Perešin 2015; Petrou 2015; Sherwood et al. 2014; Zakaria 2015). Most journalists and scholars have been able to make use of the social media propaganda, in which a large part of the female migrants are involved. An important contribution has been made by Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith who published a report in May 2015 (Saltman and Smith 2015) for the Women and Extremism (WaE) project of the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) following a primary report launched in January the same year (Hoyle et al. 2015). The research project aims to give insight into why "females are being radicalized into violent extremist networks" such as the ISIS (Saltman and Smith 2015). Whereas the first report started to follow female migrants social media postings focusing on these women's self-identified reasons for migration (Holye et al. 2015), the second report was successful in identifying important push- and pull- factors that lead women to the decision to join ISIS as well as portray some of the muhajirat, their journey and roles in the ISIS by collaborating with the ICSR and the female wing of its Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) database (Saltman and Smith 2015). The second report's findings show a large diversity in the roles of females being radicalized, unmasking the popular notion of 'jihadi brides' as reductionist (Saltman and Smith 2015). Many other scholars have reached a similar conclusion: there is no specific profile of a muhajirah, which renders it very difficult to counter this development (Perešin 2015; Petrou 2015; Zakaria 2015). Saltman and Smith's report therefore also addresses the prevention and de-radicalization options in the space of counter-extremism such as the "need for better infrastructure and capacity building within de-radicalisation programmes that handle returnees from Syria and Iraq" especially concerning gender dynamics (Saltman and Smith 2015: 6). They particularly suggest the use of "counter-narratives and counter-extremism messaging" targeted at females in order to neutralize the original extremist propaganda (Saltman and Smith 2015: 6).

One of the most important findings of the second WaE-Report is the fact that most muhajirah do not assume combat roles; instead "the responsibility of Western women under ISIS-controlled territory is first and foremost to be a good wife to the jihadist husband they are betrothed to and to become a mother to the next generation of Jihadism" (Saltman and Smith 2015: 5). This is not coincidental but has to do with the essential differentiation between male and female Jihad. Scholars have looked into Islamic literature concerning Jihad for women already before the rise of ISIS (cf. Cook 2005 for an overview). A useful concept of female Jihad based on Cook's research has been provided by Katharina Von Knop (2007) who looked at the phenomenon of women waging Jihad for Al-Qaeda addressing the misconception that female Jihad does not simply equal female suicide bombings (Von Knop 2007).

This concept of female Jihad shall serve as a starting point for my analysis and help to further understand the motivation of women to join ISIS, contributing to the current research on women in ISIS.

Conceptualizations and Theoretical Framework

Female Jihad

Understanding that there is a gender-specific interpretation of Jihad that adheres different roles to men waging Jihad than it does to women is key to understanding the aspirations of female migrants to ISIS and recognizing the potential threat. Jihad, literally 'to struggle', does not necessarily refer to armed struggle (Saltman and Winter 2014: 6). According to Katharina Von Knop the "concept of the female Jihad means that the women carry out a political act by supporting their male relatives, educating their children in the ideology and facilitating terrorist operations" (Von Knop 2007: 397). Women do not seek the male's honor (*sharaf*) through martyrdom as they are not able to achieve it but are bound by the female honor (*ird*) which they instead seek (Von Knop 2007: 410). Von Knop argues that like men women are interested in power but their realm of action is restricted to the domestic (family) sphere by the society they are living in (Von Knop 2007: 399). Encouraging male relatives to become martyrs and facilitating jihadist operations gives women power and access to the public realm (Von Knop 2007: 399). Thus, female Jihad allows women to gain strong influence on the current as well as the next generation of jihadists (Von Knop 2007: 411).

Whether women are allowed to take part in fighting has been debated, especially since the 1990s (Cook 2005: 378). Historically, women did participate in battles (Cook 2005: 376). The fact that since the beginnings of Islam the religion has split into many different sectarian groups following different interpretations renders it difficult to assess whether women are intended to physically fight Jihad. A widely accepted overview over Jihad stems from Muhammad Khayr Haykal who points out the distinction between Jihad as *fard kifaya* (the obligation of Jihad lies upon part of the Muslim community, the *ummah*) and Jihad as *fard 'ayn* (the obligation lies upon every member of the *ummah*); only in the case of *fard 'ayn* are women expected to fight (Haykal 1993: 995-97).

Following this, it depends on the evaluation of ISIS what the current state of the *ummah* is. Even though Abu Bakr Naji's 'The Management of Savagery' (McCants 2006) does not mention the role of females in Jihad, other guidelines have been published. Online supporters of ISIS (namely the Al-Khanssaa Brigade's media wing) started circulating a document named 'Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study' with the aim to clarify the role of the women in the ISIS (cf. Winter 2015a). It states that women must only fight when the "situation of the ummah has become desperate" (Winter 2015a: 8). Accordingly, women are not to take up an active role in combat or suicide bombing activities at the moment, as for instance women in Chechnya or in Sri Lanka did (cf. Winter 2015a: 8; Von Knop 2007: 410).

Yet, not only the internet provides instructions for female Jihad but female jihadists often organize in so-called sisterhoods. These sisterhoods provide a sense of belonging to the female migrants and guidance on how women should practice Jihad: how to educate their children in the ideology, how to persuade their husbands and male relatives etc. (Von Knop 2007: 407-408). The central question however remains: What do these women have to gain through carrying out the female Jihad? At first sight this seems irrational for if they properly carry out the female Jihad their husbands die as martyrs in suicide attacks with which they lose the breadwinner of their family and the guarantee for the survival of their children (Von Knop 2007: 408). Still, this system allows

them to gain two things: firstly, by following through the ideology they comply with their duty of (female) Jihad securing their place in paradise (jannah) and respect in the present, and secondly, they gain power over their husband and their children (Von Knop 2007: 408). Additionally, when the female jihadists lose their husband and with that the family income, the jihadist organization takes care of the widows and their children (Von Knop 2007: 408).

Hypothesis

The motivation of women to join ISIS may thus, go beyond a pure sense of religious duty, and incorporate a wish for female empowerment and emancipation. Based on the concept of female jihad women may next to the godly reward aim to **gain power** over their husbands and families and **respect** in society. Especially the younger muhajirat - most of these female migrants are in fact only teenagers – may be pulled towards ISIS because they wish to **take control of their lives** in their search of identity and belonging, seeking respect as a (Muslim) woman. The youth has also in the West historically been prone to radicalization, trying to escape the society and rules they live in, testing and trespassing boundaries, in the process of self-finding.

Following this notion, it can be hypothesized that through female Jihad these women aim for a form of emancipation in the new Caliphate. The women's motivation to join ISIS as a form of emancipation is analyzed and opposed to the concept of Western emancipation in section 4.

Western Female Emancipation

To challenge the hypothesis, I will conceptualize emancipation from a Western perspective through its definition in the Merriam Webster, where emancipation is defined as following: *the act or process of emancipating* → emancipating being: *to free (someone) from someone else's control or power*, full definition:

1: *to free from restraint, control, or the power of another; especially: to free from bondage*

2: *to release from paternal care*[48] *and responsibility and make sui juris*

3*: to free from any controlling influence (as traditional mores or beliefs)*

(Merriam-Webster, 2015)

Female emancipation from a Western perspective can thus be conceptualized as *freeing women from restraint or control.*

Method and Data

I chose to perform a content analysis, where six tumblr blogs of Western muhajirat were scanned for information concerning their motivations to join the ISIS covering a period of up to one year. To ascertain the veracity of the blogs, I worked together with other researchers confirming the blogger's interactions with others jihadi bloggers, the time the blog was active and if de-activated at some point whether it could be connected to elsewhere confirmed events. Choosing to use

[48] *Paternal care* can be interpreted as parental care, but in our case we will also look at the structure of this term which can be applied to Muslim women often being dependent on a "male guardian", which has frequently been compared to the legal and social situation of a minor. Also, the etymology of the term *emancipation* from the Roman law shows it as *the freeing of a son or wife from the legal authority (patria potestas) of the pater familias, to make his or her own way in the world* (Harper, 2014).

social media served two causes: firstly, it allowed to obtain an intimate picture of the women's thoughts and world views, and at the same time let us gain insights into the propaganda mechanisms of ISIS. The online conversations between an American girl and an ISIS recruiter, as well as two reports from journalists who disguised as teenage girls willing to join ISIS and undergoing grooming, allowed to take up the different perspectives and gain valuable insight into ISIS propaganda techniques. The primary material therefore stems from the female migrants themselves either obtained through their social media communication. Additionally, I was able to interview a person who had worked with women in refugee camps in Iraq and Syria for two years. Due to the limited accessibility to and the great amount of data provided by the blogs I have limited my research to a sample of six women and a maximum period of one year for the blogs. I have chosen to focus only on English-speaking female migrants due to my lack of proficiency in the Arabic language which invariably lead to a sample of women traveling from non-Arab countries. This most likely affected the findings of my analysis and one has to keep in mind that they may not be valid for females migrating from Arab countries. As long as this is not overlooked it should not create any bias although efforts have to be made to include the tracking of Arabic-speaking profiles into future research – which up to now has been largely ignored (cf. Hoyle et al. 2015; Perešin 2015; Perešin and Cervone 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015). The female ISIS migrants that make up my dataset have been included because a) they self-identified as such and b) seem to reside in ISIS-controlled territory (at least for a certain period of time). Evidence that geographically located the individual in Syria or Iraq stems from other ISIS online accounts and photographs, or media reports.

Findings

My hypothesis suggested that women joining ISIS may aim for a form of female emancipation. The findings have shown that many of the women from my sample did see seek a form of emancipation in joining ISIS, manifesting itself in the following **pull-factors**:

- Pride travelling to Syria and **taking control** of their lives as opposed to these push-factors:

a) Parental restrictions → In search for **identity, community** and a sense of **belonging,** where sisterhoods play an important role

b) Feeling deprived of choice through traditions → Taking **independent decisions** concerning their lives and future

c) Being perceived as victims of Islam in Western countries → Yearning to f**ree themselves from Western restrictions**

- Gaining **power and control** over their husbands/families
- Gaining **respect** from the community as a female jihadist

The narratives of the different individuals that have been analyzed via their social media output have produced these different pull- (and underlying push-) factors. This study has been able to reveal that due to the differences in the roles men and women play in ISIS and what is expected of them, the women from my sample have a gender-specific expectation of empowerment that does not coincide with the Western understanding of female emancipation. After the display of

the findings in more detail, a discussion of the emancipation-hypothesis follows, which will thus lead us to the aspect of ISIS propaganda.

Taking control of their lives

a) Parental Restrictions

When the young women and girls write about their families they often portray a picture of **detachment**, that they do not feel understood by them:

> "yaaaay my niqaab has arrived today […] I really do not care what my parents opinion of this will be!" – Umm Layth

Feeling **restricted by their parents' control** these often only 15 year old girls make their journey to Syria, finally **taking charge of their lives**. The families at home are then replaced by their "new families": the **sisterhoods**.

> "The family you get in exchange for leaving the ones behind are like the pearl in comparison to the Shell you threw away […] The strengh of the brotherhood and sisterhood here is most definitely shown through difficulties where someone who has no blood ties with you and not even a relation will make sure if their Muslim sister is in need of anything and if there is any problems." - Umm Layth

Many state that the **bond** they existing between the sisters is much stronger than anything they have known before, a true **community**, nothing like the "fake relationships" they had at home.

> "seeing the true sisterhood of islam purely fisabelilah [in the way/cause of Allah] was truly an emotional moment. Once you start speaking to them the sisters treat you like their own and share everything with you, are always look after you and fussing over you subhanAllah [glory to God] may reward them." - Umm Uthman

b) Freedom of Choice

"Groups like ISIS can also offer a certain kind of freedom from patriarchal traditions and cultural mores" (Zakaria 2015). When in traditional Muslim families remarrying after a divorce or as a widow is impossible "within jihadi realms, that prohibition does not apply; for instance widowed women (of which there are many owing to frequent deaths of ISIS fighters) are immediately married again. A devout woman, despite her lost virginity, is still considered pure and marriageable because she wants to fight" (Zakaria 2015). In fear of being married to someone whom their father decides on, often being **deprived of choice**, these women see the Caliphate as a realm of freedom. The idea of traveling to the Caliphate to meet a fighter and choosing whom to marry is a defiant **step of independence**.

> "Choose your company wisely." – Umm Layth

The result of such possibilities:

> "Marriages here are the most beautiful thing […] most here are mixed marriages. some interesting mixes of kids ive heard.. half swedish half Afghani, half somali half german, a mix of Nigerian Indonesian and iraqi, chinese and Indian. Malaysian and maghribi […] All United under لا اله الا الله [Allah]." – Umm Ubaydah

c) Perceived Victims of Islam in Western Countries

Muslim women in Western countries are often **victimized**, perceived as oppressed women without rights and often neither respected from non-Muslim men nor women. "A great deal of racist violence is also directed at Muslim women, who are more visible than men", who have to cope with exclusion up to right-out hostilities (Khan 2015). Thus, by traveling to Syria/Iraq and taking up an important and respected role in the new Caliphate they aim to **take over control of their lives**. "Many of them are eager to portray themselves as strong women and often make fun of the Western stereotype of 'the oppressed Muslim woman'" (Hegghammer in Gilsinan 2014).

> "We are created to be mothers and wives — as much as the western society has warped your views on this with a hidden feminist mentality." - Umm Layth

It is important to understand that the hijab (Veil) is not perceived as a form of repression, "but as an act of liberation and faith that endows a female Muslim's life with honor, an aura of respect and dignity. It is also a symbol of power over their husbands as being a good Muslima who follows the 'true' Islam" (Von Knop 2007: 409). ISIS can offer an escape from this "ghettoized status of Islam in the West" as well as it may provide a legitimate response to the victimization of Muslim women and the US-led wars in the name of female emancipation and women's rights (Zakaria 2015).

> Often they feel remorse towards the West:
>
> *"let down by the entire world, by many people, by many Muslims, by any support internationally"* - Umm Layth

confined in a system where they cannot freely exercise their religion yearning to **free themselves from Western restrictions.**

Gaining Power over their Husbands/Family

A pull-factor we observed that can be directly derived from the concept of female Jihad is the prospect of gaining power over their family members.

> "you raised my status as a woman, from a from a girl I become a mother, and with that I have become stronger" – Shams

> "sisters our role is more important than any other, and even the brothers know they are not as capable and as strong as a women is created to be. It is a part of our Fitrah [nature] to be wives and mothers, and we are not created like man. […] The 4 greatest women in Islam = Khadeejah, Asia, Fatimah and Maryam. So we as muslim females should view these women as our role models as these were the most blessed in the sight of Allah. […] What made them so unique was that they raised the best of men. They raised true slaves of Allah. Their role as mothers were so important since their upbringing resulted in the future of their child - through which they gained countless ajr [rewards]. […] you may gain more ajr [rewards] by spending years of sleepless nights by being

> a mother and raising your children with the right intentions and for the sake of Allah than by doing a martyrdom operation." – Umm Layth

Von Knop (2007: 409) explains as an example: "To guarantee that the son will still follow the word of his mother and that the mother continues to be the only true love in his life, even after he has married, she selects a wife for him that he is unlikely to fall in love with. Having chosen such a wife for him, she remains the most important woman in his life. This behavior is the knowledge they teach each other in the Sisterhoods".

Respect in Society

An often reoccurring issue in the accounts of the women is the advice for muhajirah to get married as soon as they arrive not only to move slightly more freely but because the status as a wife and mother to mujahideen is **honoured** (Zakaria 2015).

> "I urge all my sisters to **come and gain true honour** by living under the law of Shariah, by marrying a brother who puts Allah before his desires and by being in the forefront of this Islamic revival." – Umm Layth

The "greatest honor" for them is if their husbands or sons die as martyrs (Von Knop 2007: 410):

> "my heart was content knowing that my husband had left this dunya [world] striving in the way of Allah". – Umm Khattab

> "Life goes on. Seriously I don't think I've met a wife of shaheed (martyr) that is depressed knowing the reward. It's such a great honour which Allah bestows on us." - Umm Khattab

Thus, these women use the prospect of **honor and respect** in society to encourage other women to join ISIS and become female jihadists.

Discussion

Emancipation?

> "You look at me and call me oppressed,
> Simply because of the way I'm dressed.
>
> You know me not for what's inside,
> You judge the clothing I wear with pride.
>
> My body's not for your eyes to hold,
> You must speak to my mind, not my feminine mold.
>
> I'm an individual, I'm no mans slave,
> It's Allah's pleasure that I only crave. […]
>
> Man doesn't tell me to dress this way,
> It's a Law from God that I obey.
>
> Oppressed is something I'm truly NOT,
> For liberation is what I've got.
>
> It was given to me many years ago,
> With the right to prosper, the right to grow.

I can climb mountains or cross the seas,
Expand my mind in all degrees.

For God Himself gave us liberty,
When He sent Islam to you and me!"

– Muslimah – The Bird of Jannah 2015

"These women do not wish to emancipate themselves in the sense of feminism", says Géraldine Casutt, doctoral researcher at the University of Fribourg, for it is too much of a Western notion, incorporating the image of a woman that does not reflect these women (in Gumy 2014). Their goal is not gender equality, "which they perceive as hypocrisy", rather in Muslim society, women are seen and see themselves as complementary to men (Casutt in Gumy 2014). Although Casutt states it may be referred to as *Femislamism*, I find this term confusing as it is also used by Muslim feminists who actually do aim for gender equality (Hobson 2014). My suggestion is to call it *Islamicipation*, being a form of emancipation "*from* the Western society, its social norms, clothes and the image of the woman in the advertisements" (Casutt in Gumy 2014, cf. Winter 2015c). As my findings have shown, the women joining ISIS are tempted by the utopia of the Caliphate which seeks to modulate Muslim community. Feeling "estranged and oppressed everywhere" these women wish to change the gender roles within society – not wanting to take the place of the men however, rather their role models are the wives or sisters of the Prophet (Casutt in Gumy 2014; cf. Umm Layth April 9, 2015; Winter 2015b). Understanding this fact is crucial.

"*T*he strictly segregated forms of leadership practiced by a group like ISIS can seem attractive to women who also believe strongly in its general Islamist vision" (Zakaria 2015). As an example we can take the all-female brigades operating in Syria's northern city of Raqqa: *al-Khanssaa* and *Umm al-Rayan* (Alami 2014). The aim of the brigades is to ensure women follow the religion correctly and punish them if they fail to (Al-Bahri 2014, Zakaria 2015). "Jihad is not a man-only duty. Women must do their part as well" Abu Ahmad, an ISIS official, explains, "we have given them their own facilities to prevent the mixture of men and women" (in Al-Bahri 2014). "This is 'complementarity' at work: it justifies segregation of the sexes while appearing to provide a ladder to leadership for ambitious young jihadi women" (Zakaria 2015).

Although it seems that women are assuming new and more powerful roles within ISIS residents of Raqqa fear that any notion of female empowerment effected by the brigades is just as fast diminished by the even harsher restrictions they had been tasked with to impose on the local women (Al-Bahri 2014). Women in the brigades may thus gain a lot of power and respect from other ISIS fighters but is this really female emancipation?

Taking up the concept of Western emancipation, we may say that these women are, not entirely but, more (1) *free from restraint, control, or the power of another,* in the way that they take control, they can be commanders of a brigade and exercise power over others (even if it is "only" other women). Likewise, are they, if only partially, (2) *released from paternal care and responsibility and make sui juris* by being able to take decisions and perform their "jobs" without a male guardian. However, they are not (3) *free from any controlling influence (such as traditional mores or beliefs)* because their actions are driven by traditional morals and especially their belief (a strict interpretation of Islam).

Hence, even if these women gain power and respect they still are confined within a misogynistic and paternalistic system from which they cannot escape.

Yet again, some Western scholars have argued that these female brigades fully empower women engaging them in combat (cf. Perešin and Cervone 2015). However, in accordance with the concept of female Jihad, the brigades are (at least at this point) not involved in any terror acts or combat, their major role being the execution of counter-insurgency operations in areas controlled by ISIS (TRAC, 2014).

We can thus conclude, that women participating in the brigades – no matter how much they may believe they have more control or power – are nonetheless not regarded as equal to men; rather they are being instrumentalized by ISIS, rejecting the notion of emancipation in the Western sense, not however, in the understanding of *Islamicipation*.

If we look more general at my findings taking up the concept of Western emancipation, we can state that the women migrating to join ISIS may feel that they are (1) *free from restraint, control, or the power of another*, by leaving their (often Western) families and (2) *removing themselves form paternal care*[49], to finally take control of their lives. However, (2) *paternal care* may be removed temporarily but as most of these women will marry an ISIS fighter, they very soon will be back under the "protection" of a male guardian (without one, as many muhajirat themselves admit, life in the Islamic State is extremely difficult). Hence, all the constraints they remove are replaced by new (and more severe) restraints than before facing an entire system (3) *of controlling influences* coming from the beliefs and ideology prevailing in the Islamic State.

From a Western perspective this is still a far cry from female emancipation. Yet, it can be argued that for a muhajirah it is her free will to believe in specific mores and to live under sharia Law, just as Westerns live under the specific laws of their state and according to their traditions. Their idea of freedom does not define itself through the absence of rules and freeing the woman entails freeing her from the subordination of man (as in secular states) and being subordinated only under God (the attraction of the Caliphate). Simply because in the Islamic State (as it in fact is the case in many Muslim states) Religion and politics are not separated as in most Western and secularized countries, this does not signify that women in Western countries are truly emancipated according to this understanding. Lastly, as my findings confirm, Western women migrating to live under ISIS and support the system may feel more emancipated choosing to live in a state that lets them live the beliefs and traditions they call theirs than in a Western country where the laws forbid them to pursue this (veiling for example).

In regard to my hypothesis, we can conclude that the women in my sample are seeking a new form of female emancipation, what we can call *Islamicipation*. Yet, we have to keep in mind that these are all women originating from non-Arab countries. I have doubts that the theory holds true for women joining ISIS from within Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries but future research in Arabic may test the hypothesis and give us more insight.

[49] Here, in the significance of parental care.

ISIS Propaganda – A New Threat!

Still, from what we hear in the media, NGO and government reports (cf. Pillay 2014; Todenhöfer 2015; UNHRC 2014; Williams et al. 2014) most of us will have trouble comprehending how anyone can see a form of emancipation in this. The question therefore arises, what are these women leaving out in their accounts? It is thus, very important to recognize that much of it is part of propaganda.

Charlie Winter, senior researcher in transnational Jihadism at the Quilliam Foundation, has intensively analyzed ISIS' propaganda strategies for over a year, providing valuable insight into the mechanisms of ISIS' propaganda construct and the women's role within it (Winter 2015b). Additionally, two of ISIS' propaganda texts (MEMRI 2014; Winter 2015a) concerning the women in ISIS allow us to get a clearer picture of the situation. Lastly, the conversations (Rukmini 2015) of a young American woman who was groomed by an ISIS fighter and recruiter, as well as two reports (Erelle 2015; MoS Reporter 2015) from journalists who were disguised as teenagers and in contact with ISIS recruiters give us sobering insights into the propaganda mechanisms of ISIS.

The main mechanisms I found are the following (cf. also Winter 2015b):

- People are neither radicalized by propaganda nor recruited by it, propaganda itself can only catalyze and concentrate sympathies: preconditions are necessary
- The utopianism that ISIS has created with the declaration of the Caliphate allows it to stand out from all other jihadist movements and creates a massive appeal for recruits
- Through outsourcing its propaganda dissemination it becomes much harder to tackle due to a lack of centralization
- In combination with using social media platforms an army of self-appointed media-jihadists has emerged resulting in an unprecedented dynamic of dissemination

In this context, young Muslim women are thrice as vulnerable to be recruited because most of them are a) still teenagers, in search of their identities and place in society, wishing to grow up and take charge of their lives and b) Muslim, and hence may not feel as home or welcome in the Western society experiencing isolation and sometimes even harassment and c) female, trying to gain respect within their surroundings. Most of all, these individuals, as it lies in human nature, seek appreciation – and this is the major weapon ISIS has been using: tailoring to different audiences around the globe, but providing a common purpose, a sense of belonging, of brother/sisterhood, equality and unity (cf. Kuehnast 2015; Winter 2015b). This is precisely where the "coalition" is still running miles behind (Benotman and Winter 2015). The dangers are, firstly, the women's motivations to join ISIS are not taken seriously and trivialized to youthful romanticism and secondly, the image of female Jihadists in media is distorted leading to the underestimation of the long-term magnitude of the women's role in creating a hatred-filled, revenge-seeking and military-trained next generation (a dynamic that has led to the insuperability of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict). The actual threats are: an expanding and protracted war that, like the civil war in Somalia, includes a myriad of different actors that are by no means willing to compromise due to a growing sacralization of the conflict (cf. Kaldor 2012; Vidino et al. 2010). The major difference however is, that the global-Salafi jihadism of ISIS is intent on expanding the

Caliphate and exterminating all the unbelievers. At the moment this may still seem far away from reality and, as it lies in human nature, most states are mainly preoccupied with the occasional returnees. But fact is, international peace is at stake and the longer we ignore the massive threat that female jihadists and their role in building the Caliphate's new generation of jihadists pose to security, the more difficult it will become to counter it.

The focus of current programs has to shift from merely fighting active terrorism (the symptoms) to the root of the problem: ISIS' long-term (propaganda and state-building) strategy and prevention and re-integration measures in the countries where individuals are being successfully recruited (cf. Saltman and Smith 2015). The problem seems to be that there is no one audience being targeted, not one specific profile of potential migrants or jihadists, and much more research needs to be done to identify the different mechanisms of how the propaganda works in different places and find ways to counter these separately instead of trying to tackle the entire package as one (cf. Winter 2015b). Identifying driving forces that lead young people to join ISIS is a big step forward, however it has also uncovered a truth that we may not want to hear: the fact that propaganda itself does not radicalize a person. We must therefore take a closer look at our own societies and find out why so many young people feel isolated in their societies, their schools, their own families, that actually create this space for radicalization. Hence, tackling the security threat may also need to involve intra-state steps on a micro-level, reconsidering national, regional and local integration and de-radicalization[50].

Conclusion

This study revealed that the women from my sample hold gender-specific aspirations of empowerment in their motivation to join ISIS. These aspirations however, do not coincide with the Western understanding of female emancipation - rather this is a form of emancipation *from* Western society. The findings further reinforce the understanding of female Jihad, along my conception, as taking up a supporting role as wife and mother, catering for the next generation. Such a gender-specific interpretation of Jihad becomes crucial for understanding the driving forces for women to join ISIS and do away with common misconceptions as "jihadi brides" or "female suicide bombers".

Likewise, the analysis gives insight into the mechanisms of the ISIS propaganda, which becomes important in order to recognize the threat this development poses to international security. Female jihadist propaganda is especially dangerous, firstly, because these women's aspirations are not taken seriously, and secondly, for female Jihad as a non-combatant form of struggle is immensely underestimated. This paper has tried to identify several important aspects of female involvement in ISIS, and by better understanding the driving forces that lead women to join the organization it aims to pave an exit road as well as strengthen prevention efforts. Nonetheless, this study has only scratched the surface of the dynamics that will affect international security immensely in the near future, and hopes to point to a number of aspects that must not go unnoticed.

[50] For an overview of some useful de-radicalization strategies in European countries see: Saltman and Smith 2015:51-69.

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Appendix

Interview: Anonymous female Yazidi refugee

1- What is your conception of female Jihad? If you do not have any, what was the ISIS rule on it? Are women allowed to fight? If yes, under which circumstances? Otherwise, what is the role of a female Jihadist?

I don't know what is Jihad about. They stormed our towns and separated men from women, they took men somewhere we don't know and took us to their bases. Women aren't allowed to fight. First they need to go under a religious orientation then they will be given to fighters of ISIS.

2- How did it happen that you were taken by ISIS?

This happened August 2014, when ISIS stormed Mousl and they captured Sinjar immediately and we were captured by ISIS fighters and taken to their bases.

3- Did you live with your family before? Where you raised Muslim? Sunni, Shi'a or something else?

I lived with my family, we are Yazidis and in ISIS'S point of view we are considered devil worshipers unlike Jews and Christians.

4- What did they tell you why they took you?

They gathered us and put us in groups, they were shouting and laughing most of the time. They were very angry and kept saying that we are devil worshipers. They said we will be given a chance to convert to Islam and be purified from the sins and later on will be taken by fighters.

5- Do you know what happened to your family?

Some of the families were killed and buried in mass graves, some families were kept under ISIS captivity. Some families were divided and taken to different parts in Syria and Iraq (Raqqa and Mousl). The majority of families were displaced and took refuge in Duhok in Kurdistan region of Iraq.

6- How were you treated by the ISIS? Were you supposed to marry a mujahideen? What was your role?

Some were treated well, others were abused verbally and physically. We have to convert to Islam before being able to marry any of the fighters. The ones who married. They were used as sex slaves or were kept inside and looked after the houses of the mujahedden.

7- Did you meet any other women/girls that were taken by the ISIS? Were there many young girls? Were the women/girls treated differently depending on where they came from and whether they were Sunni, Shi'a, Yazidi, Christians, etc.?

I met some Christians, they were treated differently from Yazidis, The treatment of Christian girls were much better than the Yazidis as they are not considered devil worshipers.

8- Do you know anything about the slave markets?

I was sold for a Saudi fighter in the center of Raqqa, he bought me for 500 $. The place of the market was in the center of Raqqa near a huge hotel where women and children were kept there. It was like a big jail. Many cases of relatives buying their children and women through agents or tribe leaders.

9- Did you meet any women/girls who came by their free will to the Caliphate to become female jihadists/ wives of mujahideen? Were they treated a lot differently? Did they talk bad about the West?

I didn't ask this question to them and they never brought up this issue. The following 2 questions are also related to this question.

10- How did you manage to leave? Did you get help?

We were able to flee with the support of locals in Raqqa and Mousl. There are many cases, some were helped by the wife's of fighters to flee. Some managed to flee with the support of fighters (ISIS) themselves, they didn't agree to enslave these girls. Others were either bought or ransomed by their relatives and went to Turkey and from their to Iraq.

11- Is there anything else you would like to share?

The experience of being a salve is something beyond imagination. It needs a lot of time to explain and tell the details.