

The Female Face of Jihadism

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Since June 2013, many cases have emerged about women joining extremist groups such as the Islamic State organisation (IS)¹ or Jabhat Al Nusra. Both groups opened female brigades called, respectively, *Al Khansa* active in Raqqa, Syria (Al Bawaba, 2014), and *Oumana Aicha* and *Banat al Walid*, active in Homs and Aleppo (Al Najjar, 2013). In addition, several hundred Western women from Austria, Britain, France, Germany and even New Zealand have joined IS. It is difficult to give the exact number; however, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) reported around 550 cases (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

News of these Western women and their Arab counterparts made headlines, as if violence by women was new and unprecedented. The shocked public reaction lies in society's perception of women as innocent victims. The word "executioner", for example, is generally never associated with females. Violence by women is not a new phenomenon as they have been active in logistical missions as well as in combat roles and suicide bombing attacks in numerous conflicts. Women were active during the conflict in Southern Lebanon against the eighteen year Israeli occupation, in Palestinian territories as well as in Iraq with Al Qaida. Chechen women, called the "black widows", have carried out several attacks against Russian government forces; the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) also used women to attack the central Turkish government. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka also used females for attacks. More recently, Boko Haram in Nigeria used females to commit attacks against civilians and the central government forces (NY Daily News, 2015).

As more and more cases emerge of Western and Arab women joining the ranks of IS and actively taking part in their security apparatus, more attention ought to be given to the increasingly significant role of women in Jihadist movements in general and in IS in particular. Policy makers often do not pay enough attention to the politicised role these women hold, often using the expression "female migrants" to refer to them on the grounds that they are not on the battlefield; hence do not constitute a real threat. The recent flow of female recruits to IS and the use of female suicide bombers in recent attacks in Paris make the study of this phenomenon crucial, especially since there are genuine misunderstandings concerning their role and its potential to evolve. The better our understanding of this phenomenon, the better our response will be to violent extremism and our capacity to shape viable preventative measures.

Why do Women Join a Jihadist Group?

The drivers that entice both men and women into Jihadism are multi-dimensional and entangled. Indeed, they can be political, social, economic, psychological or philosophical. Women do not join IS only to become "Jihadi brides", as claimed by several media outlets

1 Although the shortened acronym "IS" is used throughout the paper to refer to the Islamic State organisation, the author wishes to emphasise the significance of its label as an "organisation" rather than relying on its self-styled nature, which is neither "Islamic" nor a "state".

and analysts. In addition, they are not passive agents and victims of males who convinced them to take up a violent career. Women are political and rational actors who have different and complex reasons to join an extremist group such as the IS organisation.

This study examines some of the main motives for women to join extremist terrorist organisations. In doing so, it rejects the assumptions about these women that focus simply on their level of education, or mental health status. As seen from the massive movement of women into Syria and Iraq to join IS, these factors do not apply to them in the least. In fact, studies show that the prevalence of mental illness among incarcerated terrorists is lower than in the general population. Despite the horrible acts that IS followers commit, it is rare for a terrorist to match the profile of a psychopath. In addition, their level of education is not necessarily lower than that of their peers. One thing is certain, any “normal” individual (if normality exists!), under certain conditions, with the exposure to certain triggers, can become radicalised and act upon it. It is complicated to draw a profile of at-risk individuals as every life story is unique and the motives can vary greatly from one person to another.

Western and Arab women share common drivers; however, Arab women are subject to additional drivers when considering the local context.

Religious Motivations

In their very powerful and highly sophisticated propaganda, IS does not overlook women. On the contrary, women, “the sisters”, are told that they have a religious duty to make Hijra and participate in the state-building activities. Umm Sumayyah Al Muhajirah explains in the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, the official magazine of IS: “This ruling is an obligation upon women just as it is upon men, for Allah (ta’ālā), when excluding those incapable of making Hijrah, He excluded the incapable women just as He excluded the incapable men,” adding, “If speaking about the muhājirīn is amazing, then speaking about their twin halves the muhājirāt is even more amazing! How many stories have I heard which I would not have believed if not for hearing them directly from the mouths of those sisters involved or seeing these sisters with my own eyes; otherwise, I would have thought them the product of imagination or something impossible!” (Dabiq issue 8, 2015a).

Embrace Islam and Live under Sharia Law

A large number of both Western and local women express their desire to “glorify the word of God on Earth” or to demonstrate their love for God and the desire to raise the banner of Islam. However, for Westerners in particular, feelings of exclusion and an inability to practise

their religion freely in the secular Western societies seem to be the most cited reasons. These women perceive IS-held territories, especially *Al Sham* [Syria] where IS controls several cities and has its capital in the city of Raqqa, as places where they will feel no social and cultural exclusion and where they can practise and embrace Islam fully and share its values with the whole of society. Umm Haritha, a 20-year-old Canadian student who joined IS in Syria in December 2014, describes the difficulties she encountered in Canada when she decided to put on a veil: “I would get mocked in public, people shoved me and told me to go back to my country and spoke to me like I was mentally ill or didn’t understand English.” She continues: “Life was degrading and an embarrassment and nothing like the multicultural freedom of expression and religion they make it out to be, and when I heard that the Islamic State had Sharia in some cities in Syria, it became an automatic obligation upon me since I was able to come here” (Roberts, 2014).

Many women in IS explain that their decision to leave their countries was motivated by the desire to live in a community where they can practise their religion without any constraint and play a key role in the establishment of the Caliphate, a place where everyone else shares and honours their values. Umm Khattab explains in a tweet: “[...] we were not stupid young brainwashed females weve come here to syria for ALLAH alone [...] I might be only 18 but I know coming to shaam the best decision staying in the UK completely diminishes your islam” [sic] (Umm Khattab). Another female who goes by the name of Al Jazraweeya explains: “Best thing ive done in my 18 years in this world is come to the blessed land of shaam and leave Britain the land of kuffar” [sic] (Al Jazraweeya).

IS is perceived by these women as a fair state ruled by the divine law of Sharia, a notion that many women express specifically and seek to fulfil, believing that their *deen* [religion] is not complete until they make *Hijrah* [migration] to the land where Islamic Sharia is implemented. They use this religious and spiritual notion to actively recruit other women who share this inclination to make *Hijrah*, believing that they are helping other women to fulfil their religious obligation, and also believing that they will receive the reward for their efforts to spread the word of Allah. The recruitment efforts are reinforced by making direct comparisons to the unjust and anti-Islamic nature of laws in Western countries. Umm Haritha, for example, said that her decision to join Islamic State in Syria was motivated by a desire to “live a life of honour” under Islamic law rather than the laws of the “kuffar,” or unbelievers in a Western society (Roberts, 2014). Another woman, Aqsa Mahmood, called Umm Layth, a 20-year-old Scottish university student who joined IS in Syria in November 2013 and became an active recruiter, explained to the “sisters” via twitter that by performing the *Hijra* they will “gain true honour by living under the law of Shariah” (Dettmer, 2014).

The women praise at length the fairness and advantages of life under Sharia law where, for instance, polygamy is not forbidden: “Being in a place where my 22-year-old brother casually has three wives and not having to worry is beautiful.” Another advantage of living under Sharia law, Umm Obaida explains, is that it provides a place where civil and religious crimes are fairly punished despite their ultraviolent nature: “Drove passed the body of the man who was crucified in manbij for raping a 70 year old. Perks of living under the shade of Shariah.” Another IS female declared: “Alhumdulillah there were 4 hand cuttings in Mimbej yesterday. And one was a man who was nearly a part of Doula (he was doing a Shareeah course).” Umm Anwar, wrote: “We worship Allah and we do what is best for our deen [religion] even if that means beheading a kaffir. Fear Allah and strike fear in the kuffar’s heart” (Hall, 2014).

The Desire to Live in a Perfect Community

Women who join IS are attracted by the idea of the “pure” society that IS depicts through its powerful media communication strategy. Joining IS is a way of acting out against their respective societies that they deem imperfect and impious.

Fraternity and Sisterhood

Both men and women in IS are attracted to the image of a state where Sharia rules and where there is social justice, a distribution of *zakat* [almsgiving], and there is no corruption, inequality, racism or discrimination. As described in *Dabiq*, it is a state where “[...] the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. [...] Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another” (Dabiq issue 1, 2014a). Shams, a 26-year-old Malaysian doctor who joined IS-held territories, for instance, continuously praises this fraternity and sisterhood: “the number of mix-marriages and mix-race children are so high. It’s beautiful to witness brotherhood with no racism,” she tweeted.

The IS organisation and its members use the words *ukht* [sister] and *akh* [brother] when describing or referring to the supporters and followers of the IS. The use of these terms reflects an understanding of Islam as an *umma* [community] of believers, signifying that each Muslim shares a “brotherly” or “sisterly” relation with all other Muslims, a substitute family that transcends blood. Using this notion, IS is able to categorise social relations and create a societal structure that resembles that of a family. Once inside IS-held territories, the greater the integration of both men and women within the group, the greater their dissociation becomes from other relationships. The “sisters and brothers of the Islamic State” replace

biological family ties and the new relationships become an emotional sustainer. Aqsa Mahmood explains in a Facebook post: “All of us disassociated ourselves from our families, friends and societies” (Hall, 2014). The “sisters” provide physical, emotional and social support to one another that leads to a shared communal sentiment among the women who constitute a community of IS wives, mothers and widows. Mahmood explains: “Once you arrive in the land of Jihad [it] is your family. [...] Rejecting your family is a religious duty if they makes allies with the kuffar and reject Jihad. [...] Blood ties are nothing compared to living a truly Islamic life” (Petrou, 2015).

This fake familiarity and fictitious sisterhood encourages women to take actions, make the Hijra and sacrifice in the name of the cause. An IS woman explains in front of a camera: “These are your brothers and sisters as well and they need our help, so instead of sitting down and focusing on your families or focusing on your studies you need to stop being selfish because the time is ticking” (White Pebble, 2014).

Having the group of sisters helps the women endure the difficulties of life in a war zone and its hazards such as becoming a widow. After losing her husband, Zehra, a 21-year-old woman from Melbourne, Australia, who announced her arrival in Syria in December 2014, explains on her Ask.fm page that she is not lonely because “alhamdulillah I have my sisters whom I love for the sake of Allah always at my house” (Bloom & Winter, 2015).



Sisterhood in the Caliphate

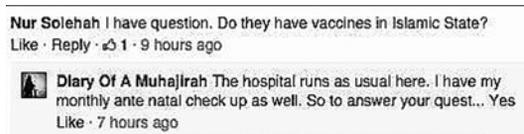


Female Comradery in the Caliphate:
'Sisters' posing with guns and the IS flag

Even those remote women (who are not living under IS-held territories) can connect to the group of sisters through social media and feel supported. The women also play the role of virtual guides for those who want to make the Hijra. They answer all kind of questions through ask.fm and disseminate step-by-step information and a “how-to” manual. For instance, Zehra answered an anonymous sender that she would be “more then [sic] happy to” help her marry a Jihadist husband in Syria and that she can advise on a private communication platform (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

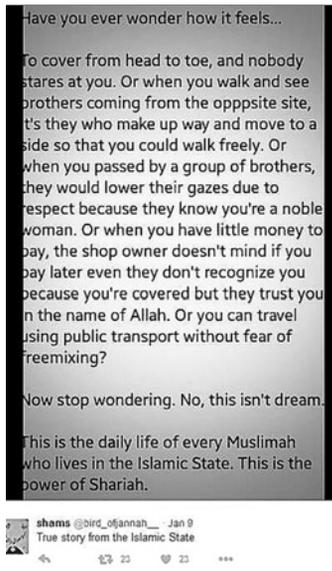
Governance and Social Welfare

One of the elements that can explain this attraction for the perfect community is that IS markets itself as a state and not an organisation. Not only do they have their own flag, anthem, identification documents and currency, but a territory under their administration. The narrative is that IS is a state that can, like any other state, provide its “citizens” with infrastructure, social welfare and even professional opportunities. Women are attracted by this idyllic image and play an important role in maintaining and disseminating a good image of life under IS. They are active marketers of IS’s branding campaign. For instance, Shams, a 26- year-old Malaysian doctor who joined IS-held territories, serves as doctor and blogger as she operates the blog “Diary of a Muhajirah”, would answer several questions about life and medical treatment (Shams):



Example of IS governance: Islamic Blogger Shams detailing life in Raqqa through her blog

IS-held territories are perceived and publicised as a state where you neither pay taxes (if you are a Muslim) nor electricity and water bills. Houses are given for free, a monthly allowance for every couple and each of their children, free medication and education.



The Caliphate as a safe haven for Muslim women

Umm Haritha, who posts photos of Raqqa regularly, explains that there are traffic police, courthouses, orphanages, and that Raqqa is “the most organized city” she has ever seen (Roberts, 2014). IS-held territories are constantly presented as safe and trustful environments where, for instance, you can leave your shop open and go to pray. A place where women are respected and do not feel in danger (Shams).

There are hundreds of pictures demonstrating the abundance of products in IS-held territories or representing daily life in a very positive way. The narrative is that despite the war, IS is the land of prosperity and wealth. Umm Haritha explains for instance that there are even “Islamic clothing stores” and that “it looked so beautiful the sisters and I joked around and called it the New York City of Syria” (Roberts, 2014).

This glamorisation of Islamic State territories helps to brand its image, especially among Westerners who might be hesitant to leave their comfortable life in the West and suffer from shortages. This is also very appealing for other Arabs who have difficult lives in other parts of Syria and Iraq or who are abroad.



Normal life resumes in the Caliphate: Despite being in a war torn country, IS advertises abundance in Raqqa



Signs of a fruitful life in the Caliphate

Numerous images of the beauty of nature are also present. This is a way to show that despite the war and its ugliness, IS-held territories remain bucolic and beautiful. Life goes on in the perfect community.



A beautiful life in the Caliphate



A prosperous life in the Caliphate

Psychological and Philosophical Motivations

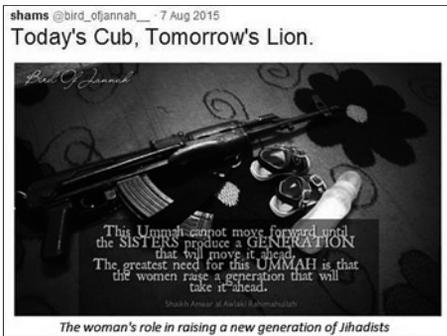
Self-Seeking

Self-seeking, or the search for an identity, is one of the motives that can explain why women join the Islamic State organisation. Usually, their desired status within their Western or local societies was hindered or could not be achieved. Joining IS – a feared and prized Jihadist group – became the means by which they intend to acquire “status” and transformed what they perceived as “purposeless” or “corrupted” in an “impious

society” to a life of devotion for Allah and the establishment of His Caliphate. The IS organisation gives the women a good image of themselves and a “positive” identity with a meaningful role to play in society. In that regard, the kunya (a new name that is adopted with the use of “Umm” for female and “Abu” for male) is very enlightening. The kunya is a symbolic rebirth: the woman leaves her birth name for a new name; it is a disavowal of one’s old self and of a previous life considered “impious”. The women reject who they used to be as Aqsa, Hayat and Sally to become Umm Layth, Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah and Umm Hussain al-Britani. They have a new name, a new identity and new family: they are born again.

The organisation becomes a sort of surrogate family that gives them an emotional comfort, a sense of security and a purpose in life. Indeed, IS propaganda makes them believe that their roles will be essential to state-building activities. IS propaganda encourages them to contribute in different roles as recruiters and facilitators, but especially as wives and mothers. They are first called to be supportive of the “mujahidin brothers”. For instance, Hayat Boumedienne, called Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah (the French widow of Amedy Coulibaly who was responsible for the 7th January 2015 attacks on the Jewish supermarket in France), stated in an interview with *Dabiq*: “My sisters, be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Be advisors to them. They should find comfort and peace with you. Do not make things difficult for them. Facilitate all matters for them. Be strong and brave. It is essential that you make all your deeds sincerely for Allah’s face and hope for His reward” (*Dabiq* issue 7, 2014b).

Women are also told that they are the mothers of “today’s cub, tomorrow’s lion” (Shams). Their role as mothers is crucial, as they will raise and educate the next generation of IS fighters in the Salafist-Jihadist ideology and culture of martyrdom and help in its



The woman’s role in raising a new generation of fighters: IS propaganda targeting women’s role in developing the “cubs” of today into the “lions” of tomorrow.



The crucial role of women in the Caliphate: raising Muslim children

legitimisation and transmission. As explained in a tweet by Mahmood, who was threatening Cameron and Obama: “[...] But worry not, somewhere along the line your blood will be spilled by our cubs in Dawlah,” explains Umm Layth (Rahman, 2014).

Mothers are called to praise martyrdom and push their children towards it. In the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, Umm Sumayyah Al Muhajirah recalls several “sisters” who supported their sons in their martyrdom and she takes them as an example to follow and imitate:

I saw sisters on a night enflamed by battle send their fifteen year old sons outside the home saying, ‘Allah is the greatest! Go to Jannah whose width is that of the Heavens and the Earth!’ O Lord, it is their sons! Their own flesh and blood! But they are not more valuable than the religion nor this Ummah! Yes, they are muhājirāt who came to the Islamic State! I say it without pride.
(Dabiq issue 8, 2015a).

To convince them, IS creates an emotional connection with the glorious past of the Caliphate:

They [the sisters] understood that Hārithah is in Firdaws in accordance with the testimony of mankind’s leader – may my father and mother be sacrificed for him. For, “Hārithah was injured on the day of Badr while he was a young lad, so his mother came to the Prophet (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam) and said, ‘O Rasūlullāh, you know Hārithah’s place in my heart. If he is in Jannah, I will be patient and await reward, but if it is the other... what do you advise I do?’ So he (sallall hu ‘alayhi wa sallam) said, ‘Woe unto you, have you lost your mind? Is it just one Jannah? There are many levels in Jannah and he is in al-Firdaws’” [Sahīh al-Bukhārī] (Dabiq issue 8, 2015a).

The Suffering of the Ummah as an Emotional Push

Since its inception in June 2014, IS has been calling for “[...] the Ummah of Muhammad to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonour, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace [...] The sun of jihad has risen” (Dabiq issue 1, 2014a). IS Salafist-Jihadist ideology is based on a binary polarisation and this is neither new nor specific to IS. IS offers its followers simple answers to complex problems by proposing a Manichean view that helps its supporters make sense of their complicated world: “O Ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present. The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr [disbelief] and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and

the camp of the Jews, the crusaders, the allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the Jews”. (Dabiq issue 1, 2014a).



The 'Us' vs 'Them'



The binary polarization 'Us' vs 'Them'

This othering process of “us vs them” helps to define the group, its enemies, how to behave in the favour of the in-group and fight the out-group. The “other” is an enemy because it is “impious”, a “hypocrite”, an “apostate”, an “infidel” and a “supporter of infidels”.

Salma and Zahra Halane, the 16-year-old twins from the UK who joined IS-held territories in July 2014, tweeted: “Allah, the merciful, placed something in mine and Salma’s hearts that we came to hate the infidels [in Britain] – to such a degree we could not even bear to look at them. [...] My best advice to you is to get the whole family to make hijrah to the Islamic State” (Calderwood, 2015).

The different conflicts in the world are presented by IS propaganda as examples of oppression of the Muslim *ummah* [community] by the *kuffar* [non-believers]. This propaganda – constantly displayed on social media through several mediums (videos, posts, magazines, pamphlets and so on) – played and will continue to play a very important role in mobilising both men and women by provoking anger, hate and fear. The trauma of others in the Muslim world is used to indoctrinate young men and women who will eventually identify themselves with the victims and try to change the situation by making Hijra to the Caliphate in order to help Muslims. Shannon Conley, a 19-year-old American girl caught attempting to fly from Colorado to join IS, explained: “Even though I was committed to the idea of jihad, I didn’t want to hurt anyone [...] It was all about defending Muslims” (CBS News, 2015).

To encourage violence against the out-group, Jihadist ideology often uses revenge imagery such as the one below:



The case of Moaz al-Kasasbeh: The use of revenge imagery to incite hate amongst it's recruits



Use of Revenge Imagery by IS to exacerbate the dichotomy mindset amongst its recruits

The rhetoric is “if we do not kill them first, they will kill us all.” This creates cohesion in the group that sees the threat everywhere and is trying to protect the “we” against the “them”, or “Islam against impiety”. Umm Layth said in a tweet: “This is a war against Islam and it shall be known that you’re with them or with us. So pick a side” (Styles, 2015). Khans writes, “Under guise of ‘fighting terror’ this bastard goes into our countries to kill more Muslims. Ya Allah! Send your wrath upon him & those with him” (Hall, 2014).

The eradication of the “other” is not only considered perfectly right and necessary, but it is the only way of “rescuing His religion, His Prophet and his allies.” IS and its fighters are presented as “brave knights of the Caliphate” who act in the name of God who has sent them “to wage war in the homelands of the wicked crusaders” (Dabiq issue 12, 2015b).

Of Romance and Adventure

Many individuals are attracted by the organic fusion between Muslims of the entire world for the splendour of the Prophet Mohammad and the Ummah. In some cases, joining IS offers an opportunity for many Westerners to break the boredom of modern democracies (Berlin, 1990). Adhering to an organisation with such an aura and supposed strike force provides a chance to find a meaning in life and live a great and unique adventure that is changing the face of countries (Syria and Iraq) and the world. Joining IS brings “marvel” to a life perceived as purposeless and tedious. Joining IS and living a “romantic adventure” with a mujahid is a way out of an insipid life. There is no social infringement, as the engagement is understood as epic, a moral obligation for a divine cause and a heavenly conquest.

In addition, there is a much-romanticised idea of the so-called “mujahideen”, who are portrayed as courageous, fearless and committed to the cause of Allah and His prophet. War is glamorised and violence is legitimised and normalised. There is an idealisation of the *shaheed* [martyr] who is also called “green bird” who “seek[s] the gardens of eternity” (Hall, 2014).



The virtuous life of Jihad

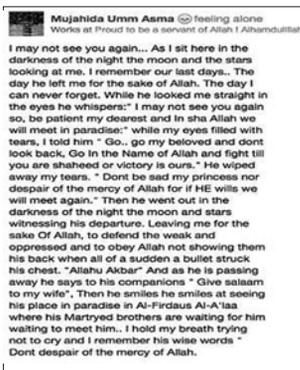


The righteous life of Jihad



The honorable life of Jihad

Several cases showed that many Western women hold a highly romanticised image of *jihad*, and they travelled to become the wives of the *mujahideen*, the potential “green birds” [martyrs] and the mothers of fighters-to-be. Single female are encouraged to marry upon their arrival to IS-held territories and boost the martyrdom of their husbands, as they will be reunited in *jannah* [paradise]. Their glory as martyrs will reflect on their wives because the martyr will ensure a place for his wife in paradise. Not to mention the special status that the widows of martyrs receive within the community as a “chosen one” (screenshots of various Twitter accounts).



Of romance and jihad



The Virtues of being a martyr's wife



The Romanticization of being the wife of a Mujahid

Shams, who calls herself the “bird of Jannah,” presents a highly romanticised image of IS, of what it means to marry a *mujahid*, and eventually raise children in the Caliphate. She explains: “What does actually matter is – heart. When you love someone for the sake of Allah, He will ‘tie’ a knot between our hearts and make the attachment strong, regardless of

the difference between two of you.” Umm Layth explained in a tweet: “Only after becoming the wife of a Mujahid do you realize why there is so much reward in this action” (Hall, 2014).



The great privilege of being women in the Caliphate

The chance to be the wife of a Mujahid

Many IS females explain how martyrs are celebrated and how their widows do not cry but smile and are exultant about their death. Attaining martyrdom is seen as the highest honour one could achieve for himself and his family. Umm El Baraa, whose best friend lost her husband after 7 years of marriage and two daughters, explains the joy and happiness of the sisters the day of his death, especially his wife:

“We entered the house, I saw there was almost 20 sisters. No body cried. Everyone was smiling. The house smells good. The kids seemed happy, and there were foods on the floor. I was astonished, puzzled. [...] I heard Umm Habiba approached me joyfully. She looked pretty as always, she wore a nice cloth, with make-up on her face, jewelries and she smelled good. Umm Habiba. I hugged her. The tears began to flow on my cheeks. I cried like a baby. She took her hand and wiped my tears and hold my cheeks. She said something that amazed me. ‘Umm al Baraa ya Habibty. My husband is a shaheed. He is In sha Allāh in the garden of Jannah, married to Hoor-al Ayn. Today is the day of celebration. Today is the day of joy. No one shall cry! [...]’. I never thought someone can be this strong. I looked at her kids, two beautiful girls. I don’t know if they understand that their father is no more alive. I pulled Habiba closer to me and asked her how she’s doing. She said she’s happy because her mother told her that the father has bought a house in paradise and waiting for them” (Hall, 2014).

A 45-year-old British woman, Sally Jones, nicknamed Umm Hussain al-Britani, who travelled to Syria and married a 21-year-old Jihadist called Junaid Hussain, explained in a tweet after the death of her husband: “proud my husband was killed by the biggest

enemy of Allah, May Allah be pleased with him, and I will beaver every love anyone but him." Talking to a sister who lost her husband, Jones explained "May Allah accept your husband too into the highest ranks of jannah" (Virtue, 2015).

In addition, marriage is also a practical step as a woman in IS-held territories cannot live by herself or go out without a *mahram* [allowable escorts]. Mahmood explains in a post:

"I have stressed this before on twitter but I really need sisters to stop dreaming about coming to Shaam and not getting married. Wallahi life here is very difficult for the Muhajirat and we depend heavily on the brothers for a lot of support. [...] Unless of course if you have family here, if your father or brother is here then it is a different situation. Regardless, it's most appropriate and better for the sisters to get married sooner" (Hall, 2014).

Social Connections as Sponsors' Integrator

Another motive that entices women into extremist groups such as the IS organisation is social connections. Being related in one way or another to a person engaged in IS can indeed boost one's predispositions for joining the group and turn them into action. Several cases show the importance of family, friends, and mentors as integrators to the group and its ideology for both locals and Westerners. As explicitly explained by a former Syrian IS female working for the Al-Khansa brigade: "Since my relatives had all joined, it didn't change a great deal to join" (Moaveni, 2015).

The identical twins Salma and Zahra Halane were introduced to IS ideology and influenced by their older brother Ahmed Ibrahim Mohammed, a 21-year-old who left the UK in 2013 to join IS in Syria. The Saudi woman Nada Mouid Al Kahtani was also influenced by her brother whom she decided to follow into Syria (Assawsana, 2013). There is also the case of the friends Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Khadiza Sultana who decided to travel together to IS-held territories (Smith-Spark, 2015). Or the case of "Jihadi Jane" who travelled to Syria with her friend called Umm Layth. Several cases showed that family ties play an important role in the mobilisation: there is for instance the case of Khaled Sharrouf, who went from southwest Sydney to the capital of the Islamic State organisation in Syria (Raqqa) with his wife, his two daughters and three young sons. A close friend of the family, called Zehra Duman, a 21-year-old, followed the steps of the Sharrouf family who she joined in Raqqa in December 2014 (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

Forced or consensual marriage additionally helps in consolidating alliances, ensuring allegiances and making defection more difficult. For instance, Khaled Sharrouf gave one of his daughters, a 14-year-old, in marriage to one of his friends, an IS fighter called Mohammed Elomar.

These social networks also act as counter-measures to defection. Indeed, it is more difficult for a woman who joined IS to leave the organisation in which her brother, sister, father, husband, friend or cousin (and sometimes children) are engaged.

Additional Motivations for Local Women

As mentioned above, Western and local women share common drivers. However, Arabs are subject to additional drivers because of the local context.

Economic Motivations

According to a recent report released by The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), 3.1 million Syrians became poor in 2012, 1.5 million of whom became extremely poor (Nasser, Mehchi & Isma, 2013). Poverty is due to several factors, among them the high price of goods and services, a reduction in incomes, unemployment and lack of professional opportunities and damage of physical assets. People in Syria, especially displaced individuals and rural populations, suffer from several forms of deprivation, such as lack of housing and basic services (fuel, electricity, water and even food). Working for a group such as IS and being under its umbrella becomes a source of income; a way to secure a livelihood and to live in better conditions. According to Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), a local NGO, an IS female Jihadist earns between \$700 and \$1500 per month, depending on her status, the number of children and her nationality (Al-Raqawi, 2015). Other sources cite this figure as \$200 to \$300 (TRAC), which, despite this discrepancy, remains a substantial sum under the current conditions in Syria.

Dua, a former member of Al-Khansa Brigade, the all-female IS morality enforcement apparatus in Raqqa, explained that money was her first motivation for supporting and joining the group. From a modest background with a father who was a farmer heavily taxed by the IS organisation, the young woman married a wealthy IS fighter called Abu Soheil Jizrawi, who offered Dua's family \$2,500 for her dowry. In addition to the monthly income and the facilities that the organisation provides its followers and fighters, joining IS allowed Dua to live in a spacious apartment with a servant who would leave bags of meat and food every morning at her door (Moaveni, 2015). According to RBSS, there are 278 cases of local women who got married to IS fighters because their families were

in need of the dowry money that, in some cases, would reach \$4000 (Al-Raqawi, 2015). IS provides financial ease as a way to attract fighters and maintain their loyalty. A local woman who fled IS-held territories explains: “If you are a member of IS they give you gas, petrol and bread [...] Better to take the things they offer than die of hunger, this is how they force people to support them” (Waterlow, 2015).

Engagement by Involvement

The current difficult economic conditions and high rates of poverty are factors that lead locals, both men and women, to engage with the Islamic State organisation, essentially becoming a part of it, without actively seeking to do so. They join IS gradually and, without noticing, their level of engagement deepens within the organisation. Usually, this process starts with “small favours” that IS asks from these individuals, who would carry them out as a way to earn some money. These favours do not usually involve big risks (the danger lies in the illegality of the act). This process is gradual and usually slow. It begins with several small “tests” that eventually lead to a more important mission. These steps are usually non-violent. For instance, the women are asked to cook food for the fighters, to sew their clothes, to nurse them, to keep an eye on the security forces’ activities, to spy on the non-Islamic behaviour of the other women and neighbours, to deliver a package, and so on. Gradually, these small favours turn these women into accomplices of the Jihadist group. The more the person performs deeds for the group, the more she is involved, compromised and cannot refuse to perform a bigger task. Eventually, the pressure to join mounts, defection becomes too risky and too costly (death or retaliation against her family), and the circle is complete: no possibility for withdrawing and a single choice that is explicitly joining the organisation. As explained by Aws, a defector from the Al Khansa Brigade in Raqqa, the first concession that she made was to agree to marry a Jihadist from the organisation in order to protect her family and avoid retaliation against them for not accepting the proposal. Soon after her marriage, she joined the brigade responsible for morality enforcement, recruiting women foreigners and picking up the muhajirat from the borders and making sure their transition went smoothly (Abed Sherad, 2015).

Indiscriminate Violence and Thirst for Protection and Revenge

When Islamic State takes the control of a region, its tactics of indiscriminate violence against anyone who opposes it do not leave many options to the locals. They leave if they have the chance to do so, but many join either as a passive response when they see that many other people have also joined, either because they believe that joining is the right thing to do, or they join IS as a survival tactic out of fear for their lives. As explained by two women defectors of Al Khansa Brigade in Raqqa Dua and Aws, when Islamic State took full control of Raqqa, the organisation incarcerated the recalcitrant,

tortured them or killed them. For people to survive, they either had to flee or to support the organisation and get involved (Moaveni, 2015). The case of Hanan is an example. Hanan had to marry the head of the IS Sharia police, a so-called Abu Mohammed Al-Iraqi in exchange for her father's life. She describes her visit to the headquarters: "After a bit my mother came and said to me, they will release him if you marry the head of the Sharia police. His name is Abu Mohammed al-Iraqi. My father's life for his hand in marriage. We have no one but him; I had to accept" (Damon & Tuysuz, 2015).

In addition, the fact that the local authorities and international actors consider Raqqa and its population as a terrorist zone does not allow the population to distance itself from the IS organisation, especially when these actors resort to indiscriminate aerial bombardment of the city, killing many civilians and dismissing them as collateral damage in the larger fight against IS. This mechanical inscription and dismissal of the population will lead to a self-reinforcing mechanism. The indiscriminate violence against entire villages by the Syrian regime is counter-productive because it removes any allegiances, or trust, in the authorities, and instead creates an aspiration for protection and a thirst for revenge. Many women joined Islamic State or other groups such as Jabhat Al Nusra because they considered them their protectors and the remedy for the injustice and humiliation they faced from the security forces. Even if these women do not agree with the ideology of the group, they will align with the group with the aim of rectifying a grievance of which they have been a victim or of which one of their siblings or loved ones was a victim. Carrying weapons enables them to act, get revenge and, most importantly, protect themselves and their families and avoid being subject to potential or proven aggressions such as rape. A combatant from the *Banat Al Walid* Brigade in Homs stated: "Our main goal is to protect ourselves against the fierceness of Assad groups" (Al-Khateeb, 2012).

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the number of foreign fighters (both Arabs and non-Arabs) and their female counterparts – whose role will evolve within the organisation – the danger for the West and the MENA region is great. IS will use women in more active roles when it begins to fear for its defence and survival because of a perceived or confirmed weakness; or when the organisation would like to hit hard targets (highly guarded with a considerable security). An IS article online entitled "A Sister's Role in Jihad" clearly illustrates this point (Sister Al):

"While Jihad (or Qital) is generally waged by men, there is clear evidence of women's participation in Jihad – both during the times of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and throughout Islamic history, up until this day. [...]"

However, when the need arose, our brave sisters never held back from fighting, and neither should they now! [...] By the Grace of Allah, The Most High, the situation in the Ummah is not that desperate yet [...] However, sisters should definitely be prepared!"

Women in IS pose a real threat for several reasons: on the one hand, they will continue to participate in IS propaganda via social media and try to indoctrinate and recruit "at-risk" individuals and disseminate the Salafist-Jihadist ideology. Not to mention that their support to the Jihadist cause and to the fight is contributing to the success of the organisation. They will continue to recruit those who are already convinced, and lift their predispositions. On the other hand, some of these women (and men) may return to their respective countries and perpetrate terrorist attacks there. For these reasons, it is crucial to adopt some policy approaches that will successfully deter and prevent "at-risk" individuals from joining IS by countering their ideology and presenting them with a better alternative:

- a. Counter-ideological effort: fighting the ideas. Develop both offline and online alternative narratives to the Jihadist ideology, by giving these young women and men better tools to be able to tackle extremist propaganda. These narratives should comprise social media campaigns, educational campaigns for young people in schools, places of worship, and civil associations, and bringing together religious and community leaders, activists, and academics to define a cohesive strategy to combat extremism in the society. States and ministries should fund initiatives to train Muslim activists, media (local and Western), NGOs, religious organisations, preachers and imams to be voices of an alternative narrative and to advocate against extremism. In addition, marketing and advertising professionals should be mobilised to develop sophisticated and glossy campaigns for every targeted audience. These initiatives should take the form of educating and training young people on the dangers of extremist propaganda, and how to correctly assess and process the extremist content they come across; hence they would be able to differentiate between Islam and Islamism, Jihad and Jihadism and so on. These initiatives will also expose the flawed logic of the organisation and the reality of the dire situations in the areas which it controls. This counter-narrative had to be qualitatively and quantitatively coherent to match and exceed the capabilities of IS in disseminating propaganda. As shown by a recent report, the IS organisation disseminates "an average of 38.2 unique propaganda events a day from all corners of the Islamic State 'Caliphate'" (Winter, 2015). What some state actors are doing, such as France, Britain and the US, to develop this counter-narrative is not even close to enough. Countering the Jihadist narrative and presenting an alternative to it should be

scaled up in scope and inclusiveness; it must be a constant 24/7 stream of positive information and media, and must be diversified in content and approach, as everyone is attracted by a distinct message. In that regard, the digital advocacy hub KNOW is a very good initiative, which encourages individuals to actively participate in disseminating messages to counter violent extremism. Initiatives such as the 77th Brigade's "Facebook warriors" created by the British Army to counter extremism on social media including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other platforms is a good start provided that those recruited to the Brigade have a good understanding of IS, its ideology and how and why people join (MacAskill, 2015). The counter-narrative needs to be able to counter each and every aspect of IS propaganda (including victimhood, depicting the perfect community, the dichotomous rhetoric of "us vs them", and so on), and respond to each of those angles in a logical manner that refutes its argument and diminishes its appeal to at-risk individuals. In addition to simply "countering" the IS narrative, presenting an alternative narrative is that has a more powerful appeal than that of Salafist-Jihadist arguments is just as crucial. In addition, these alternative narratives should be presented in several languages (Arabic, French, English, German, Urdu, etc.) to capture a wider audience, using the same multi-lingual method that IS adopts for its own propaganda. The choice of wording is also very important and professionals such as academics, Muslim clerics, psychologists, and local community leaders should help in the translation, and become active members of these initiatives.

- b. Give returnees a voice. The counter-narrative needs to be delivered by an appropriate and "legitimate" source. The example of the American Think Again Turn Away campaign is enlightening (Katz, 2014). The fact that the campaign was created by the US Department of State destroyed its credibility. Indeed, an at-risk individual who thinks that the State Department is the "enemy to be destroyed" would never listen to its counter-narrative. Instead, former extremists, returnees, defectors and incarcerated extremists should be given the chance to discuss their experience and tell their stories in public because they have an authenticity that allows them to gain the trust of the returnees or at-risk individuals. As explained by a former Indonesian Jihadist of the Jemaah Islamiyah who benefitted from a de-radicalisation initiative and now is the head of a local non-governmental organisation: "I used to be like them before. I used to be in their world, so I know how to talk to them in their language" (Lamb, 2011). Due to this approach, the Indonesian government succeeded in persuading 680 extremist militants to change sides. Former fighters can also be a real asset and help in raising awareness, as shown by the former Malaysian extremist Nasir Abbas, who became a writer and turned his experience of Jihadism into a comic book. His book was handed

- out in schools and libraries in order to raise awareness and help change the mindset of people toward Jihad (McDowell, 2011).
- c. Engage families of victims of Jihadist violence and associations but also the families of those who left for Syria and Iraq in the counter-narrative. Because of their victim status, they have more legitimacy and weight. Sharing their pain and experience can contribute in creating an awareness of the calamitous effects of extremism and reduce popular support for it. Victims talking about the hefty price of terrorism will have a personal emotional impact on their audience. The Indonesian experience, for instance, that involved the Survivor Foundation, the Association of Victims of Terrorism Bombings in Indonesia and the Alliance for a Peaceful Indonesia was a real success (IPAC, 2014).
 - d. Multi-agency approach. Follow a multi-agency approach in which civil society groups, specialists, teachers, educators, police officers and other stakeholders work together to identify at-risk individuals and provide them with the tools to exit the spiral of violence.
 - e. Rehabilitation and empowering through entrepreneurial trainings. Avoid dealing with returnees by confiscating their citizenship. On the contrary, this policy only feeds IS propaganda and leaves no alternative to the returnee. Government policies need to be more flexible with returnees and offer them rehabilitation procedures to reintegrate them into society and the community. Social enterprises and industries should help in their rehabilitation (Ramakrishna, 2014). It will give them meaning in life and a sense of pride. In Indonesia, initiatives like these proved positive. Former extremist detainees were rehabilitated and have been offered jobs in fish farms, restaurants or literary cafés (Cassrels, 2011).
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