

## Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS

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### Abstract

More than 550 Muslim women from Western countries have joined ISIS and moved to its proclaimed 'Caliphate' in Syria and Iraq. No extremist group has been able to attract so many female Western recruits so far, and their number continues to grow. This article is intended to explain the reasons behind such unprecedented success, the motivation of Western Muslimas to join ISIS and their roles in the 'Islamic State'. It also compares living conditions under ISIS' rule with the expectation induced by ISIS' recruiters in women from the West who had shown an interest to make *hijra* and join ISIS. Understanding these factors is vital to figure out how to stop this trend and to assess the security threat posed to the West by possible female returnees, or radicalized sympathizers who are unable to leave their countries of residence.

**Keywords:** ISIS, Islamic State, Caliphate, female foreign fighters, *muhajirat*

### Introduction

This article explores the reasons why a growing number of Muslim women (Muslimas) from the West are joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a group that became notorious for its brutal violence, torture, executions, and mistreatment of prisoners, hostages and civilians, including women and children. By formally approving of brutalities against women accused of being unbelievers, such as physical and sexual violence and slavery[1] (in the pamphlet "Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves"[2]) and by clarifying strict behavioural norms and the roles women are allowed to play in ISIS-controlled territory (in "Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Studies"[3]), the group has spread fear and demonstrated its power to control and use women to achieve some of its goals. Even though the image the group chooses to offer could be expected to make it unattractive to women from the West, a surprisingly high number of female Muslims and converts, identifying themselves as *muhajirat*, have recently left their Western countries and performed *hijra*[4] to the newly proclaimed 'Caliphate'.

Previous research on individuals involved in terrorism and violent extremism demonstrates that, among other factors, the causes of terrorism can be found in an environment that is conducive to, and permissive of, such acts and in motivating factors that directly encourage violence.[5] The fact that more than 20,000 foreign militants have gone to Syria and Iraq to fight,[6] a higher number than in all other jihadist struggles combined, raises concerns that radicalised and traumatised individuals with combat experience could return to plot against their home countries. The phenomenon of ISIS' Western foreign fighters and the threat they pose as potential future terrorists, have been primarily analysed focusing on the male component. This article analyses the importance of females for ISIS' strategic goals, both in the 'Islamic State's' territory and in the West. Thus, using open-source information and the voluntary statements of self-identified female adherents active on social media, this article explores the background of ISIS' Western women, their motivations and expectations, their importance for ISIS, and the differences between the conditions promised and the reality of life in the 'Islamic States' or 'Caliphate'.

Understanding the motivations of Western Muslim women to join the group and the importance of the experience some of them get in the 'Islamic State', is necessary to assess the capacity of women to go through the "terrorist production system"[7] to become female terrorists, skilled and instructed to conduct violence in the ISIS-controlled territory or in their Western countries of residence. Women who successfully went

through different stages of the “complex model of foreign fighter radicalization: decide, travel, train & fight, return, plot,”[8] will require different types of treatment if/when they return to their home countries – something that needs to be recognized in any counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism policies.

The available data, which is currently limited due to the lack of reliable socio-demographic profiles of women and neutral information on the reality of life in the ‘Islamic State’, has nevertheless helped to paint a preliminary picture of the ISIS’ Western Muslim women that still needs to be further corroborated and elaborated. Such limits restrict our understanding of how their motivation to participate in violent jihad is progressing, how to counter this trend, and what kind of threat these women could pose to their home countries. However, it clearly demonstrates the importance of Western women for ISIS and the need to seriously assess the phenomenon in the West.

### ***Who are ISIS’ Western Muslim Women?***

The exact number of Muslim women from the West who joined ISIS is still not officially confirmed. It is estimated that their number exceeds 550,[9] or that they represent 10 percent of the number of all ISIS’ Western foreign fighters. [10] Apart from that, authorities from different European countries, as well as the US, Australia and Canada, continuously report new cases of women who are being arrested at airports on suspicion of trying to travel to Syria or who express their willingness to make *hijra* on their social media accounts.

A research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue showed a significant amount of diversity within the profiles of Western female migrants. This makes it impossible to create a broad profile of women at risk of being radicalized by ISIS based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background.[11] These girls and young women are mainly aged between 16 and 24,[12] but even younger girls have attempted to travel to Syria. In most cases they are second or third generation Muslim immigrants, but the number of converts is also growing. A considerable number of girls who have left school, who are students, or are already well-educated and supposedly possess a certain level of intellectual independence, such as Aqsa Mahmood (a.k.a. Umm Layth), the privately-educated and trained radiologist from the UK,[13] indicate that a significant number of girls and young women have good prospects of education and life in the West and come from well-established, moderate and non-radicalized families.

Unlike cases of entire families moving from the West to the ‘Islamic State’, in the case of individual female migrants there is no evidence that their families support their decision to follow radical jihad and move to ISIS-controlled territory. On the contrary, there are several examples of family members who begged their daughters or sisters to change their mind and return home.[14] Some of them even travelled to Syria and tried to bring them back, while others, clearly shocked after having discovered the connections of their “intelligent and lovely daughters” with violent jihadists, publicly expressed condemnation of “perverted and evil actions of the distortion of Islam.”[15] Families with such attitudes could, in many cases, become valuable partners for security services implementing new female-oriented counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism measures.

An important question is: what term to use to properly refer to ISIS’ Western women, considering the motivation and the roles they play in the territory controlled by ISIS. Are they to be labelled *terrorists*, *female foreign fighters*, *muhajirat* or *naïve manipulated victims*? Female terrorists are not a new phenomenon. Many terrorist organizations have used women for carrying out terrorist attacks, especially suicide bombings. Up to now, such use of ISIS’ women has not been confirmed, but it is also not strictly forbidden, as it will be described below.

ISIS' women are often labelled by security experts and journalists as 'female foreign fighters', a term that implies the same role for women and men within the group. 'Foreign fighters' are defined as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil war,"[16] but "whose primary motivation is ideological or religious rather than financial." [17] That implies that foreign fighters are paid, as ISIS' fighters are, [18] but money is apparently not their primary motivation. Such a broad definition of 'foreign fighters' could be applied to women from the West who receive some financial allowance and some of whom, once they arrive in Syria or Iraq, learn how to use weapons and can be seen on the streets of the 'Caliphate' carrying Kalashnikovs. However, a strict interpretation of *Shariah* law prohibits combative activities for women and so far there is insufficient evidence that ISIS use women in combat. The individual statements, like the one given by a self-identified former member of the Al-Khansaa Brigade who escaped to Turkey, published in April 2015, that the European members of this brigade "fought on the frontline" [19] has not yet been confirmed from different sources. The same is true with regard to two cases of executions presented as being performed by women. In one case, Al-Khansaa Brigade members executed a former comrade, who was accused of being a spy. [20] In another case, a Syrian soldier was shot dead by an off-screen individual identified as the wife of a slain fighter.[21]

In terms of self-identification, Muslim women who joined ISIS and moved to the 'Caliphate' call themselves *muhajirat*. The term *muhajirah* (sg.; *muhajirat*, pl.) was coined by the first historians of Islam to honour the women who protected the Prophet during the early Islamic battles in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, both female members of the Prophet's family and new converts to Islam.[22] It is important to highlight that not all ISIS women, depending on their motivation for making *hijra*, clearly understand the importance and honourable value of the term in its religious sense, which could offend true believers. The same term has also been used to specify female suicide bombers, "reflecting the evolution of women's role in conflict from passive to active supporters of the violent jihadi movement" [23] – something which might in some cases also be applicable to ISIS' Western women.

Finally, notwithstanding how adolescents understand what concepts such as 'Caliphate', *ummah*, or violent jihad really mean, ISIS also use naïve and easily manipulated teenage girls to play a role in territory under its control, inducing them to embrace a cause that they often do not clearly understand.[24]

With the above-mentioned limitations in mind, none of the terms—*terrorists*, *female foreign fighters*, *muhajirat* or *naïve manipulated victims*—can be generally applied to all the Western female migrants. Proper labelling will depend on the evidence of their motivation, role and activities in the ISIS-controlled territory.

While it is hard to quantify the extent of the growing alienation between female migrants and the respective countries of residence, there is widespread concern about this trend and is trying to find out what motivates women from the West to move to the war-torn area and join such a notorious terrorist group.

### **Motivation**

In public, ISIS' Western Muslim migrants expressed different motives to join ISIS: from religious, ideological and political to personal ones. Here we will explore if and how their sense of frustration was exploited by ISIS' propaganda to offer them a 'new meaningful life' in a 'better society'. Religious motivation is cited most often by the women themselves as the most important driver. It is always present at some level, but by itself it is not sufficient to explain the willingness of Western-educated Muslim women to move to the 'Caliphate' and to join ISIS. In most of the cases analysed, a combination of religious and other motivating factors fuel the aspirations of women to take part in violent jihad.

Firstly, women are responding to ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who urged Muslims from around the world to fulfil their religious duty and move to the new 'Caliphate' "to help build its infrastructure, economy and army for jihad." [25] Entire families answered that call, "believing that they are doing the right thing for their children." [26] The same intention can be found among a significant number of single women, who decided to move to the 'Caliphate', alone or with their children. Others left their families after finding a prospective husband with whom they want to start a new life in Syria. One such example is the Bosnian woman Elvira Balic Karalic, who left her husband and two children, aged ten and three, to go to marry a French foreign fighter of Bosnian descent, with whom she now lives in Raqqa and has another child. [27]

In the newly proclaimed 'Caliphate' some women see a chance to take part in the state-building process and to participate in the creation of a new society that would be built in contrast to the "decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which has no respect for women." [28] With that in mind, women talk about joining the *state*, not a terrorist group, and expect to be given an important role in creating the new, ideologically-pure state, where they could live 'honourably' under a strict interpretation of *Shariah* law. Zehra Dunman, a 21 year-old woman of Turkish descent from Melbourne, Australia, explained that once the 'Caliphate' was declared, she could no longer wait even a second to migrate there. [29] Promoting the same aim in online blogs, ISIS' female recruiters "talk about the failings of Western societies, speak negatively about restrictions on how they can practice Islam (for example, the ban on wearing the *burqa* in France), and criticize the political system." [30] In a similar instance, a Dutch woman in Syria called Khadija declared: "I always wanted to live under *Shariah*. In Europe, this will never happen." [31]

Some women express the belief that the *ummah* is under attack and needs to be defended, or that they are protecting their religion from the war they believe the West is waging on Islam itself. Umm Irhab, writing about this 'War on Islam', invited all Muslims to defend the *ummah* by choosing to be "either with us or against us." [32] Thus, some women publicly expressed their willingness to play traditional female non-combatant roles like cooking or being nurses for soldiers or to fight alongside their jihadi husbands. Such an intention, for example, has been expressed by a certified nurse from Colorado, Shannon Maureen Conley, 19. She was arrested at Denver Airport in April 2014 on her way to Syria "to become a soldier's' wife and to fight alongside him, or to help using her skills as a nurse." [33] By expressing their belief in the mandatory religious duty to migrate and to assist in the process of building a Muslim 'Caliphate', women are expecting a twofold reward: a sense of belonging on earth now and a place in paradise later. [34]

Motivated more by political reasons, some women believe that they are taking part in a humanitarian mission to relieve the mistreated Syrian population after seeing the horrific pictures of the Syrian conflict, like Aqsa Mahmood, whose parents said she was desperate to help suffering Syrians. [35] Identification with the sufferings imposed on Muslims around the world, coupled with the disapproval and anger for their country's foreign policy toward Muslim countries, often plays a significant role in pushing young people toward violent extremism. [36]

This, together with the feelings of alienation and inequality, racism and a lack of religious freedom, xenophobia or negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in the West, is used by ISIS' recruiters to boost the aspirations of Muslims to live and practice their religion in a more congenial environment. As Umm Ubaydah writes, such reasons motivate her and others to try "to build an Islamic State that lives and abides by the law of Allah." [37]

When it comes to personal reasons troubling adolescent girls, ISIS exploited the personal identity battles of some women, provoked by liberalism and modernity in multicultural Western societies. Many Muslim female youths have found themselves caught between traditional and liberal values imposed by their families

on the one hand, and their friends on the other. In ISIS' ideology they found a third path, which offers them a sense of belonging to a global cause,[38] as well as stability and acceptance within a group, which they previously lacked.

Furthermore, some young people are just "bored" and the possibility of being part of a "movement that claims to be changing history"[39] seems very attractive to them. Supporting that, Mia Bloom argues that ISIS—by promoting "a new kind of utopia" offers women a "fantasy escape" and a feeling that by joining ISIS "they will be empowered, have an exciting life, and do something meaningful with their lives." [40]

Some women are just looking for 'a real man, a fighter', and are attracted by the possibility to marry a foreign fighter, "a heroic figure willing to sacrifice himself for a cause." [41] In addition to getting a 'brave and noble husband', ISIS' female recruits are promised a free house, equipped with top-of-the-line appliances and all expenses paid.[42] Even though financial reasons are not highlighted in women's posts as decisive to make *hijra*, the benefits and financial awards they are promised for each child could be an important incentive. That makes them believe that they will be financially secure and will not miss out on anything in life.

Other motivations that women have expressed, include adventure, alienation, dissatisfaction with their lives, searching for alternatives, romantic disappointments, adolescent rebellion, or other forms of discontent. For many teenage girls, participation in jihad seems very romantic, as well as being married to 'holy warriors' and living in the idyllic 'Muslim Disneyland'. However, naïvety and romanticism do not mean that their motivation to join ISIS is weak. A very strong determination is necessary for women, especially teenage girls, to leave their family and to move to a war-torn area.[43] Such strong motivation to follow radical jihad opens the road to new security concerns, such as the possibility that they could also be ready to follow orders to conduct acts of violence, or remain exploitable for the same cause when they return home.

The available data demonstrates the specific motivations of individual Western Muslim women to join ISIS, mostly a combination of different motivating factors. Some women are willing, for very different reasons, to leave their Western countries to change their lives or "to wash themselves clean of a previous life of *haram*." [44] This makes it difficult to define the most influential motive or the tipping point of intense ISIS propaganda which might lure the majority of them to leave their families and friends. ISIS, tuning in on different aspirations of potential recruits, creates a propaganda strategy that covers a very wide spectrum of motivating factors in order to offer something to almost anyone.[45]

The motivation of recruits also changes over time. Someone who was initially motivated primarily by one set of factors may thereafter gradually change his or her thinking based on experience. Such an example is provided by Umm Layth, who had expressed a willingness to become a martyr before she moved to the 'Islamic State'. Later, as an ISIS online recruiter, she urged women not to think about how to carry out suicide attacks, but to focus rather on their domestic role in the 'Caliphate'. This is not the only case illustrating how former plans and intentions of Western female migrants had been transformed during their stay in Syria. Others too encountered life conditions and found roles in the 'Islamic State' different from what they expected after the initial exposure to ISIS social media campaign.

### ***Social Media Campaign***

To lure Western women to Syria and Iraq, ISIS has introduced a new type of social media campaign that is primarily led by those female supporters who have already joined the group; some of whom seem to have quasi-official status within the ISIS media wing. The main goal of ISIS' propaganda is to motivate women from the West to join the 'Caliphate' by offering them solutions for resolving the above-mentioned

frustrations and dissatisfaction with their lives, to make their decision easier by giving them useful travel tips, and to demonstrate that their living conditions will be better than in the West—both in terms of material as well as intangible benefits.

This campaign is being led in a variety of languages (for Western supporters, mostly in English and French), and on various platforms. Twitter has been the group's platform of choice[46], in part because users can effectively conceal their identities and accounts can be easily re-established after being shut down by officials, or by Twitter itself. Beyond Twitter, ISIS supporters also use Facebook, Instagram, Kik, WhatsApp, YouTube, SureSpot, Ask.FM, Tumblr and other alternative sites. ISIS is continuously searching for means of exploiting new social media resources.

By using social media, ISIS empowers individual supporters to take part in creating and distributing its narrative. Such promoters share official propaganda about ISIS 'victories' in battles, promote ISIS ideology and regularly post pro-ISIS slogans, together with personal details about their experience in the group. Narratives about individual experience of life in the 'Caliphate' have proven to be a very effective tool for luring Western women to join the group. By presenting their daily activities, such as cooking, making Nutella pancakes, doing housework, playing with children or posting pictures of romantic sunsets in Syria, online promoters are offering a picture of life under ISIS' rule that is positive and attractive to would-be followers. Such communication is specially intended to help prospective recruits to easily identify themselves with the chatty young female jihadists who express their happiness at living in the 'Caliphate'.[47] However, Bloom warns that women from the West are getting a very distorted view on social media of what their life would be like if they were to join the Islamic State[48] – something also outlined below.

Social media posts also give a variety of practical and motivational tips and guidance to would-be *muhajirat*, from facilitating their travel to advising them on what to bring (warm clothes, a good pair of boots, a hair dryer, the type of vaccinations required), what not to bring (coffee and tea—easy to find), how to communicate with their families back home, as well as courses on how to be 'good wives of jihad'.[49]

Media outlets, such as the "Zora Foundation,"[50] have been established with the aim of preparing potential female recruits for different roles in the land of jihad, covering the competencies of housewives and facilitators. That means that, on the one hand, women are taught how to sew and cook 'fast and easy recipes' from the ISIS recipe book – food that can be served to fighters at any time but especially during breaks in battles, and with the necessary nutrients and calories to enhance the power and strength of fighters.[51] On the other hand, they are offered advice on how to use weapons, how to administer first aid to wounded fighters, and how to work with computer design and editing programs to help spread ISIS propaganda.[52]

International travel, apart from being more accessible and affordable than ever, is made easier by online planning and support from women who have already been through the process. Yet travel support consists of more than tips published online. ISIS' Western women can expect well-organised operational support on their way to the final destination, including phone numbers of contact persons who will be waiting for them at airports, guides and even lawyers for solving administrative or other problems with officials in transit countries such as Turkey. For instance, Umm Khattab explained that ISIS sent her a lawyer "who worked some magic and after a looooong tiring week in prison they let us go..."[53] Travel advice is often more general and more focused on women's emotions than on practicalities which could hamper the efforts of future migrants. Women seriously interested in making the journey are advised to use encrypted channels or private messages to get more precise information.[54]

ISIS has progressively tightened security checks on Westerners to prevent spies infiltrating the group by posing as foreign fighters.[55] It is believed that at least one recommendation from a prominent *sheik* already known to the group could be required from new recruits. Such measures do not seem to complicate the attempts of many women to reach ISIS-controlled territory, as long as their recruiters provide strict and detailed travel support information.

A great deal of attention has also been paid to the issue of communication with the family back home once they have arrived, which is especially important for teen migrants. Umm Layth explained to her followers on social media that the most difficult part about joining the group is opposition from family back home. On her Tumblr blog she wrote how difficult it is to stay calm despite the family's call to return. "The first phone call you make once you cross the borders is one of the most difficult things you will ever have to do ... when you hear them sob and beg like crazy on the phone for you to come back it's so hard." [56]

Social media allows ISIS to promote its goals quicker and more easily to a younger generation who spend a great deal of time on the Internet and are adept at utilizing all its advantages. ISIS successfully transformed social media "into an offensive strategy of psychological warfare," [57] using it at the same time "as a weapon in its fight for ideological supremacy on the global jihadist spectrum." [58] Images of violence and brutal executions, communicated online, provide an effective instrument in this type of psychological warfare, seeking to achieve local, tactical goals of spreading fear while demonstrating superiority and projecting power globally. Such promotion of brutality gives ISIS relevance, as the jihadist group most feared by the West. Carefully-formulated propaganda is framed in order to maximize the international community's abhorrence of ISIS actions, to keep them in Western headlines and to be attractive to would-be followers.

Youthful ISIS sympathizers, both male and female, are influenced by the glamour of images of a war with a cause, including images of torture and executions of those who oppose the 'Caliphate'. Fascinated by the "cult of death" and by places like "heaven" and "life after death", they talk about "five-star-jihad" to describe the fun and excitement they are having fighting in Syria, rather than being "bored" in their home countries. There is the risk that such "jihadi-cool subculture" drives more youth to the 'Islamic State'. [59] Another question is whether they find what they expected in ISIS-controlled territory.

### ***Life under the Rule of ISIS: Expectations vs. Reality***

From ISIS' propaganda material it is clear that the main attraction by which ISIS so strongly lures Muslim women living in the West to move to the 'Caliphate' is the opportunity to become wives of ISIS' fighters and mothers of a new generation of jihadists. Additionally, they are needed to play domestic female supporting roles (like cooking or being nurses for soldiers), to take professional positions left unfilled by man, to control the civilian population and to recruit others to join ISIS.

To ensure that thousands of male Western foreign fighters will not leave the 'Islamic State' territory, ISIS created a strategy to retain them, by giving them a job, a house and a family. [60] In addition to being promised a salary, they are promised a wife, and often more than one. Western migrants who enthusiastically make themselves available to marry ISIS foreign fighters are apparently regarded as better mothers and supporters of jihad than local women, who are often reluctant to marry foreigners. Western foreign fighters might also prefer Western women, who are culturally and linguistically much closer to them. Foreign women, blondes and converts are highly ranked by ISIS officials, and as such are rewarded to the most prized fighters. [61]

The fact that Muslim women leave the West to move to the 'Caliphate' also demonstrates that they see ISIS ideology as superior to the Western worldview.[62] ISIS promotes women from the West in its ranks as a validation of its power, strength, and the acceptance of its ideology throughout the world.[63]

What we know about the life of Western Muslim women on the territory controlled by ISIS primarily comes from women's social media posts. On the one hand, active ISIS female online recruiters and promoters of idealistic living conditions in the 'Caliphate' emphasise their satisfaction and assert that everything is functioning as in normal society. For some women the conditions are "amazing".[64] They report better treatment than in the West and the sense of belonging they have found in the 'Islamic State'. As Umm Hamza explained, "women are harassed [sic] and some are beaten in the street in the West, but here under the law of Allah we are protected." [65] That makes some of them feel "free for the first time in life as a woman." [66]

Some women are amazed by the relations with others, especially with the 'sisterhood in *Dawla*', where there are no fake relationships, where friendships are very strong and where they are not sorry to leave their families back at home. For Umm Layth, "the families you get in exchange for leaving the ones behind are like the pearl in comparison to the shell you threw away into the foam of the sea which is the *ummah*." [67]

On the other hand, there are the impressions of women who succeeded either in escaping or in contacting their families in a desperate attempt to receive help to return home. They talk about shocking experiences and an awareness of having made the biggest mistake of their lives, based on mistreatment by their husbands or dissatisfaction with their role in the 'Caliphate'.

Such negative experiences seem to have afflicted two Austrian teens Samra Kesinovic, 17, and Sabina Selimovic, 15, known as 'ISIS poster girls'. [68] The reality of life was similar for a one French *muhajirah*, whose brother, after meeting her in Syria, reported that "she was thin and sick... she never saw any light ... and lived surrounded by armed men." [69] A 25 year-old single mother, Tareena Shakil, [70] a short time after joining ISIS, also expressed a willingness to return to Great Britain, after she had realized what type of life she would have had in Syria in a forced marriage with a one-legged fighter. In an interview with CNN, a former member of the Al-Khansaa Brigade confirmed the "many cases of sexual violence to which Western women are exposed," [71] explaining that foreign fighters could be very brutal even with the women they marry.

Other disappointments, presented in a research report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, range from "concerns over the role of females, specifically frustrations over being banned from military combat and emotional strains of becoming a widow at a young age, to physical descriptions of failing infrastructure and harsh environments." [72]

However, there is no indication that data and images of a good living conditions posted on social media are all false or fictitious, that they do not represent a reality on a par of that experienced by many Western women, or that women in general are not satisfied with their lives. A Swedish migrant [73] tweeted criticisms of Western media reports about life under the 'Islamic State', which she said were "fantasy stories," insisting that her life in Raqqa was "good." Katherine Brown also said that no woman she has spoken to via social media was considering returning home, after they had migrated to a "better life" where they could "feel free." [74] It seems that each woman has a unique experience of life under ISIS, and that the level of satisfaction depends on how she is treated, first by her husband, and then by the people around her, as well as by her capability to adjust her behaviour to comply with the strict *Shariah* rules.

Even if they are treated well, women are exposed to a very different way of life than in the West. ISIS women are always entirely dressed in black, not even the eyes are visible through *niqabs*. They are heavily controlled once they arrive, and their movement outside the home is restricted, especially for unmarried women.

According to ISIS propaganda, on arrival, women are either given a home, if they are married, or settled in an all-female hostel with a guaranteed monthly allowance, if they are single. Women coming alone are therefore accepted, but they are supposed to marry shortly after arriving in Syria. Umm Layth in her “Diary of Muhajirah” explained that women would not be forced to marry,[75] but in a subsequent post she urged sisters on Twitter “to really stop dreaming about coming to *Shaam* and not getting married.”[76 ] Another woman, Umm Ubaydah echoed this warning too, explaining how hard it was to live in the ‘Caliphate’ without a husband.[77] In a cultural environment where marriage remains an important form of social currency, many ISIS online recruiters openly advise women to try to arrange a marriage before they even arrive in Syria or Iraq. Finding an appropriate husband is an important precondition to make their position in the ‘Caliphate’ easier.

To prepare incoming Western Muslim migrants for the ‘trials’ that come with their lifestyle changes, ISIS’ women published a post on the “Al-Muhajirat” Tubmbr blog on May 2015.[78] In this blog they explained that migrating to the ‘Caliphate’ does not mean that life of *muhajirat* will be “smooth and dandy” and will not be difficult. Some hardships are expected both in the marriage and in other *dunya* [this world] matters: for example, with new families, local people or with health. Such situations are presented as a means by which Allah tests women, their patience through difficulties and their faith.

Some women already explained that foreigners are not always well-accepted by the local population. They report communication problems or misunderstandings with local people who are generally not very welcoming, hospitable or eager to help.[79] More drastic examples of mistreatment and discrimination include cases of inappropriate care some women face in hospitals, because they are foreigners. The better living conditions and benefits that foreign fighters enjoy in the ‘Caliphate’ create divides and resentment among the local population, complicating relations.

Additional tensions could be caused by unfilled expectations of some Western women. ISIS propaganda mostly shows women carrying guns but enjoying ‘normal’ activities such as taking care of children, meeting each other for coffee, eating in restaurants, reading, studying religion and learning Arabic during their free-time.[80] Indeed, another question is whether women are satisfied with the strict rules and limited female roles, having in mind the participation in combat activities that some imagined, and featured on social media accounts before joining the group.

The vast majority of Western female Muslim migrants occupies very traditional domestic female roles and is only seldom permitted to be engaged in active employment.[81] For any woman who could think that coming to Syria and Iraq and joining ISIS might bring new opportunities or equal rights, Umm Ubaydah is clear. “The main role of the *muhajirah* here is to support her husband and his jihad and [God willing] to increase the *ummah*.”[82] They are expected to be a “righteous wife who will raise righteous children.”[83]

The role of ISIS’ women is more clearly described by ISIS itself. In the document posted on a jihadist forum in January 2015 in Arabic (translated by the Quilliam Foundation under the name “Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study)” [84] ISIS, in contrast to what is mostly promoted online to Western women in English, clarified that the designated role of women under the ISIS version of *Shariah* law was primarily domestic: to raise the new generation of jihadists. On the other hand, this manifesto does not exclude a combat role for women, but only in case of extreme situations of an enemy attack against the country, insufficient men or a fatwa issued by an imam. Considering the threat that the returning women of ISIS could pose to the West, it is important to assess their attitude towards violence and their intentions to participate in combat activities.

### *Tendency toward Violence*

There are many posts in social media in which ISIS women support and celebrate brutality and violence towards enemies, such as Umm Ubaydah calling for “more beheadings please,”[85] or a woman who described the brutal murder of the American aid worker Peter Kassig and 18 Syrian hostages as “gut-wrenchingly awesome.”[86] ISIS women do not just celebrate it, they justify such brutality according to their reading of Islamic Law, and dismiss Muslims who criticize ISIS: “Beheading is halal [permissible under Islamic law]. Go kill yourself if you say it’s haram.☺” Additionally, some women also indicate a desire to inflict violence themselves, like Umm Ubaydah, who remarked “I wish I did it!”[87] after the beheading of journalist Steven Sotloff, or Khadijah Dare who declared a desire to replicate the execution by saying: “I wna b da 1st UK woman 2 kill a UK or US terrorist!”[88]

Some women also manifest militant desires, expressing a willingness to become a fighter or a suicide bomber, by tweeting about martyrdom as the “highest dream.”[89] Umm Ubaydah wrote about a grenade being her “best friend,” indicating an intention to participate in military operations. The same intention was expressed by Umm Layth who told her father, shortly after she arrived in Syria, that she wanted to become a martyr and would see him again on the “day of judgment,”[90] while Zehra Duman often tweets about her own personal wish to undertake *istishad-operations* [suicide missions].[91]

Despite such fatal desires of some Western women, ISIS online promoters are clear. They urge them not to think about martyrdom operations but to focus rather on their domestic role in the ‘Caliphate’. Umm Layth, in contradiction of her own expressed desires mentioned above, explained that women “may gain more *ajr* [reward] by spending years of sleepless nights by being a mother and raising children with the right intentions and for the sake of Allah than by doing a martyrdom operation.”[92]

However, the idea of taking part in *qitaal* [fighting] is very attractive to some Western women. Melanie Smith from the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalization explains that “the younger ones are very wrapped up in the idea of fighting, but they know they cannot go over the heads of the authorities.”[93] Whether or not the women want to fight for ISIS, it would appear that they cannot freely take up arms and join the men in battle because, as muhajirah Amatullah explained on October 2014, “unlike other armies, IS isn’t void of men!”[94]

On her blog, Umm Layth acknowledged this frustration and confirmed that it is one of the most common questions she has been receiving from ‘sisters’. She explained the background of the situation in more depth: “... there is absolutely nothing for sisters to participate in *Qitaal* [fighting]. Sheikh Omar Shishani has been quite clear on his answer and has emphasised that there is nothing for sisters as of yet. No *amalia istishihadiya* [martyrdom operations] or a secret sisters *katiba*. These are all rumours... And the women you may have seen online participating are all part of propaganda... For the time being *Qitaal* [fighting] is not *fardh ayn* [a compulsory religious duty] upon the sisters... For the sisters it is completely impossible for now. *InshaaAllah* [God willing] in future.”[95] In response to a user asking whether females are allowed to engage in combat, Zehra Duman also declared: “not at the moment... but maybe one day soon, it just might happen... which I cannot wait for.”[96]

It is possible that, with the losses that ISIS is experiencing, women will soon be given some new roles, such as gathering intelligence or even participating in military operations. This appears to have been the case with the Canadian woman who calls herself L.A. She is believed to be the first documented case of a female on the frontlines with ISIS,[97] after she reportedly infiltrated hard-to-reach “enemy” territories and penetrated Kobane, Aleppo and Mosul. A reasonable inference would be that L.A.’s presence in all major ISIS battlegrounds may have facilitated surveillance for ISIS in the vicinity of military operations. Even though it

is believed that ISIS prohibits fraternizing between genders on the front lines, L.A. stressed that in the actions of ISIS male fighters she did not see “anything but the utmost of respect for me as a sister.”[98]

Even if the participation of ISIS women in current fighting, mentioned by a former member of Al-Khansaa Brigade, still has to be verified against other sources, posted pictures and statements show that some women are trained to use weapons, but “only for their own protection...obviously”.[99] Also, members of two all-female brigades, Al-Khansaa and Umm al-Rayan, responsible for patrolling the streets, are armed. They accompany male fighters at checkpoints and on home raids to search women, look for male fighters who might have concealed their identities under a veil or *niqab*, and enforce ISIS’ strict rules of dress and morality for other women.

The most famous one, the Al-Khansaa Brigade, set up in Raqqa in February 2014, is composed of 25-30 women, mostly British, aged between 18 and 25, who receive a monthly salary of 25,000 Syrian lira (less than 200 USD).[100] Its members are presented in the media as being very brutal with women who do not obey the strict moral rules. They have been accused of taking cruel punitive methods, such as the disfigurement of 15 women’s faces with acid for not wearing a *niqab*,[101] or the torture of a mother with a spiked clamp device for breastfeeding in public.[102]

The main role of these all-female brigades is expected to be much broader. Strict control over people’s behaviour is essential for ISIS to impose the fear and obedience necessary to establish an authoritarian rule over a controlled territory and to generate civilian support. To maintain such control over territory held, ISIS needs support from the population and sees women as an important “means of ruling and controlling civilians.”[103] ISIS wanted women to fill these roles instead of men, because women could help ISIS control civilian populations in ways that men could not.[104] Additionally, women have better ability to access, engage and recruit civilian women and to make sure that they support the group.[105] Such extended roles will fulfil the expectations of some women, giving them more power but also making them more dangerous for the West if and when they return.

### ***The Future of ISIS’ Women***

A key concern is what the future of ISIS’ Western women will be, especially if the so-called ‘Islamic State’ collapses and the group loses control over its core territory. Some disenchanted ISIS female volunteers have already expressed their willingness to return home, but they have not been allowed to do so by their husbands and now risk punishment, including execution for attempts to escape. It seems that it is much harder to leave than to join the group, due to the strict measures ISIS has gradually introduced, such as confiscating the passports and identity documents of newcomers. Escape is even more complicated for women, because they cannot freely leave their houses or travel unescorted. Disappointed, disillusioned and perhaps awareness of having made the biggest mistake of their life, such women will probably not be interested in following a violent jihad in the future.

The future activities of most Western migrants will be closely interconnected with the future plans of their husbands, and with the future of ISIS as a group or the ‘Islamic State’ as the territory of the proclaimed ‘Caliphate’. If the latter should collapse, many of those who may remain fully committed to a global jihad are likely to seek to come to the help of Muslims embattled elsewhere; in other words, they will migrate to other fronts, where ISIS may have found new allies. Others could be discouraged from returning home by the fear to be jailed in their home countries for their involvement with the group; they will try to find another place to live and to continue their mission.

Some Western migrants already express their willingness to achieve more militant roles in the 'Islamic State', as indicated above. Even though they are currently discouraged from becoming suicide bombers, such a contribution would be neither forbidden nor unexpected, if the situation on the ground worsens for ISIS. Having lived in a warzone, women could become desensitized to violence and this might boost their motivation to be more active participants in terrorist operations, not only in territory controlled by ISIS, but also in case of their return. By showing the willingness to defend the 'Islamic State' territory arms-in-hand, women express the readiness to fight for the jihadist cause even outside the 'Caliphate', as Umm Khattab explained: "Laawl, me and the akhawats [sisters] thought maybe murtads [apostates] were in the city lool I put the belt on and everything." [106]

Some scenarios thus envisage a more active role for the women of ISIS in their home countries as recruiters, facilitators or direct perpetrators of violent acts. The fall of the 'Islamic State' could strengthen their commitment to ISIS and motivate them to continue the struggle for the jihadist cause in their countries of residence. Their motivation, together with the military training they received in Iraq or Syria and their experience of living in a warzone, means that they must be considered a potentially serious security threat to the West if/when they return to their home countries. Special attention should also be focused on children who have grown up in the 'Caliphate', since they have been exposed to the same scenes of violence, and have been indoctrinated and trained in using weapons, just like their parents.

On their social network accounts, some women have already posted threats against the West, sometimes even using their real names, like Aqsa Mahmood who, after being informed that her passport was being cancelled, said that the only time she will ever return to her native country would be to raise the ISIS flag there. [107] A recent study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London also found that British *muhajirat* were urging women to commit terror attacks in the UK. [108] The same was the case of a French 15-year-old girl who, after failing to reach Syria, was urged by her recruiters to carry out attacks at home. [109] Zehra Duman instructs her Twitter followers to "kill Kuffar in alleyways, stab them and poison them. Poison your teachers. Go to haram restaurants and poison the food in large quantities." [110] Umm Layth used the same platform to encourage Western Muslims to perpetrate acts of violence in their home countries, following the examples of their 'brothers' from Woolwich, Texas and Boston. She invited them, if they cannot make it to the battlefield, "to bring the battlefield to yourself." [111]

Not all ISIS female sympathisers are active on social media, and this makes them less visible to security services. [112] As such, they could pose an even more significant security threat. In comparison to women who succeeded in joining ISIS, radicalised females who for whatever reason did not make the *hijra*, and who lack military training, could be instructed to perform simpler attacks (using knives, cars or homemade explosives), focusing on unprotected and softer targets. However, as of early 2015, the ISIS' Western women pose no direct physical threat to the West. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out a possible shift in roles in the future. As Umm Ubaydah wrote, "maybe the time for us to participate is soon." [113]

### **Conclusion**

Explaining why a growing number of Muslim women from the West have left their countries to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria is a complex task. Their motivations are a combination of religious, ideological, political and personal reasons. ISIS, for its part, has two evident strategic reasons to attract women from the West. The first is to use them in traditional domestic female roles in the newly established 'Caliphate', like wives of fighters and mothers of the next generation of jihadists. The second is to occupy professional female positions, to

recruit new (female) followers, to support fighters, to serve in a police role and be ready to participate in military operations if the need should arise.

By using a professionally designed social media campaign, ISIS is more aggressively and more effectively recruiting women than any other terrorist group in the past. ISIS uses Muslim women who have already joined the group, to attract new recruits by stressing positive personal life experiences and by glorifying military successes and violent acts against non-believers. Its aim is to highly glamorise 'ISIS' lifestyle' and to make it attractive to would-be followers. However, the realities of life in the 'Caliphate' often do not match the romanticised and utopian images presented online by ISIS' recruiters.

Women with a strong will to participate in the state-building process, dedicated to the creation of a better 'Muslim society' and willing to protect the newly-proclaimed 'Caliphate', generally accept the female roles assigned to them by their male companions. However, they also often express their willingness to fulfil more militant functions. Regardless of the expectations of some of them, there is so far no evidence of women's engagement in ISIS' combat roles. Some women work for the all-female police, gather intelligence or prepare themselves for military operations or possibly suicide attacks. Others are active online recruiters and encourage potential (female) recruits to move to the 'Islamic State' or to carry out domestic terrorist attacks. Such activities make them invaluable for ISIS and crucial for the future of the 'Caliphate'.

In consideration of their strong motivation, current engagement and potential role for the future, these women could pose a considerable security threat to the West. Some of these Muslim women will come back disillusioned and, as such, will probably be easily reintegrated into society. Others who will come with military training and the intention to continue to be an active part of the global jihadist network, could pose a more significant threat as potential female terrorists, ready to plot against their home countries or to inspire others to do so. As such, they should be monitored, seriously assessed for risk, categorised and properly treated in the case of return.

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