

## Women of the Caliphate: the Mechanism for Women's Incorporation into the Islamic State (IS)

by Hamoon Khelghat-Doost

### Abstract

*The ongoing incorporation of women into the Islamic State (IS) is unlike what any other jihadi organization in the recent history of jihadism has attempted to achieve. An important question is therefore: how does IS reconcile its ultra-conservative Islamic narrative of women, with the organization's incorporation of women? By analyzing primary data collected through fieldwork in the Middle East, the author of this article argues that, through the platform of 'gender-segregated parallel institutions,' IS has established a mechanism by which Muslim women are being effectively incorporated into its envisaged Islamic State. Through this mechanism, IS has inspired a substantial number of women from around the globe by advocating an alternative narrative of divine redemption to the one of secular emancipation of women.*

**Keywords:** ISIS, Islamic State, Caliphate, Women, gender-segregated parallel institutions, redemption

### Introduction

Women in black veils go about the street bazaar, purchasing household items, adhering to a strict law that requires them to be accompanied by a male relation; on the other side of the street, a woman is being harshly questioned by several armed and veiled female police personnel regarding her lax dress code; little girls put up their veils to get ready to go to their girls' schools; a husband at a hospital waits for news of his wife, who is in labor, behind doors that say "men strictly not allowed." These scenes may seem highly exaggerated reflections of the ordinary lives of many women in conservative Middle Eastern societies; however, these are real scenes of life for women under the Islamic State (IS).

Contrary to the extremely conservative conventional views of jihadi organizations over women's participation in social affairs[1], the increasing trend of women's incorporation[2] into IS is unlike any other jihadi organization in the recent history of jihadism. It is estimated that over ten percent of westerners, who made *hijrah* (migration) to IS territories, are female[3] while this number is much smaller and often close to none in most other jihadi organizations. This figure does not include local women and those migrated to IS territories from non-western countries, especially from the Islamic world. Therefore, an important question is how does IS reconcile its strict ultra-conservative Islamic narrative of women, with the organization's growing incorporation of the same? Current scholarly research on women's incorporation into IS focuses mostly on women's motivations for joining IS. Due to security and logistical restrictions, research on the dynamics of women's incorporation within IS's territory and institutions has received less scholarly attention.

By analyzing primary data (including interviewing Syrian and Iraqi refugees and government and security officials) collected through fieldwork between May 2015 to December 2016 in Kurdistan of Iraq and along the Syrian borders in southern regions of Turkey and Lebanon, the author of this article argues that, through the platform of 'gender-segregated parallel institutions,' IS has established a mechanism by which many women are being successfully incorporated into its vision for an Islamic society. Understanding this mechanism of incorporation provides a better understanding of IS's view on women, the gender dynamics[4] within its territory, and ultimately, the utopian society it promises.

For this article, 20 male and 30 female Syrian and Iraqi refugees were interviewed in refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and in different cities of Turkey and in Beirut, Lebanon. The data collection process also included several interviews with military and security officers, local NGO members, relevant government officials,

academicians, and social activists in Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon over a course of four months from 2015 to 2016.

### ***Islamic State: One of a Kind***

The rise of the IS has changed the geopolitical image of the Middle East. Started as a branch of Al-Qaeda in Iraq with *salafi* jihadi ideology, the organization shocked the world by announcing the establishment of a Caliphate in 2014 in a vast geographic area within Iraq and Syria. Contrary to the vague vision of most other jihadi organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, about running a supra-nationalist world by jihadi leaders[5], the main objective of IS appears to be to embrace a new vision for society, governed by a strict and harsh interpretation of sharia law in practice.[6] For this reason, IS should not be studied as a mere insurgent organization, such as Al-Qaeda, but an organization in charge of running a functioning proto-state. Contrary to other jihadi organizations, IS's different take on state building in practice paved its path to incorporate thousands of women from around the world in its vision society.

The classic image of a jihadi organization is one of a transnational organization comprising "militant Sunni Muslim activists, who feel that they must be engaged in a prolonged and perhaps even endless war with the forces of evil." [7] This description can be easily applied to most well-known jihadi organizations, including Al-Qaeda, Ansar Al-Sunnah, Al-Shabaab, Jemaah Islamiyah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Lashkar-i Jhangvi, Islamic Jihad Union of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and others. Most Jihadi groups retreat to their hidden safe houses after a hit-and-run operation and hold no identified territorial areas. Due to the militant nature of such groups and organizations, violence is "first and foremost a sacramental act of divine duty (martyrdom) executed in direct response to some theological demand (jihad) or imperative." [8]

In contrast with the militant nature of jihadi organizations, Islamic jurisprudence puts restrictions on women's engagement with militant activities. Some also argue that "classical Islamic sources are fairly negative about the role of women in military activities," [9] and these texts emphasize the importance of women's roles as "mother, sister, daughter, and wife of Muslim men at war." [10] Jihadi organizations largely "either purposely refrained from calling on women to make their presence felt on the battlefield as warriors or have explicitly excluded them." [11] Although women are incorporated by some jihadi organizations, including Al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad Union of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, their number remains extremely modest compared to those of their male counterparts. The most significant manifestation of women's incorporation into jihadi organizations is in their role as suicide bombers, which is, to a great extent, a tactical tool more than an expression of some social vision. Due to the lack of trained female officers and operatives in the security structures of most Islamic countries and due to religious and cultural obstacles facing male officers in dealing with women, female suicide bombers enjoy tactical superiority over men in the conduct of suicide operations. [12] However, due to strong religious and cultural negative sentiments against the use of women in violent operations, even this tactical advantage has not resulted in extensive use of women in combat roles.

Building upon classical Islamic sources, women's lower incorporation into jihadi organizations is justified by them through the concepts of *mahram* and sexual purity. Based on these conservative concepts, a Muslim woman should always be accompanied by a male *mahram* (either her husband or a relative in the prohibited degree of marriage) in public. Due to the nature of war zones, "women warriors would inevitably find themselves in the unlawful company of males who are not their close relative;" [13] therefore, to avoid such seemingly sinful situations, jihadi organizations initially banned women's participation in jihad. Building upon such narrations of sexual purity, jihadi organizations initially found themselves in an ideological battle against "a world characterized by sexual disorder, one in which females are seen as encroaching on the male domain." [14] Subsequently, they emphasized the domestic roles of women in jihad, which included being virtuous wives to male jihadists and good mothers to the next generation of jihadists.

Contrary to classic jihadi organizations and with establishing a supra-nationalist functioning state in practice as its core objective, IS has been a game-changer among jihadi organizations. Established its caliphate in war-torn Syria and Iraq, IS successfully moved beyond a mere Islamist militant organization by setting up its own alternative institutions to fill the governance vacuum in parts of Syria and Iraq. Like institutions in any other functioning state, IS institutions include a wide range of sectors, including police, military, education, healthcare, finance, and governance.[15] By moving towards establishing a state, IS is in charge of running a defined territory and the population within it.

The story of jihadi organizations establishing their proto-states does not start with IS. Several other jihadi organizations have tried the state-building process, including Jund al-Islam of Iraq or Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (MSSI) of Libya. However, the territories and population under their control were very localized and limited. They failed to develop full-fledged governing institutions. Only the Taliban of Afghanistan and Al-Shabaab of Somalia have established their rule over relatively large territories and population. However, although IS is not the first jihadi organization to establish its proto-state, it is relatively the most successful among them in incorporating women into its state apparatus. The call by the its Caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi[16] in early 2014 upon all Muslims around the world to make *hijrah* (migration) to IS territory was received positively by thousands of Muslim women from around the globe.[17]

It is argued[18] that jihadi proto-states share four common characteristics. First, they are “ideological projects.” In this regard, these proto-states are established upon the divine principles of sharia law; therefore, there is limited room for ideological evolvement, pragmatism, and gradualism within them. Second, these proto-states are “international projects.” In this regard, they are keen on absorbing foreign fighters while also seeking ideological approval from foreign clerics. Third, these proto-states manifest “aggressive behavior vis-à-vis neighboring states and the international community.” Most of these proto-states are considered significant threats to international security and stability. Last, these proto-states are committed to “effective governance” and have set up well-functioning systems of justice (according to sharia law) and service provision within their territories.

Although, in principle, IS shares the same characteristics, the organization has a unique approach to these characteristics, which makes it ultimately different from all the other jihadi-proto-states. In terms of the “ideological project,” unlike any other jihadi proto-state, IS has shown a great degree of pragmatic flexibility, including security and intelligence cooperation[19] with non-Islamist groups, such as former Baathists.[20] Regarding the “international project,” IS showed a clear understanding of the concept of governing a state in the 21st century. IS’s professional use of electronic and social media platforms to spread its ideology has earned them the title of “the Digital Caliphate.”[21] The call for foreigners to join its proto-state was not only for fighters, but also for “doctors, judges, engineers and experts in Islamic jurisprudence to help develop the caliphate.”[22] IS’s effective and comprehensive approach towards establishing state institutions to use such professionals is also not comparable with the primitive state institutions of the Taliban and Al-Shabaab. While the caveman approach of the Taliban and Al-Shabaab towards running a state is based on primitive tribal structures[23] with poorly functioning crude institutions, IS has successfully established “a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects”[24] within its territories in Iraq and Syria.

The above-mentioned approach of IS is well manifested in IS’s ability to incorporate a higher number of women within its state apparatus than any other jihadi organization. It is argued here that this unprecedented incorporation of women is made possible through IS’s pragmatic approach towards learning from other contemporary historical cases and through the mechanism of establishing ‘gender-segregated parallel institutions’ within its evolving state apparatus.

### ***Learning from Others***

Unlike jihadi organizations, such as the Taliban and Al-Shabaab with ultra-rigid orthodox ideological tenets, IS has repeatedly shown interest in adopting pragmatic approaches learned from others. Implementing a gender-segregated parallel institution, with the idea borrowed from the practices of Iran and Saudi Arabia, is an example of such pragmatic approaches. IS might not be the first organization to use gender segregation as a tool for social engineering;[25] however, it is the first jihadi organization to implement this policy effectively throughout its territory.

Post-1979 revolutionary Iran is one of the classic examples of nation-wide implementation of gender segregation. Iranian women were exercising a higher level of rights than the women of their neighboring countries during the secular regime of the Shah, including suffrage (in 1962) and Family Protection Law (in 1967), which “gave women the right to divorce, with custody of their children upon the court’s approval, and increased the minimum age of marriage for girls from 13 to 15.”[26] The Shah’s top-down policies in offering such rights to women, combined with his efforts for promoting liberal western social values, faced a strong backlash from the largely conservative and religious society of (rural) Iran.[27] Ayatollah Khomeini (later the leader of the Iranian revolution) called these rights as being incompatible with Islam and warned the Shah of the consequences of pro-Western social policies. Many religiously conservative Iranian families were reluctant to allow their female members of families to participate in social activities, including attending high school and university, which were co-ed.

Following the 1979 revolution, the new regime of Iran imposed a rigid gender-segregation and dress code for women in several public spaces, including “schools (from primary to high school), sports centers, and public transportation.”[28] As a result of this new approach, many Iranian women banned by their conservative families from participating in social activities during the Shah’s era found such a gender-segregated society an opportunity to expand their social participation. The number of girls attending schools increased significantly upon establishing gender-segregated schools and the rural female literacy rate, which was 17% in 1976, increased to 70% in 2006. While women’s share of university population was only 30% in 1976, this share rose to over 60% in 2006.[29] Therefore, gender-segregation created a platform for conservative Iranian women to increase their social participation.

The same patterns of gender-segregation can be traced in Saudi Arabia, where most institutions, including schools, universities, several healthcare centers, banks, and restaurants, are gender-segregated. Many houses in Saudi Arabia even have different entrances for men and women.[30] As many women in Saudi Arabia wear a veil, dining in restaurants is a challenge as they need to remove the veil to eat. Restaurants allocate specific gender-segregated dining halls to families and women.[31]

Patriarchy[32] as a “social constant” is profoundly rooted in all forms of private and public lives of most Muslim societies, especially those in the Middle East, and extend to the political, social, and economic spheres.[33] Gender-segregation has, therefore, enabled the male-controlled states, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, to extend their strict and harsh patriarchal control over women beyond their private lives at home into to public space. Gender-segregation by these patriarchal states enables them to protect what they believe is the sexual purity of Muslim women by minimizing interactions between different sexes in public sphere. This would, in their interpretation, prevent sinful acts, including fornication and adultery, and therefore ensures society’s commitment to the state’s strict interpretation of Islamic morality and codes of ethics.

### ***Redemption vs. Emancipation***

Aware of the successful use of gender-segregation by countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia to control the female half of the populace, IS imposed a harsh and unyielding system of gender-segregation in public spaces throughout its territories in Iraq and Syria. Imposing this system has been achieved through the mechanism

of establishing 'gender-segregated parallel institutions.' This means a section within almost every existing IS institution is assigned to women only to address relevant women's affairs. These sections are fully run by women, and their level of communication with their male counterparts is minimized. This system comprises all IS state institutions, such as education, healthcare, administration, police, finance, and service provision.

As a functioning proto-state with a clear vision for the establishment of a utopian alternative society to Western secularism that is based on sharia law[34], IS cannot afford to ignore the importance of half of its society's populace. By establishing gender-segregated parallel institutions, IS has overcome the *mahram* obstacle in incorporating women into its state apparatus. As mentioned earlier, providing a religiously permitted environment for women to perform their duties is a challenging task for classic jihadi organizations, such as Al-Qaeda. By establishing 'women-only' sections within every institution, IS has practically reduced mixing between opposite sexes and has provided a functioning environment to utilize women in different roles. Through its propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, IS portrays the situation for Muslim women in Western and secular societies as one where it is "impossible to live as a pious and righteous Muslim." [35] IS therefore promises all those Muslim women, who are marginalized for their orthodox religious and ideological beliefs in Western secular societies[36], a utopian society in which they can fulfill their social obligations, while adhering to their strict interpretation of religion.

For instance, women banned from entering public schools for wearing a burqa[37] or face veil in France, can become teachers and school principals in gender-segregated schools within territories controlled by Islamic State. In an article in IS's *Dabiq* in 2015[38], IS criticizes women who continue study in secular medical schools around the world and instead calls on them to make *hijrah* and to enroll in IS's medical schools in Raqqa and Mosul to serve the *ummah* rather than Western infidels, adding, "the Islamic State offers everything that you need to live and work here, so what are you waiting for?"

By establishing gender-segregated parallel institutions, IS unveils its vision of a utopian society for women. Through these parallel institutions, IS challenges the Western secular (in its eyes, sinful) emancipation of women and, instead, offers its own version, which includes the benefit of divine redemption. In his 2014 call for jihad and migration, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS Caliph, directly addressed this issue: "is it not terrorism when women are prevented from wearing the hijab in France? All this is not terrorism, but freedom and democracy?" [39]

By replacing redemption for emancipation, IS rejects Western gender equality, based on its orthodox interpretation of Islam. In this strict interpretation, biological differences between men and women are stressed. For the same reason, women are viewed as more emotional and physically weaker and therefore not equal to men in the social, economic and political spheres. This has resulted in men's superiority over women in issues including "marriage, divorce and remarriage, leadership in religion and politics, inheritance, witness in a court of law, dowry, travel, business and work, and dress and clothing." [40]

In line with the above argument on biological differences, modesty for women is another important issue in IS's view on women. The notion that Eve is the initial seducer and that women have thereafter been vessels of sinful sexual power, has set the premise for IS to establish patriarchal restrictive regulations, curtailing and controlling women's social activities. IS views women's emancipation in Western secular societies as to unleash this sexual sinful power, something held to be against Islamic teachings. One of the Quranic verses selectively used by IS to justify its opposition to Western secular emancipation is, "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their chests, and not to reveal their adornment." [41] In line with this Quranic command, IS forces women to "adhere to humility, scarves, and coverings" [42] by which their power can be controlled and their path to divine redemption will be paved. To achieve this objective and as an authoritarian, ideologically driven proto-state[43], not only in charge of earthly affairs of its citizens, but

also their divine ones, IS offers gender-segregated parallel institutions as a mechanism for women to achieve divine redemption, while fulfilling their earthly commitments.

### ***Gender-Segregated Parallel Institutions in Practice***

Empirical data and evidence collected through fieldwork in Kurdistan of Iraq, along the Syrian borders in southern regions of Turkey and Lebanon reflect the effectiveness of IS in reconciling its ultra-conservative Islamic narrative of women, with the organization's continuing incorporation of the same through establishing gender-segregated parallel institutions. Iraqi and Syrian refugees interviewed for this research as well as conversations with Iraqi and Turkish security and military officials, confirmed the existence and functioning of these institutions across IS's territories.

A 32-year-old former resident of Raqqa[44] stated she has frequently come across IS's all-women sharia police brigade of Al-Khansa in the streets of Raqqa. According to her, the *al-Khansa* women normally drive SUV cars with the IS logo on it. They are wrapped in long black robes and use black gloves. The *al-Khansa* women are armed with AK-47s and pistols. They regularly stop women on the street and ask for their identity and inquire where they are heading. If they find a problem with women's dress code (mostly if the robe is too tight or in any color other than black), they take them to one of *al-Khansa's* special facilities.[45] "*Al-Khansa* has its own headquarters in Mosul, and women who are arrested are interrogated and even harshly tortured (especially Yazidi[46] women) by *al-Khansa* female officers. No man is allowed to enter their center. They come from different Arab countries, and you can only identify them by their Arabic accent," stated a 44-year-old female former resident of Mosul, Iraq.[47] All the Syrians and Iraqis interviewed for this research emphasized that *al-Khansa* women on streets are consisting of Arab nationals. This validates reports on the possible use of *al-Khansa* Western women in other capacities than patrolling streets.[48] *Al-Khansa* is being effectively utilized by IS to expand its brutal control over women and to repress women of religious minorities and those Muslim women opposing its ideological interpretation of Islam.

The same arrangements can be seen in other institutions within IS's territories. A 29-year-old mother of two girls who fled the city of Raqqa in early 2016 mentioned "upon capturing the city, IS banned men to enter girl schools. All teachers, principals, and cleaners at her daughters' schools in Raqqa were females. Students were forced to cover their hair even in the class. All teachers were also forced to wear black robes while at school." [49] A 22-year-old former resident of Mosul also stated that "her younger sister's (15-years-old) high school was frequently checked by *al-Khansa* forces to ensure no male is hanging around its entrance. A girls' school was also shut down by IS as it was in a close distance with a boys' school." [50] According to her, Al-Mabra'a Elementary School and Al-Ryad Secondary School are among the few girls' schools which are still functioning in Mosul. A 35-year-old former resident of Raqqa pointed out that "IS has established an English language girl's school named Aisha for the daughters of foreign migrants to IS. The teachers of the school are all Western females." [51]

Healthcare is another sector in which IS has imposed its gender-segregated parallel institution system. According to a 35-year-old former resident of Mosul, "IS has assigned a section in Mosul general hospital for women only. In this section, female doctors and nurses are allowed to provide services only for women patients. Both patients and doctors are forced to wear black robes and only behind the closed doors of [the] doctor's office, patients are allowed to take off their robe if necessary." [52] The same situation can be observed in hospitals and clinics in different cities throughout IS-controlled territories. "There is always a woman in a black robe guarding the entrance of the women-only section of the hospital, and she does not allow any man, even the husband of a patient, to get into the section," [53] said a 28-year-old former resident of Raqqa.

Gender-segregation has been also expanded into IS's economic sector, including its tax collection system. After losing control over oil fields in Iraq and Syria, IS is becoming more dependent on tax collection as its

main source of income. The system relies on the income tax collected by the agents, commonly known as tax collectors. “IS female tax collectors were visiting the hospital I was working in on a monthly basis and upon calculating my income tax and receiving the cash, they were issuing me an official stamped receipt,” [54] stated a 40-year-old female nurse working in a hospital in Mosul till late 2015. A 33-year-old former shopkeeper in the city of Raqqa also mentioned he had witnessed a room in the offices of IS’ tax authority in Raqqa assigned for women to pay their income tax. According to him “only women who wanted to pay their taxes (including the religious tax of *zakat*[55]) could enter the room as an IS armed member was guarding its door.” [56]

Women who make *hijrah* (migration) to IS territories also play an important role in supporting IS’s counter narrative of women’s place against that of the Western secular societies. A specific women-run division in IS’s state apparatus, commonly known as ‘housing and sheltering division’, is in charge of these women’s affairs. “IS female housing and sheltering officers are assigned to make necessary arrangements for the new single foreign members of IS to assimilate into IS apparatus. These women are in touch with the new members from the moment they pass the borders into IS territories” [57] said a 26-year-old female former resident of Raqqa. A 38-year-old Iraqi female refugee also mentioned these officers are those “teaching the single newcomer women basics of Arabic language to facilitate their incorporation into local societies. These officers work under the female division of IS’s department for *muhajirun* (migrants) affairs. These officers also act as matchmakers by introducing the single women to male jihadi fighters.” [58]

## Conclusion

IS might not be the first jihadi organization that has successfully established a proto-state, but it is the most effective and practical in terms of amount of territory and size of population controlled, the level of institutionalization and the number of foreign members. Despite its brutal treatment of women of minority religious sects (and those ideologically opposing it) and, unlike any other jihadi organization, IS has incorporated a wide range of women from many countries, including from Western societies. The high number of women who made *hijrah* (migration) to IS territories is historically unprecedented.

Through establishing gender-segregated parallel institutions, IS has – unlike other jihadi organizations – found a practical solution for the religious obstacle of *mahram* in utilizing women in different capacities. These parallel institutions have provided IS female members with an enabling women-only environment to perform the social obligations assigned to them by IS, with the lowest possible degree of intermixing with the opposite sex. IS has pushed the boundaries of women’s utilization in jihadi organizations beyond combat tactical capacities. As a functioning proto-state, female IS members are assigned to different gender-segregated parallel institutions to address women’s affairs throughout IS territories. The services offered by these parallel institutions cover a wide range, including education, healthcare, police, and charity.

Although IS’s brutality against women (especially those of religious minorities and ideological opposition) is undisputable, through the mechanism identified in this article, IS has inspired a large number of women abroad by offering them an alternative narrative to the one of secular Western female emancipation, emphasizes divine redemption over gender-equality.

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## Notes

- [1] Cook, D. (2005). Women fighting in Jihad?. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28(5), 375-384.
- [2] In this article, the term 'incorporation' is used in a holistic way to address all forms of affiliation, including recruitment, attraction, participation, voluntary joining in, cooperation, and involvement in a variety of related roles (combat and non-combat) and on different organizational levels.
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