Online Deceptions: Renegotiating Gender Boundaries on ISIS Telegram

by Meili Criezis

Abstract

This resrach note examines the ways in which Islamic State supporters on Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, renegotiate gender boundaries. The introduction positions receptions of female ISIS accounts in the online space within the context of the roles that women are expected to fill and ISIS's tentative acceptance of women fighting on the battlefield. An overview of Telegram gender social norms is provided before discussing the methodology used to gather supporting archival data to analyze the renegotiation of gender boundaries on Telegram. This section is followed by an analysis of a case study that considers the wider implications of what this says about women's agency and involvement in terrorist groups online. The conclusion addresses the policy implications of possible shifts in gender social norms and the shape that women's engagement in violent jihadist groups might take in the future.

Keywords: Islamic State, women, Telegram, propaganda, gender

Introduction

Substantial research has examined women's participation and membership in terrorist groups—particularly in the Islamic State.[1] While findings suggest that ISIS's approach concerning women's roles within the organization have not greatly diverged from its predecessor and other violent jihadist groups, the unique set of challenges ISIS faced during its period of territorial decline forced it to deal with existential threats head-on and utilize more unconventional means.[2] One such solution was to tentatively push the boundaries of the permissibility of women's engagement in active combat. These shifts emanating from ISIS's core[3] were gradual and female members continued to remain largely restricted. In contrast, the online environment has provided unique opportunities for women to become increasingly autonomous and there is evidence that suggests that the social dynamics among online supporters may be shifting away from the stricter gender segregation rules that have continued, and in many cases continue, to determine social behavior on ISIS Telegram. In order to understand the significance of these shifts taking place online, it is important to first contextualize them against the wider backdrop of ISIS's policies on women.

In "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State" (2017), Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin provide an overview of documents that have specifically addressed women's roles which emphasized non-combatant positions in normal conditions but deemed direct participation in fighting as valid under certain circumstances such as a shortage of male fighters or territorial losses.[4] The documents discussed were: the Khansa Brigade manifesto, "Valuable Advice and Important Analysis on the Rules for Women's Participation in Jihad" from the Zawra' Foundation, and continued discussions featured in Dabiq, Rumiyah and al-Naba'.[5] In fact, "women are referenced in the 28 issues of Dabiq and Rumiyah more than 1,500 times."[6]

Additionally, firsthand accounts from women who joined ISIS verify that the organization maintained strict gender segregation and emphasized the importance of motherhood and being a supportive wife along with domestic duties.[7] This gender segregation "practically reduced mixing between opposite sexes and has provided a functioning environment to utilize women in different roles."[8] Nonetheless, some women still expressed the desire to fight on the front lines but were corrected in their misunderstanding that they would be allowed to join men on the battlefield.[9] Then in February 2018, al Hayat Media Center released a video titled

"Inside the Caliphate 7" showing women engaged in combat:

Figure 1: Image of Women Engaged in Combat [10]

More photos and videos of this nature appeared during the period of the battle of Baghouz where women were permitted to pick up a weapon and fight side by side with men:

Figures 2–5: Photos and Social Media Posts on Female Fighters [11]

Baghouz represented the lingering remnant of a so-called caliphate that once encompassed a population of almost 12 million people in a territory the size of Britain.[12] Although the images presented above are not from ISIS's official media outlets, the fact that supporters circulated them among themselves suggests that images of women fighting had an impact but again, this only came to fruition under the conditions produced by such dire circumstances. However online, women have had significantly more influence in mixed gendered spaces long before ISIS's decline. For example, Aqsa Mahmood, who went by Umm Layth, was an influential female ISIS propagandist.[13] In the following screenshots from Tooba Gonadal, another female propagandist who went by "Umm Muthana", it is apparent that her messages were available to a wider public audience but the images and texts highlighted her female identity in order to demonstrate what female empowerment looked like in the Islamic State:

Figures 6-7: Social Media Posts of Female Fighter "Tooba Gonadal"[14]

It could be argued that a portion of the generic propaganda produced by these women is aimed at a wide audience regardless of gender, but the messenger's female identity remained strategically relevant and integral to the message itself. This is for several reasons: women have been able to directly recruit other women without encountering gender barriers via targeted propaganda, women's efforts in supporting the Islamic State have been used to criticize men who do not display enough dedication to the cause, and their presence as ISIS supporters has played a crucial role in constructing an alternative narrative that directly challenges what ISIS supporters view as the falsehoods of "Western" feminism.[15]

While it is tempting to interpret the presence of these female propagandists as evidence that women are exercising their agency, the ways in which they frame their propaganda and their decision to take on the role of propagandists tend to abide by ISIS's gender norms and expectations. As Elizabeth Pearson explains, "work on women's political violence is often focused on the assertion of women's ability to exercise agency, while neglecting analysis of the structures and norms that often seek to limit that agency."[16] Despite certain limitations, women have been able to level the playing field. The case study of two female admins who ran a predominant unofficial pro-ISIS English language Telegram channel, called "GreenB1rds," serves as an example.

Before discussing the methodology with which data concerning this case was gathered and the background details of GreenB1rds, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the ISIS Telegram community's approach to female accounts. Chelsea Daymon describes her observations of how various rules are enforced to maintain gender segregation:

> On pro-ISIS Telegram, overtly female accounts have limited access. Some channels or groups even post rules of engagement, specifying that "sisters are not allowed." When joining channels or groups with a female themed account, many administrators (admins) will eventually if not quickly, kick female accounts out of the large majority of channels or groups on the platform. Additionally, admins will sometimes send a private message chastising a female account for joining the group before restricting entry. Thus, pro-ISIS Telegram provides limited access to female accounts. There are specific channels and groups for female ISIS supporters, but these tend to discuss issues like being a good wife, proper dress codes, and more "female oriented" discussions. In this way, pro-ISIS Telegram creates a segregated online ecosystem, unless women conceal their gender online by using gender-neutral accounts or posing as males.[17]

Daymon's last point about women entering groups under gender-neutral names to circumvent restricted access is discussed by Telegram ISIS supporters.[18] There is no doubt that women employ these evasive methods in order to gain full access to groups, but it would be impossible to analyze the percentage of 'false' male accounts due to the anonymous nature of the online world. This further highlights the significance of the GreenB1rds case because the individuals connected to that channel and account have been publicly verified as women.

Methodology

The author acquired access to a wide array of ISIS channels and groups by joining them through links that were periodically posted in channels and groups that she was already in. Telegram monitoring took place from mid-October, when the news first announced the arrests, until late November. Various ISIS accounts shared URLs to the news articles shortly after the articles appeared online and it generated conversations on gender. Any mentioning of GreenB1rds, the female admins, and references to gender from both channels and individual accounts in groups were documented and archived for later reference. Keywords the author kept in mind while looking for evidence included "GreenB1rds", "women", "sisters" "haram". While the news caused concern among supporters, discussions about the GreenB1rds arrests did not last past a couple of weeks at most and the ISIS Telegram ecosystem quickly moved onto other topics. However, it is important to mention that GreenB1rds propaganda continued, and still continues, to be shared widely by supporters and pro-ISIS channels demonstrating a long-lasting impact.

Given the anonymity of online accounts, particularly with supporters of terrorist organizations, several factors could skew the conclusions taken from the archival data:

- The accounts are undercover law enforcement or online ISIS hunters and are, therefore, not representative of feedback from true ISIS supporters[19]
- Male commenters responding to the news of the GreenB1rds are women concealing their identities with male account names
- The author did not access other channels and accounts that discussed GreenB1rds during the aggregation of archival data and missed opportunities to include a wider variety of responses

Case Study: GreenB1rds

In October 2019, police in the Netherlands and in the UK arrested two individuals responsible for running a popular English language pro-ISIS Telegram channel and account called "GreenB1rds."[20] Although news articles did not provide many details, the woman in the UK "allegedly created a false persona of herself as a man…and instructed a number of administrators so that they could continue after her suicide bombing."[21]

ISIS supporters' reactions to the revelation that two GreenB1rds admins were female reveals how the nature of the online echo chamber shifts when real identities are disclosed. Once the news of the GreenB1rds arrests became known, supporters reacted in several ways: They warned others to be cautious about operational security, they made supplications for the women's protection, and a supporter specifically addressed gender by responding, "Please ikhwan (*brothers)* in the future can u not allow our precious pearls to run such delicate groups/channels."[22] Another pro-ISIS channel shared a message asserting that "many sisters wish they were men" and simultaneously shamed men for not taking action while women could only dream of such a chance. [23]

The fact that GreenB1rds received gender-based feedback indicates a number of points:

- Women, who undoubtedly had a hand in spreading ISIS propaganda and plotting attacks, were nonetheless criticized regardless of their contributions to 'the cause' because of a single factor: their gender which, in turn, made them delicate "precious pearls" who were ultimately unfit to take on a leadership role in the eyes of the male critic.
- The individual who refers to the female admins as "precious pearls" is under the impression that the male accounts would somehow be able to enforce gender-based rules that would apply in offline contexts and maintain control in online spaces. In other words, his response reflects an attempt to directly translate real-world social norms to Telegram.
- Women, in this case, the GreenB1rds admins, were used to shame men who had not taken action: the implication being that men were not fulfilling their masculine duty in their failure to contribute.
- The individual who posted "many sisters wish they were men" understands the inherently limiting nature of being a female ISIS supporter and acknowledges that this sentiment may be widely shared among other women. The comment speaks to a certain level of self-awareness on the part of the original poster and it attempts to shame male ISIS supporters by addressing a certain male "privilege"—a male privilege that allows them to fully engage in violent jihad while women often face numerous restrictions.

Responses from accounts with male usernames[24] who expressed concern and support reveal an equally important point: The lack of gender-based feedback, in many of the responses, signifies a willingness to fully accept the female GreenB1rds admins' efforts regardless of their gender and their attempts to deliberately deceive fellow ISIS supporters into thinking that they were men. This indicates an increasing flexibility regarding the acceptance of women which reflects the increasing pressures on ISIS's online ecosystem, as demonstrated by

one commenter in a chat group, "…many sisters help with media now akhi. We are short many brothers."[25]

There is no single consensus on the matter of women's engagement, but debates centered on women's inclusion or exclusion continue to organically develop within these private groups which demonstrates that at least some supporters themselves are willing to be more flexible in their ideology, regardless of positions expressed in ISIS's official media outlets. These complicated and shifting internal dynamics explain why some women choose to avoid mentioning their gender altogether and, in the case of the female GreenB1rds admin from the UK, may go one step further by allegedly deceiving other online ISIS supporters into thinking that they are men. Despite the looser parameters online, passing as a man ensures that the individual is able to fully participate without facing possible obstacles that they might otherwise encounter if they had chosen to reveal their gender. Interestingly, the GreenB1rds channel had previously posted a message asking "sisters" in groups to avoid sharing photos, using overtly feminine names and "strictly no free-mixing in chats".[26] It intentionally encouraged deception in quite explicit terms. The emphasis on "no free-mixing in chats" is somewhat ironic given that the female admins engaged in conversation in groups that were supposed to be all-male. To the author's knowledge, ISIS has not solidly addressed the permissibility of lying about one's identity online in order to enter groups, participate in the so-called 'media jihad', or the actual plotting of attacks under non-dire circumstances.

It would be interesting to consider how receptions to GreenB1rds might have differed if the female admins had disclosed their gender openly. What *is* known is that they passed as male to obtain unquestioned access to all parts of the ISIS Telegram community and exert influence through their channel. This level of agency and equalizing the space depended solely on these women's ability to hide their female identities. The degree of impact that the original GreenB1rds had on the ISIS echo-chamber is difficult to measure but the nature of the content it produced, which ranged from bomb making instructions to threats to more generic propaganda, was widely shared.[27] The fact that the content was produced in English added to its relevancy among English-speaking supporters and by extension, widened accessibility to a larger audience.

Online channels, such as GreenB1rds, challenge conceptions of the ways in which women's participation and engagement in terrorist activities may take shape. Katherine E. Brown states that it is important to recognize "women's agency as extending beyond the private sphere challenges many of our inherited gender images…"[28] Observing how parts[29] of the online ISIS ecosystem renegotiate gender boundaries offers numerous important insights: understanding how terrorist groups across ideologies may re-evaluate women's participation, following the possibly evolving nature of gender dynamics and how various contexts can force supporters to inconsistently move the line, and recognizing the ways in which Islamic State supporters attempt to frame varying narratives of women's empowerment—even if some of these narratives conflict with one another.

Conclusion and Further Research Opportunities

ISIS has lost most of its territorial claims but, as countless terrorism researchers have pointed out, their online presence remains strong despite attempts to disrupt their networks.[30] Late November of 2019 saw a major crackdown on ISIS accounts, channels, and groups as part of a coordinated effort between Telegram and Europol.[31] However, according to Amarnath Amarasingam, "Playing a role in ISIS's cyber frontline was hugely rewarding…the very act of getting suspended, collectively strategizing ways to get back online, helping fellow supporters prop up their accounts and networks all became personally, emotionally, and socially significant…The results of deplatforming are now playing out in real time before our eyes, as ISIS supporters shop around for a new and stable home."[32] As the online battle against ISIS continues, female ISIS supporters will remain engaged and, as demonstrated by GreenB1rds, they have the ability to simultaneously take on the multiple roles of propagandists, recruiters, facilitators, planners, and attackers.[33]

More data would need to be gathered to definitively determine if a shift in acceptance of what women can or cannot do as members of ISIS's online echo-chambers is occurring but *if* it is, this development would have significant policy implications. ISIS's ability to establish itself as a proto-state meant that it entered untested waters and the diverging points that distanced it from its predecessor, al Qa'ida, provided it with opportunities for re-creation. Part of that process included an acceptance, albeit minimal and limited, of women on the battlefield as soldiers. David Cook highlights that legal sources deemed it permissible: "According to the legal sources, if the necessity for *jihad* is incumbent on the entire Muslim community, then women do have the option of fighting. But most still say that even in extreme circumstances women fighting remains an option, not an obligation."[34]

On the other hand, online supporters are distanced from direct control by ISIS's administration which allows for the organic development of discussions that might not have happened under physical proximity to ISIS's territorial so-called caliphate. While supporters' online social patterns mirror official edicts from ISIS in many ways, shifts in official propaganda create an atmosphere that is open to change. When thinking about potential terrorism trends in the next decade, it is necessary to ask if ISIS's policies could undergo more radical policy shifts and if future violent jihadist groups might incorporate women as soldiers by citing ISIS as a precedent. If this does occur, it will be crucial to consider how such a stance could be portrayed in both official and unofficial online propaganda and to what degree that message would resonate with female supporters globally.

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Notes

[1] Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State*, Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group Inc., 2017; Edited by Laura Sjoberg & Caron E. Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2011.

[2] Charlie Winter, "ISIS Women and Jihad Breaking with Convention," *ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 13, 2019, p. 9.

[3] The term "core" refers to both ISIS's territorial caliphate and its official propaganda outlets

[4] Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," CTC Sentinel Volume 10 Issue 7, August 2017, p. 26: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/08/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss7-9.pdf

[5] Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," p. 26.

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[12] Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-caliphate.html

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[16] Elizabeth Pearson, "Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 13, 2018, p. 7.

[17] Email communication with Chelsea Daymon on December 12, 2019.

[18] From personal archives, July 2018.

[19] It is highly unlikely that accounts making pro-ISIS comments are academics or journalists given the ethical standards by which they must abide.

[20] "Woman arrested in Uithoorn for running IS support Telegram service," *DutchNews*, October 11, 2019: https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2019/10/woman-arrested-in-uithoorn-for-running-is-support-telegram-service/

[21] Richard Spillett, "Female 'ISIS supporter', 36, appears in court accused of plotting to bomb St Paul's Cathedral and a London hotel after 'pledging support for terrorist group'," *Daily* Mail, October 16, 2019: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7580413/Woman-court-alleged-ISIS-plot-bomb-St-Pauls-Cathedral.html

[22] Telegram screenshot from personal archives. October 17, 2019.

[23] Telegram screenshot from personal archives. October 17, 2019.

[24] Caveat: It is impossible to confirm if the people behind these accounts are male or female but this conclusion is based on the assumption that they are male as presented by their usernames.

[25] From personal archives, July 2018.

[26] Telegram screenshot from personal archives. September 2019.

[27] Imitation accounts and channels calling themselves "GreenB1rds" have appeared since the arrests of the original female admins.

[28] Edited by Laura Sjoberg & Caron E. Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism,* p. 214

[29] While GreenB1rds and the various commenters compose a tiny fraction of ISIS Telegram, their actions and reactions reveal the ways in which gender boundaries are being renegotiated.

[30] Michael Krona and Rosemary Pennington, *The Media World of ISIS*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019, p. 6.

[31] Amarnath Amarasingam, "Telegram Deplatforming ISIS Has Given Them Something to Fight For," *Vice*, December 5, 2019: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vb55bd/telegram-deplatforming-isis-has-given-them-something-to-fight-for

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