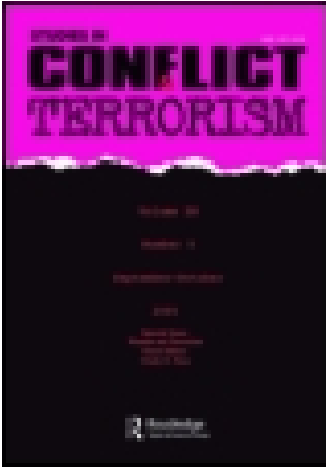


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The Western Muhajirat of ISIS

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The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS

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An unprecedented number of Western women have recently joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group has envisaged strictly non-combat roles for them, but violence is an essential part of their embraced ideology and several signs suggest that they could claim a more militant role. Their marginalization, however, is essential for the preservation of ISIS's power system and it is consequently unlikely that it would accommodate such aspiration, at least in the areas of the proclaimed caliphate. It could be different in the West, where women returning from conflict areas or those, even more numerous, anxious to join but unable to travel, could engage in violent acts.

The Arabic word *Muhajir* (feminine: *Muhajirah* [sg.], *Muhajirat* [pl.]), also used as a first name, is a direct Quranic name and has the original meaning of “one who avoids or abandons bad things,” later extended to “migrant.” *Muhajir* has the same root of *Hijra*, the name of the transfer of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions from the hostile Mecca to the promising Medina in 622 CE, and it consequently identifies migrants from a problematic place to a better one, for the sake of Allah. *Hijra*, intended as migration from the lands inhabited by infidels to Muslim lands or to contribute to *jihad*, is the 36th of the 44 famous “Ways to support Jihad” preached by Anwar Al Awlaki and published on his blog in February 2009.¹ The self-proclaimed Caliph and leader of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also called on all Muslims to move to the new territorial entity that he founded, pointing out that “migration to the house of Islam is a duty.”² Western women who have joined ISIS have extensively used the term *muhajirah* to identify themselves on social media, clearly indicating in this way a discontent with their previous living environment (the West), an impellent drive to move to a place of ideal perfection (the caliphate) and the religious motivation for seeking the change. These three aspects are at the core of the inclusion of a significant number of Western women, generally second generation Muslim immigrants but in some cases Western converts, between the *jihadists* who traveled to Syria in recent times. This presence, never seen in

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previous *jihadi* transnational mobilizations, is facilitated by the ease of travel from Europe to Syria and by the expected good living conditions at destination, in religious and material terms. It is also a sign of the extraordinary attractiveness and success of ISIS, which has not only lured around 3,000 Western fighters in its areas of operation, but also a significant female component.

The aim of this article is to show the importance of sympathetic Western women for ISIS, both those (*muhajirat*) who have moved to the areas controlled by the group and those who were radicalized and accepted its ideology but for different reasons have been unable to travel. Our thesis is that the *muhajirat* are a useful support for the fighters only in non-combat roles, while a bigger threat to the West may come from the women who still live there, rather than from potential female returnees. This thesis is based on threefold premises: first, it is not expected that the *mujahirat* will be easily allowed to return back home due to their importance and role in the proclaimed caliphate; second, it is very unlikely that disillusioned *mujahirat* who were able to escape and go back home will be motivated to continue the struggle; third, the new legislation introduced in many countries will discourage them from returning or they will be strictly monitored or arrested and prosecuted. In any case new measures, especially designed to prevent and counter female radicalization and possible consequent violent acts, should be timely introduced.

The first section of the article considers historical, academic and media sources to analyse the contentious issue of the involvement of women in past and current *jihadi* struggles. The second section highlights the causes of the success of ISIS in attracting so many female recruits, their roles and relevance within the organization, and their level of satisfaction. The third section describes the originality and the effectiveness of the group's use of social media and its utility for external observers to understand the psychology of the female recruits and their predisposition to violence. The fourth section argues that these women are expected to have a relevant but non-combat role in the conflict areas, with the possible exception of their use as suicide bombers, if some conditions will change, while they could more likely resort to violence in the West, and explains what Western government could do to protect their citizens.

The article concludes that there are elements to argue that the competition between reasons to exclude ISIS's women from militant roles and factors that push them in that direction, united to the possible mobilization of women willing to join the group but unable to travel to the areas of the proclaimed caliphate, could find a synthesis in the West and could produce unsophisticated but lethal attacks by few individuals or "female lone wolves."

The Female Jihad

While there are several historical examples of women involved in direct fighting in Muslim societies since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, with some of his close relatives included, female *jihad* has generally been considered different from its masculine version. The Prophet himself, according to authoritative collections of his traditions, and a large number of Muslim jurists and clerics in the following centuries have made clear that women had to be excluded from the battlefield. A rationale for such position has been the need to give priority to "the women of paradise," the prize reserved to *jihadi* fighters fallen in battle and a powerful encouragement to combat without fear to die, over the "women of Earth," who tied the men to the material world and could distract them from celestial aims and intrepid fighting.³

Another compelling reason for the exclusion of women from the battlefield in Muslim societies is the willingness to preserve them from situations at odds with the traditional principles of modesty and the related legal obligations, as public mixing of genders and free circulation of women without an escorting male relative. This justification is also consistent with the differentiation of statuses between men and women in those societies, which is instrumental to the survival of the traditional patriarchal social order. The risks associated with a possible increased role of women in fighting might explain why Abdullah Azzam, one of the main ideological fathers of Al Qaeda, while recognizing the participation of women in *jihad* as a prescription of *Shari'a*, clearly stated that this practice amounted to a "great evil."⁴

The mentioned factors have been so significant to take priority over the doctrine of defensive *jihad*, which would have mandated the unlimited participations of all the members of the *Ummah*, women and children included, when exceptional situations occurred, like invasions and consequent deprivation of structures of authority in Muslim lands.⁵ Such prescribed exclusion is not a trivial "ideological lacuna" and doctrinal inconsistency, because the concept of defensive *jihad* is exactly what has legitimized the mobilization and participation of male *jihadists* in all the recent domestic and international struggles against the perceived oppressors or invaders of Muslim lands. While offensive *jihad* is a collective duty that needs to be called by the legitimate ruler, defensive *jihad* is an individual duty that does not require any authorization and is extended to everybody, whatever is his/her age or gender.⁶ Women should therefore be allowed to participate in fighting every time a condition of defensive *jihad* is believed to exist, but their participation has only occurred few times, while religious scholars and authorities have been generally ambiguous on this matter and even the few that have mentioned women's participation in *jihad*, have constrained their role and have stressed their subordination to male figures also in these circumstances.

A letter written in 2009 by Umayma al Zawahiri, Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife,⁷ to Muslim women, is emblematic of the dominant reluctance toward a militant interpretation of female *jihad*. She mentions the historical female companions of the Prophet who sacrificed everything for *jihad* and showed more courage than male fighters, but emphasizes that fighting is not easy for women and that there are many other ways for them to contribute, like supporting their husbands performing *jihad* and bringing up their children on the love of *jihad*.⁸

Women have no fewer motives than men for engaging in *jihad*. They share the same political motives and may have additional personal reasons to seek revenge, as the loss of their male relatives or the violation of their honor. The adoption of assertive behaviors, not only in secondary roles but also in the militancy, might also be an answer to the need of emancipation that is particularly felt by young generations, living in conservative societies that relegate women to subordinate positions⁹ but not immune by the spreading of modern Islamic feminism,¹⁰ especially if they belong to diasporas living in the West. These personal motivations converge with the substantial advantages offered to organizations by the use of women in suicide attacks. Female suicide bombers may conceal explosives and evade security checks better than their male companions and have more chances to hit with precision their targets, because they are considered less suspicious than men. The same reason that makes violence less expected from them, the association of femininity with motherhood and pacifism, is what amplifies the psychological impact, overall effectiveness, and consequently attractiveness of their attacks.¹¹ Additional advantages of their participation are the increase of the number of fighters, due to their

presence, and the possible increase of recruitment of male fighters for the shame effect on them caused by the enrolment of women.

The use of women in suicide missions, in addition to the many advantages, avoids the unwanted women's empowerment that would result from their militant acts, as in the same moment they engage in fighting they also die and disappear from the scene. Several *fatwas* have been pronounced to legitimize their use in suicide attacks, even if these statements have been often ambiguous and many conservative clerics have preferred to be mute on the issue.¹² Women started to participate in growing number in suicide missions in the last three decades and they have achieved great successes. A member of a secular Syrian party, Sana'a Mehadli, carried out the first known suicide attack in Lebanon in 1985 and many others were performed in the following years, especially by Palestinian and Chechen women. According to Mia Bloom, between 1985 and 2010, female bombers committed 257 suicide attacks, a quarter of the total.¹³ The phenomenon interested also Al Qaeda itself and, according to an interview to A-Shraq Al Awsat of a female militant named Umm Osama in 2003, a women suicide division had been established by that organization.¹⁴ In 2006 in Iraq for the first time a suicide attack was carried out by an European woman, Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to Islam¹⁵ and several alarms have been raised in Europe by the security agencies, with reference to the possibility of increasing participation of women in terrorist activities. The use of women in suicide operations is anyway a choice of last resort in case of difficult times, scarcity of men and desperation.

Suicide attacks perpetrated by women in support of Al Qaeda and other *jihadi* groups have occupied the headlines since the phenomenon started, for the mentioned positive practical and psychological effects, but the bulk of female contribution to the *jihadi* efforts has been provided in different and less visible roles, which are consistent with the tradition and the recommendations of Islamic clerics and are magnified by *ji*had-friendly male commentators. Women are described as having an important role in inciting their male relatives to fight and in supporting them in several essential auxiliary roles, like raising their children in the path of *ji*had, managing the finances and the logistics of the operations, recruiting new fighters and female companions, collecting and disseminating intelligence, providing medical care, glorifying the struggle and spreading the *jihadi* ideology through Internet traditional contacts. In addition to these important contributions, the level of women's influence on their male relatives is also emphasized. A document entitled "The role of women in the *ji*had against enemies," written by Yussuf al-Ayiri, emir of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula until he was killed in 2003, stresses that women hold power over the men and that: "... if a woman is convinced of something, she is the greatest source of strength in a man's [*jihadi*] performance, while if she opposes something then she is the biggest obstacle."¹⁶

Women are therefore presented as those who in many cases are behind the decision of their male relatives, especially sons, to become committed *jihadi*s or even martyrs (*shahid*).¹⁷

The described historical situation of female *ji*had is the background against which its recent version within ISIS and in particular within its Western female contingent has to be assessed. Never before so many *jihadi* fighters moved to a conflict area from the West, especially from Western Europe, and never before women were so evident part of this mobilization. These are effects of the success of the organization in the past months and of its consequent attractiveness, but the abundance of male fighters is also a reason for not needing the female contribution in militant roles. Other characteristics of ISIS have an impact on the role of its female component, as its extreme conservatism and

the consequent reluctance to let women fight, added to its impressive military advancements so far and the resulting absence of desperation that has historically been a powerful incentive to use female suicide bombers. The most relevant factor in this matter, anyway, is the creation of a new territorial entity and the ambition to establish a caliphate, which require, in addition to fighters, many other roles functional to state and society building and especially the most peculiar function of women of giving birth and raising the next generation of *jihadists*. This might change in the future and reasons could emerge to involve women in military operations, but the major concern in the West for the time being should be the possible mobilization of ISIS's female members or sympathizers in their home countries.

The Women of ISIS

ISIS has received considerable attention for its barbarity against women and for their systematic degradation, abuse, and humiliation in the territory it has occupied. In spite of that, a growing number of Muslim women have performed *Hijra* to the area controlled by the group. In this article our attention is given to women from the West, their motivation and importance for ISIS and the proclaimed caliphate. While many Western countries do not have available data on the number of women joining ISIS, it is estimated that almost 10 percent of ISIS's Western members are female,¹⁸ with a tendency toward the rapid growth of the number of female contributors. It is believed that already more than 200 young women and teenage girls left their homes to join ISIS, most of them from France with an approximate number of 60,¹⁹ then from the United Kingdom (50), Germany (40), Austria (14), Belgium (35),²⁰ and other European countries, whose authorities constantly report on the growing number of young women who already left, who are being arrested on the runways of the airports or who are preparing to leave.

According to a research by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization at Kings College London,²¹ these girls and young women are mainly aged between 16 and 24, but even girls as young as thirteen, after being radicalized, wish to travel to Syria. Such growing trend of radicalized female teenagers, who in most cases run away from their homes and travel to the Middle East without their parents' permission, raise many questions and concerns not only for the security experts, but for the Western society as a whole. They belong to Muslim families or are converts to Islam, but in both cases families are shocked when they discover their interest in "violent *jihad*." Women are joining ISIS for a number of reasons: first, they are responding to ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who has called on them to help to build the new territorial entity, which needs women to assume the traditional roles as wives and mothers or to perform as skilled workers, doctors, nurses, engineers, and the like, while others have less traditional and more militant expectations.²²

ISIS instructs women how support *jihad* off the battlefield by rising *mujahid* children and encouraging their husbands, sons, and male relatives to participate in armed struggle. Initially, a significant number of women traveling to Syria went to join their *jihadi* husbands²³ or were motivated by revenge for the loss of their husbands or relatives. Only from Bosnia and Herzegovina more than 20 women with children accompanied their husbands who went to fight in Syria.²⁴ In most cases, anyway, women and girls have left their homes to marry *jihadists*, mostly foreign fighters who they had found on the Internet, after being convinced of the need to support the fighters and bear their children to create conditions for the growth and normal functioning of the new proclaimed caliphate, as well as to contribute in women's traditional roles in *jihad*,²⁵ like cooking or being nurses for

soldiers. An example of the intention to perform this last role is provided by a certified nurse from Colorado, Shannon Maureen Conley, 19, who was arrested at the Denver airport in April 2014 on her way to Syria to be a soldier's wife and a nurse in an ISIS camp near the Turkish border.²⁶ Finding an appropriate husband is thus an important part of online radicalization and recruitment of women. Even though ISIS strictly follows very conservative Islamic rules for women, women coming alone are also accepted, but they are supposed to marry shortly after arriving in Syria. As part of ISIS's propaganda, an English-speaking woman running the "Diary of Muhajirah"²⁷ wrote on her Facebook page that women could work as teachers, doctors, and nurses, would not be forced to marry, and would be enabled to stay in an all-sisters hostel with the assured monthly allowance. However, in reality, staying in ISIS's controlled areas without a man is very difficult, which is the reason why Umm Layth urged sisters on Twitter "to stop dreaming about coming to *Shaam* and not getting married."²⁸

We are faced with a carefully planned and well-organized ISIS strategy of mobilization of Western women, with an extent never seen before. The rationalization behind this comes from the premise that voluntary and enthusiastic brides are much better mothers and supporters of *jihād* than domestic women forced to marry the fighters against their will. Domestic Muslim women, in fact, are reluctant to marry foreigners and in traditional Islamic culture "militant organizations could not recruit women directly, without transgressing familial and societal honour code."²⁹ Additionally, by leaving the West to perform *Hijra*, women demonstrate that they see a superiority of ISIS's ideology over the Western worldview, providing an important gratification and a significant morale booster for the *jihād*ist fighters.

By analyzing the process of radicalization itself and the recent activities of ISIS's Western foreign fighters, especially on the territory of the proclaimed caliphate, some differences arise between male and female participants concerning their motivations, roles, activities, and the possibilities of returning home. For both genders, ideology appears to be the most important motivation factor, but reasons to leave the West are also relevant. On their blogs, women belonging to immigrant communities in the West, who are the large majority of Western ISIS recruits, often reveal their alienation from the host indigenous societies and even from their diaspora communities. Recent growth of xenophobia and negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in the West also boost up their aspiration to live their religion in a better environment, such as the new caliphate proclaimed by ISIS, as an alternative society in which women, as Umm Ubaydah writes, "are trying to build an Islamic State that lives and abides by the law of Allah."³⁰ But taking into consideration that teenage girls who are joining ISIS are much younger than male foreign fighters, the level of their understanding of ISIS's ideology, the idea of caliphate or of the role of women in it are more questionable and this leads us to the conclusion that many of them are naïve and easily manipulated to embrace a cause that often they do not clearly understand.

Financial reasons, which are considered a significant motivation factor for many Western men for joining ISIS, is not an important factor in the case of women, since their role is quite different. In addition, from the published cases, it is obvious that a significant number of female recruits are coming from well-established families, are well educated, and generally have bright prospects of life in the West, to the point that their close relatives, when discover their departure, cannot believe that they were ready to leave their well-off life, with many promising paths, to go to live in a war-torn territory.

It seems that women, much more than men, are motivated by a romantic idea of their participation in *jihād*, of marriage with "holy warriors," and a fascination with ISIS's

promotion of the caliphate as an ideal place for living for all Muslims. The mentioned naivety and romanticism do not mean that their motivation is weak. It is much more difficult for women to leave their family, to travel to another country, and to quickly become the wife of an unknown foreign fighter. This requires very strong will and motivation and makes us believe that women's resolve may be stronger than the resolve of their male counterpart.

Other motivations are adventure, search of attractive alternatives to their current unsatisfying lives, and personal psychological problems. Some of them believe that they are taking part in a humanitarian mission to relieve the mistreated Syrian population and have no intention of carrying out violent acts, while others expect to participate in combat activities and have an equal role as men, or at least to become a *jihadi* "Florence Nightingale" and tend the wounded. It could be said that the motivation of women is "a combination of political and personal reasons, together with naïve romanticism."³¹ In general, their expectations seem to be quite different from the projects that current ISIS leadership has for women, which coincide with Bloom's "jihadi bride concept" and envisage women mainly as "baby factories" in the desire to populate the new "purist" Islamic State."³²

There is not much available data on how their life in the Islamic State really looks like, due to the absence of any kind of neutral media coverage of the territory controlled by ISIS after the brutal treatment and beheading of captured foreign humanitarian workers and reporters. Such a situation leads to partisan reports on the life conditions in that territory and also represents a new strategy not seen before, which is the absolute control of any reports, news, pictures, or posts created or filmed there. ISIS's Internet propaganda shows idealistic life conditions and treatment of *jihadi* brides, some of whom continue to use social media to stay in touch with their families and friends, but with a questionable privacy and not excluded censorship and manipulation, making such posts an unreliable source of information. Posting pictures of life in the territory under ISIS's control is also a part of the recruitment campaign based on portraying that area as an idealistic place to live and to attract foreign women to join their "sisterhood in the caliphate."³³ Their propaganda mostly shows women carrying guns and enjoying "normal" activities such as meeting each other for coffee, eating in restaurants, cooking and doing housework, making selfies with beloved *jihadi* husbands, and so on.

On 23 January 2015 the media arm of the Al-Khanssaa Brigade posted onto a *jihadist* forum a document entitled "Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study," only in Arabic, dedicated to the life of women in the so-called Islamic State.³⁴ It is clearly a piece of ISIS propaganda, but it is valuable to understand the role envisaged for women by the leaders of the group and the message that they want to convey to potential Arab female recruits, in particular those from the Gulf. While the propaganda posted on social media in English or French is conceived to allure an audience that lives in the West and generally belongs to traditionalist diaspora communities but is exposed to Western themes, especially in the field of women's empowerment, this Manifesto is not constrained by opportunistic considerations and expresses, in our opinion, the most authentic attitudes of the group toward women. The first section of the treatise is a condemnation of the Western civilization and in particular of its feminism. The second section illustrates the idealized life of women in the territories of the so-called Islamic State, presented as the complete fulfillment of the precepts of Islam. The third section offers a comparison between the life of women in the Arabian Peninsula and in the territories controlled by the group, with the clear intent to convince women living in the former to migrate to the latter. While the lifestyle of the ideal *muhajirat* emerging from this document is distant from the adventure and the excitement expected by female Western recruits, this

Manifesto does not exclude a combat role for women, limited to extreme situations of enemy attack to the country, insufficiency of men and presence of a *fatwa*, issued by an *imam*, prescribing women's intervention. The same Al-Khanssa Brigade is responsible for enforcing strict *Shariah* laws on women and is famous for the brutality and cruel punitive methods of its components, like the disfigurement of 15 women with acid for not wearing *niqab*,³⁵ or the torture of a mother with a spiked clamp device for breastfeeding in public.³⁶

In contrast with ISIS idyllic representations of women's life under their rule, some of their family members, who were able to receive messages from them, reported on their shocking experiences and awareness of having made the biggest mistake of their life. A French girl's brother, after seeing her in Syria, said that "she was thin and sick," that "she never saw any light and that with the other women she had to look after young children, orphans, but she lived surrounded by armed men."³⁷ Another example is provided by a 25-year-old British single mother, Tareena Shakil,³⁸ who fled to join ISIS with her toddler son, but in a short period of time expressed her willingness to return to Great Britain, after she had realized what type of life she would have experienced with the extremists in Syria, where she had been forced to marry a one-legged fighter. A similar experience seems to have concerned two Austrian teens, Samra Kesinovic, 17, and Sabina Selimovic, 15, reported to be married and pregnant in an ISIS-controlled area in Syria. After having become the "poster girls" of the group, thanks to pictures and information posted on their social media accounts, it was revealed that they had contacted their families in a desperate attempt to receive help to go back home.³⁹ To the harsh and humiliating conditions that are expectedly experienced, even if only occasionally reported by the Western *muhajirat*, it is to add the shocking witnessing of the cruel and inhumane treatment imposed by their husbands and companions on local women, especially those of different religion, who are victims of forced marriage, rape, and enslavement. It is difficult to believe that these situations can leave the Western *muhajirat* insensitive and do not induce compassion, gender solidarity, and consequently some form of resentment toward the perpetrators of such brutalities.

In addition to reasons of disillusionment caused by how they are treated and what they witness, the Western *muhajirat* could also suffer from the limits imposed on their roles. Even though they were aware, prior to their arrival, that their main role would have consisted in being the "ultimate wives of jihad,"⁴⁰ a significant number of them, considering that they come from societies where women are emancipated and that were attracted by propaganda showing images or armed women, could expect a more militant role. Some *muhajirat* have supported on their blogs the idea of women taking part in fighting or inflicting violence, like Umm Layth, who stressed that she completely understood her sisters' craving to participate in combat operations, or Umm Ubaydah, who expressed her regret she had not beheaded herself the American-Israeli journalist Steven Sotloff.⁴¹ Some signs of progress toward such an involvement are present. Even if they do not participate in fighting, some are trained to use weapons and carry guns for self-protection. The formation of the Al-Khanssaa brigade, set up by a British woman in February 2014 as an all-female "morality police" responsible to ensure that local women comply with Islamic laws of dress and conduct,⁴² is an additional step in such a direction.

The question is if this formation could be seen as a first step in women's attempt to achieve a more militant role, or if it represents the limit they can achieve and it was mainly created to intimidate other women and gain social control. If this indicates a bigger, "slow-moving shift toward allowing women 'more operative' roles in the jihadi

movement,” Hegghammer warns that we can talk of “a process of female emancipation, albeit a very limited (and morbid) one.”⁴³

Currently there is no evidence that ISIS is embracing women’s empowerment and their involvement in fighting, even if the women seem attracted by such a possibility. The opposite is true and this group appears to be much more restrictive and conservative in this respect than other historical *jihadist* formations. As happened to others, should the situation for ISIS worsen on the field, they could change their mind and women might be firstly used as suicide bombers. As a further step, in case of an existential threat and out of desperation, they could abandon the current restrictive approach and could progressively give more militant roles to the women.

Such accomplishment would be consistent with the nascent “jihadi girl power sub-culture,”⁴⁴ that has been observed on the posts on social media of Western women sympathizing with ISIS and more compatible with the character of girls and women that make the courageous decision to move from a safe environment to a conflict area, but it could backfire for ISIS. The “sexual revolution” that would result from women’s empowerment and military involvement, in fact, could undermine the *jihadist* ideology, founded on a patriarchal model of society and, as assumed by professor Nelly Lahoud, could “supplant jihad altogether.”⁴⁵ A compromise could be achieved by expanding the authority of the all-female “morality police” and by giving them more police power over the overall population on the occupied territories. By this, ISIS could gain twofold goals: a fulfillment of Western women’s expectations, by giving them an increased sense of power, and the possibility to move male fighters to more valuable combat roles.

The Role of Social Media

The phenomenon of militant organizations taking their messages to social media is not new and the virtual world is definitely considered an irreplaceable part of the battlefield. The importance of media, especially Internet, has also been recognized by ISIS, whose global media campaign, focused on the recruitment of foreign fighters, could be assessed as the most effective ever. ISIS’s use of global media plays a significant role in the process of individual participation in *jihad*, of both women and men from the West, by fulfilling three functions: radicalization, recruitment, and identity formation.⁴⁶

ISIS’s media campaign is intentionally used to create ISIS’s dual image: to be both loved and feared.⁴⁷ Brutally violent videos of beheadings and public tortures and executions are on one side directed to ISIS’s enemies, to frighten them and force them on collaboration (on the territory of Syria and Iraq), or to provoke their reaction (primarily the United States and its allies). On the other side, it is recognized as an effective tool for recruitment of sympathizers from outside the Middle East. Additionally, due to the absence of any neutral source of information from the territory occupied by ISIS, materials published on the Internet by its leaders and followers are used to create a picture of the proclaimed caliphate as an idealistic place for living and to motivate sympathizers from all around the world to join them. The originality of ISIS’s recruitment campaign is based on its primarily online conduction, the participation of recruited foreigners in it, and 24/7 online activities that allow a direct communication with ISIS’s members on the theater to learn what the real experience would be like.

Western Muslim women are important targets of ISIS’s media campaign, due to their importance for ISIS, described in this article. This is the reason why ISIS has created a special social media campaign directed to Western women and why it is so carefully designed and conducted. Materials and information posted on the Internet encompass all

recruitment steps: indoctrination, motivation for making *Hijra*, and all necessary information regarding travel, finding appropriate husbands, being the “ultimate wives” of ISIS’s fighters, behavior, roles, and living conditions on the territory of a so-called caliphate, as well as relations and communications with families back at home. This is the first time that a militant organization has given a strict guidance to women on their role, “preparing them for the honour of jihad.”⁴⁸

To promote its propaganda, ISIS is relying on advanced media production techniques and the use of social media to gain access to a young female population, especially in the West. The most important promoters are already recruited Western women who take over a crucial part in ISIS’s recruitment campaign. ISIS uses their ability to easily access other Western women, to convince them of all Muslim women’s obligation to participate in *jihad*, and to inspire them to participate in the creation of the new territorial entity, as their religious duty. On Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites, young Muslim women, who already live on the territory occupied by ISIS, portray their lives as a sort of “Disneyland for Muslims”⁴⁹ by posting pictures and writing blogs of daily life activities and offering help and support to all of those interesting in joining their “sisterhood in the caliphate.”

The number of visitors and users of these blogs and social-media platforms, with the increasing number of women between them, as well as the increasing number of women joining ISIS, prove the effectiveness of ISIS’s media campaign. It also shows that ISIS is very adept at targeting a young female audience in the West, as well as its competence in conducting the *online jihad* at a higher level than any other Islamist militant organization. It could be said that ISIS is responsible for the evolution of modern jihadist propaganda, named “online jihad 3.0,”⁵⁰ and for the success in expanding its influence, gaining visibility and inspiring recruits from all over the world. With its sophisticated use and understanding of social media to achieve its goals, ISIS aims to persuade all Muslims that battling to restore a caliphate is a religious duty.⁵¹

Dangers, Prevention and Contrast of Women’s Contribution to ISIS

The positive contribution of women to the success of ISIS is undeniable. In the next future they could increase their role in policing the controlled territories and in exerting social control on the people living there. They could also provide the unique benefits resulting from the use of women in suicide attacks, if the fortune of the group on the battlefield will decline, changing the group’s priorities on the use of its female members. Even without these increments, their ability to support their male relatives, to boost their morale, to reinforce their commitment to *jihad*, and to perform many roles that are vital to build, reinforce, and sustain the new territorial entity makes them a significant asset to ISIS.

The major concern for Western governments, anyway, is the possibility that lone⁵² female returnees or, even more likely, radicalized women unable to travel to the areas controlled by ISIS, could decide to participate in the struggle staying in their home countries. In addition to performing distant support roles, they could engage in violent acts, following instructions from the group or taking autonomously the initiative, in small groups or alone, giving possibly rise to a new phenomenon of “female lone wolves.” The lack of military training would lead them to perform simple attacks and to prefer unprotected targets, but this would be very alarming, because many more people would feel insecure. Such conduct would be an answer to the clear incitement delivered by a speaker for ISIS, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, in a video broadcasted on 22 September 2014, which has recently found several male followers in the West:

If you are not able to find an IED or a bullet, then single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies. Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him. . . . If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops.⁵³

An example of what a single woman without training can do is provided by the burka-clad woman's lethal knife attack against a female American teacher, perpetrated in Abu Dhabi in December 2014.⁵⁴ The chances that these events could happen in the next future are increasing, due to the awakening of sleeper cells that Western intelligence agencies have announced as possible, especially in some European countries, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks on 7 and 9 January 2015.⁵⁵

Efforts to counter Western women's contribution to ISIS in conflict areas or in home countries can benefit from several methods and procedures studied to face the group in general, as prevention of radicalization in Western countries, intelligence collection and surveillance to detect sympathizers before departure and after return, measures to contrast the transfer to the conflict areas, judicial actions, disruption of the money flows, military and counterinsurgency operations, countering the ideology and its spreading, reconciliation, de-radicalization, and rehabilitation. It is important to point out, in this regard, that while military and judiciary instruments alone cannot solve the problem of the Islamist militancy, a strategic advantage could come from the neutralization of their ideological motivations and consequently the interruption of the flow of new recruits. If this is true in general, it is especially true in the case of women, who have not taken part in fighting so far but have had a strong role in sustaining and spreading the *jihadist* ideology. These women have also other peculiarities, which offer the opportunity to adopt specifically tailored measures of prevention and contrast.

Women, especially if they belong to traditional societies and if they are young, as is often the case with Western *muhajirat*, generally have strong connections with their families. Working with communities and families may be an important instrument of early detection and prevention of radicalization, collection of information from the conflict areas, recognition of unease and willingness to defect and return home, organization of return trips, de-radicalization and rehabilitation once they are back at home. Family members, first of all parents, are in most of the cases disconcerted, scared, and desperate when they discover that their daughters took such decision and would likely cooperate with authorities to separate them from ISIS and to bring them back home. Governments should therefore create specialized units, able to effectively engage the interested communities and families, to build their trust and to convince them that cooperating with the institutions would be in the best interest of their member or relatives.

When the intention of women to move to the areas controlled by ISIS is detected, actions are needed to prevent such transfer. While it is true that preventing them from leaving could increase the immediate risk of attacks at home, letting them go could create domestic problems later, while it would surely increase the overall strength and the lethality of the group. Preventing women from departing is also in the interest of the women themselves, who may have been convinced to join the proclaimed caliphate in good faith, but would only too late discover what type of new life they would experience once at destination and in most of the cases would not be free to come back.

When the women are already in the conflict areas, they may be spontaneously disillusioned by the harsh life conditions and cruelty of the fighters toward the local civilian population or by mistreatment toward themselves, but they might also be helped to

recognize the brutalities exhibited by the group, especially against women, and encouraged to reconcile with their society of origin and to disengage from the struggle. To facilitate their disengagement, it is fundamental to show that the possible punishment for having joined ISIS should not deter them from returning, that simple adherence to the group through marriage of a fighter would not produce severe sentences if no crimes were committed and that voluntary disengagement would anyway be considered a reason for penalty reduction. It is not easy to sell this approach to Western constituencies, especially after attacks in the West and atrocities committed in Syria and Iraq, but an unconditional criminalization of all the people who moved there would be counterproductive, especially with regard to women who did not participate in violent acts. Disillusioned and disengaged *muhajirat*, allowed to return home should be of course monitored, but they could be helped to reintegrate into society and could become formidable witnesses of the tragic drawbacks of their experience, expectedly different from the romantic and heroic narratives that inspired them to join the group, and powerful instruments of prevention of radicalization and discouragement of departures of potential future victims of extremist propaganda.

Finally, it will be necessary to counter the media campaign targeted to recruit women. In this field, too, approaches exist to face the phenomenon, independently from the gender of the involved people, like shutting down accounts, monitoring the flows, infiltrating the chat rooms and creating “honey pots.” What may be recommended in our case is the specialization in women’s psychology of the operators responsible for monitoring the social media and interacting with the women through them, to be able to understand their mentality and feelings and possibly to create a useful dialogue with them.

Conclusions

Our research was focused on the extent, motivations, roles, and relevance of the Western *muhajirat* of ISIS, with special interest on their security impact. The number of these women, more than 200, is much higher than in any previous *jihadi* mobilization of Western foreign fighters. At the base of their motivations is unease with the West and adherence to the *jihadi* ideology, united to romantic and sometimes naïve aspirations to join a “holy struggle” and to become part of an entity of ideal perfection.

We highlighted that the male members of ISIS have envisaged strictly non-combat roles for these women, who are expected to be first of all wives of the fighters and mothers of their next generation and to support the *jihadi* and the construction of the new territorial entity in technical, logistic, and administrative roles. The only concession to the militant expectations of many women has been their participation in the armed police female brigades. We, anyway, recognized the importance of all their functions, so vital that ISIS has preferred, until now, not to exploit the advantages of the use of female suicide bombers, which has been so popular in other theaters of *jihadi* struggle.

The assertiveness demonstrated by these women in taking the hard decision to leave and their “*jihadi* girl power subculture,” shown in many of their posts on social media, make it difficult to believe that they will be content with the almost exclusively domestic role reserved to them by their male companions. At the same time it is also very unlikely that the male members of the group will renounce their reluctance to assign combat roles to the women, at least in the territories of the proclaimed caliphate, because this could compromise their power system and, in the already mentioned words of Abdullah Azzam, could amount to a “great evil.” The situation could be different in the West, where women returning from conflict areas or those anxious to join but unable to travel, could decide to

engage in violent acts. The latter case is more concerning because lone female returnees are unlikely and they would anyway be known to the authorities and monitorable or disillusioned with their experience and very likely unwilling to continue the *jihadist* struggle.

As anticipated in the previous section, our assumption is that these unrealized *muhajirat* could perpetrate unsophisticated but lethal random attacks on casual unprotected targets, able for this reason to terrorize the population. The authors could be small groups of women or “female lone wolves.” There is no evidence in open source data that there are already plans to act in this way. There are anyway no doubts, as we have demonstrated, that these women are prone to resort to direct violence, while there are no other ways to channel this aspiration, due to the strict attitudes of their male mates in this regard.

The threats that these women pose need to be addressed through gender-specific integrations to the methods adopted to prevent and counter the group and the *jihadist* phenomenon as a whole, with special emphasis on cooperation with families, prevention of radicalization, surveillance, monitoring of the social media, and formulation of tailored messages, with the intent to prevent them from embracing the *jihadist* ideology or to disengage them from it.

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