Women and the ISIL phenomenon: from recruiters to suicide bombers and everything in between

Synopsis: Between 2013 and 2017, a significant number of women travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State. Once in the group, they took on a variety of roles; most frequently cited roles include mothers, recruiters, and enforcers of sharia law, but women have also served in ISIL’s intelligence apparatus, and as suicide bombers. Female supporters of the terrorist organization have not been confined to Iraq and Syria; the group also has female supporters around the world who spread propaganda, engage in recruitment and radicalization activities, and plan terrorist attacks. This article will examine what is known about the radicalization of these women, the activities that they were engaged in in the Islamic State, the types of attacks they have attempted or conducted and what to expect from female returnees.

Women in ISIL: A Threat Difficult to Quantify

Almost any article written about women in the Islamic State highlights the fact that the group is unique in modern history in that no other terrorist group has attracted so many women. While this is objectively true, the conditions that allow for this phenomenon are rarely explored in depth. Instead, the sole explanatory factor offered is the pull of the Islamic State. The group does have unprecedented pull, but this is effective in large part because of modern communication technologies. In the past, barriers to entry such as a lack of information about the group, a lack of extremist social network, and a lack of publicized role for women have prevented women from joining terrorist groups in such numbers.

The Islamic State has overcome the first barrier to entry for women: lack of information. ISIL has effectively disseminated its propaganda almost exclusively through social media. The group has several publications (including al Naba, Rumiyyah, and Dabiq) that are shared extensively on social media platforms, by both supporters but also by researchers, journalists, and academics. The use of social media to disseminate information about the group cannot be overstated, and this information’s impact on the recruitment of women has also been unprecedented. Historically, sharing extremist literature and propaganda was done through hard copies of newsletters, videos, and cassette tapes. These materials were only disseminated to trusted individuals, meaning that the reach of the information was highly restricted.

The second barrier to entry for women that ISIL overcame with ease and in large part through social media was the lack of a social network. Research has demonstrated that women rarely radicalize and taken action on their ideas in the absence of a social network.¹ Even for the Islamic State, being related to someone who has joined the group increases an individual’s

¹ DAVIS, Jessica, Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State. Lanham 2017, 44
chance of joining, and family, friends and mentors act as facilitators into the group. However, social media networks have overcome the need for a physical social network. Instead, the group has utilized women in its ranks to develop relationships with prospective recruits online and encouraged them to join the group. For their part, ISIL-inspired women and girls have reached out to ISIL facilitators in order to join the group.

The group easily overcame the third barrier to entry for women into terrorist groups through its publications in which the group regularly discussed the role of women in the group. The broader appeal of the Caliphate was also presented through propaganda disseminated on social media, and provided a wide range of roles for women in the group, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Comparatively speaking, one of the reasons why the Islamic State has succeeded in attracting so many women is that many previous conflicts have also taken place with the borders of a country that lacked broader appeal. In some instances, such as the conflict in Sri Lanka involving the LTTE, the ethno-nationalist nature of the conflict encouraged local women to join the fighting, but had little impact on a broader uptake or engagement. For the Islamic State, the broader appeal to extremist Muslims around the world increased their potential for international recruitment.

Because of the significant changes in the social media landscape over the last decade, it is not methodologically accurate to draw direct comparisons to other terrorist groups and their appeal to women. These barriers were prohibitively difficult to overcome; social media, however, has spread the extremist message broadly and the appeal of that message to women has become clear. At the same time, it is difficult to quantify that appeal in a precise and accurate manner. Many countries have published figures on how many individuals from their countries have travelled abroad for extremist purposes, but the majority of these numbers include all conflicts and groups, not just the Islamic State and the Syria / Iraq conflict. These numbers frequently include people travelling to join Al-Qaeda aligned groups in the region, and potentially also include travel to Somalia, or other theatres of war.

For the most part, the largest number of travellers for extremist purposes, or foreign fighters, have been to the Syria / Iraq conflict (certainly since about 2014), and the majority have joined the Islamic State. Table 1 outlines the best estimates available for the number of women who

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3 DAVIS, Jessica, Gendered Terrorism: Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Minerva Journal of Women and War 2008-2/1 pp.1-19
have travelled for extremist purposes, drawn from a variety of sources.\textsuperscript{4,5} One source indicates that from the West alone, about 600 women have travelled to join the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{6} The estimate of 600 western women joining the Islamic State likely under-estimates the phenomenon, given that France may have had in excess of 720 women travel to join the Islamic State. However, these numbers are difficult to verify, and the primary source material is rarely referenced, let alone published.

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Country} & \textbf{Percentage of women who have travelled abroad to join a terrorist group (not necessarily just ISIL, but primarily..)} & \textbf{Number of female foreign fighters (best estimate or most available data) Note: the percentage is from separate data, and may not represent the proportions in the previous column)} & \textbf{Total number of foreign fighters}} \\
\hline
Australia & 15\% & & \\
Austria & 6.5-19\% & 59 & 300 \\
Belgium & 12\% & & 478 \\
Azerbaijan & & 200 & \\
Canada & 20\% & & \\
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\end{tabular}
\caption{Table 1:}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{4} a. MEHRA, Tanya, \textit{Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Trends, Dynamics and Policy Responses}, ICCT Policy Brief December 2016, p. 11
\textsuperscript{b} b. THOMSON, David, \textit{Les Revenants}, France 2016, 176
\textsuperscript{c} c. DANCER, Helene, \textit{They Were Preparing Their Souls to Die’: When Your Daughters Join ISIS}, Vice. Available from: https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/olfa-hamrouni-they-were-preparing-their-souls-to-die-when-your-daughters-join-isis Accessed 2017 01 18,
\textsuperscript{g} g. According to BBC, 800 people have travelled http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-3202698560
\textsuperscript{h} h. \textit{The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union} ICCT Research Paper, April 2016., 23, 25, 29, 33, 38, 44

\textsuperscript{5} The numbers for the total foreign fighter column were drawn from the same sources as above as well as Niall MCCARTHY, \textit{Scores of ISIS Foreign Fighters Have Returned Home}, Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/10/25/scores-of-isis-foreign-fighters-have-returned-home-infographic/#573093bc5e8e Accessed 2017 11 13

\textsuperscript{6} SIMCOX, Robin, \textit{The Islamic State’s Western Teenage Plotters}, CTC Sentinel, February 2017, 21
The US intelligence community estimates that some 40,000 foreigners joined ISIL from abroad,\(^7\) a number that likely includes both male and female recruits. The numbers outlined in table 1 suggest a total closer to 20,000 but many countries are not represented due to lack of information. For instance, no reliable numbers were found for Israel, Algeria, Turkey, or Libya, while in Morocco, just over 1600 male fighters are believed to have travelled to join ISIL, along with a nearly equal number of women and children.\(^8\) As a result, it is difficult to estimate the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of women who have travelled abroad to join a terrorist group (not necessarily just ISIL, but primarily..)</th>
<th>Number of female foreign fighters (best estimate or most available data) Note: the percentage is from separate data, and may not represent the proportions in the previous column</th>
<th>Total number of foreign fighters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>915</td>
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<td>Jordan</td>
<td></td>
<td>3000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1623</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td></td>
<td>512</td>
<td>3417</td>
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<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
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<td>3244</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>2926-5500</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>850</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>129</td>
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</tbody>
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\(^8\) MEKHENNET, Souad and Joby WARRICK, The jihadist plan to use women to launch the next incarnation of ISIS, The Washington Post, November 26, 2017.
number of women who have travelled to join these groups, but as can be seen from the numbers that are available, it is not insignificant. In fact, these numbers are well within the range of participation for women in other conflicts.

For the most part, when women are strongly represented within a terrorist group, it is because the organization is indigenous to the area, as are the women who join the group. Examples of this include the LTTE and Boko Haram, as well as ISIL’s predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq. In the case of ISIL, the international recruitment of women is significant and unprecedented. At the same time, much less attention has been paid to the Iraqi and Syrian women who have joined ISIL, which again is likely to be a significant number of individuals, but also likely muddies the waters in terms of how many female adherents the Islamic State truly has.

Motivations for women in joining the Islamic State

Examining individuals’ motivations for joining terrorist organizations (essentially, the “why” of their radicalization process) is fraught with methodological challenges. A wide variety of push and pull factors exist to explain the process. Broadly speaking, the radicalization process is unique for each individual. Few empirical studies exist that have examined women’s motivations for joining militant groups, including ISIL, or compare and contrast their radicalization process with their male counterparts. Most of the existing studies consist of research and analysis on small groups of women taken over a specific period of time - few studies exist with sufficiently large sample sizes to draw solid conclusions.

Compounding this lack of empirical research into women’s motivations for joining the Islamic State are media representations of this phenomenon. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that media reporting about women in terrorism tends to emphasize the personal over the political in terms of motivation, citing personal grievances whether or not they are the main motivating factors. For example, one CNN report presumed that ISIL was attracting women through pictures of kittens and promises of Nutella. Public opinion dismissed female ISIL followers as “fan girls”, lumping all ISIL affiliated women together with infatuated teenagers.9

Reading media reports of women in the Islamic State would lead one to believe that women join the group out of sexual desire and romance (to become a jihadi bride). Common explanations for women engaging with jihadist groups include that they are desperate, mentally ill, naive, manipulated by men, or they want to be ‘jihadi brides’. These stereotypes can be traced back to society’s perception of women as nurturers or victims of violence, rather than perpetrators of it.10 In reality, the reasons that women joined ISIL are likely very similar to the reasons that lead women to join terrorist groups in general: that is to say, the same reasons as men, and a combination of push and pull factors.

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9 HUEY, Laura & Eric WITMER, #IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism, Journal of Terrorism Research, 2016 -7/1, pp 1-10, 2016, 1

In contrast, ISIL propaganda targeted at women can include messaging on sisterhood, belonging, empowerment, and spiritual fulfillment. Islamic State propaganda describes several roles for women in building the Caliphate. Three archetypes described in the group’s propaganda are: contributor, mother/sister/wife, and defender/fighter. The most prominent role for women outlined in the Islamic State’s newsletter Dabiq is the role of contributor, or the woman who performs hijra to the Caliphate and contributes to building the “Islamic-utopia”. Women are promised meaningful lives as mothers, sisters, and wives, as well as a sense of belong and unity in the everlasting sisterhood.

While understanding the motivations of women joining the Islamic State can be a fraught exercise, the use of social media by the Islamic State to recruit men and women has also paved the way for unique social media analysis of the radicalization process. Studies that draw on social media representations of motivations by individuals can be insightful but also problematic in assessing an individuals' motivation in joining a terrorist group. How an individual represents themselves on social media can include a very select presentation of some of their push and pull factors, but also allows unique access to the actual individuals joining terrorist groups.

Collecting information from first hand accounts on social media is not, however, a panacea: there are few methods available to researchers to validate the identity of the women or the information they provide. Nor are there methods to disaggregate the individual’s motivations and the content that they are providing, given that their objective is likely to both influence (as in counter-messaging or information operations), as well as to inform and provide a narrative of their experience. Despite these limitations, some research in this area has yielded interesting findings. For instance, a content analysis of female terrorist fighters’s Tumblr blogs revealed that women join ISIL out of a form of female emancipation, but this gender and Islam-specific interpretation of emancipation does not coincide with a Western understanding of female emancipation. The women studied joined ISIL out of a combination of push and pull factors. Push factors include parental restrictions (the search for identity and belong), feeling deprived of choice (the desire to make independent decisions), and being perceived as victims of their religion (Islam) in Western countries (and the corresponding need to free themselves from Western restrictions). Pull factors have included finding pride in the challenge of travelling to Syria and taking control of their lives, and gaining respect from their community and social network as a female jihadist. For Syrian women, however, different push and pull factors may be present. One key difference is that for Syrian women, the motivation may also be economic. Different sources cite the ‘salary’ of jihadist women differently, but regardless of the actual sum, it can mean the difference between starvation and not in Syria.

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11 DANCER, Helene, ‘They Were Preparing Their Souls to Die’: When Your Daughters Join ISIS

12 INGRAM, Kiriloi M., More Than “Jihadi Brides” and “Eye Candy”: How Dabiq Appeals to Western Women, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 12 August 2016

13 KNEIP, Katharina, Female Jihad - Women in the ISIS, Politikon, 2014-29, pp. 88-106, 93

14 MUKHTAR, 57
Another study found that some of the women who have travelled to join the Islamic State call themselves female migrants, and speak of the need for completing hijrah (migration), and saw living in the Caliphate as living a utopian dream. Part of what seems to have compelled them to travel to Syria / Iraq was the perceived persecution of Muslims. This persecution featured prominently in ISIL propaganda, and the concept of migration was explained at length in the 8th issue of Dabiq magazine.\(^\text{15}\) In other cases, the promise of an adventurous life drew women to the Islamic State, as did living a life with meaning.\(^\text{16}\)

Women also spoke about seeking respect and wanting to live in a world where their hijab did not alienate them or make them a target for racism and persecution.\(^\text{17}\) Umm Haritha, a 20 year-old Canadian student who joined IS in Syria in December 2014, described her motivation as follows: “I would get mocked in public, people shoved me and told me to go back to my country and spoke to me like I was mentally ill or didn’t understand English. Life was degrading and embarrassing…” She was motivated to live a ‘life of honour’ under Islamic law.\(^\text{18}\)

In a complementary study, Huey & Witmer conducted a social media content analysis relating to women and girls in ISIL. This study involved a qualitative review of 20 ISIL “fan girl” social media posts (primarily twitter) over a period of 10 months to help shed light on how these fan girls embraced and acted on ISIL ideology. They found that for some young people, violent extremism had a subcultural cachet, as it allowed one to see oneself “as fighting against real or perceived disempowerment”.\(^\text{19}\)

Sometimes, women sought romance and adventure, and a break from the boredom of their lives.\(^\text{20}\) Indeed, the United Nations reports that the Tunisian women who travelled to join the terrorist group may have done so because they were looking for a life that was brave and exciting.\(^\text{21}\) While not the only factor, this may have contributed to women (including Western women) deciding to travel to join the Islamic State.

A sense of community and network may have also played a part in motivating women and girls to join ISIL. Girls and women may have engaged with ISIL propaganda and social media networks because they seek community and kinship. The Huey & Witmer study found a deeply

\(\text{BJORGUM, Maren Hald, Jihadi Brides: Why do Western Girls join ISIS?, Global Politics Review, 2016- 2/2, pp.91-102, 92-94}\)

\(\text{ALI, Mah-Rukh, ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS exploits women, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015, 15}\)

\(\text{BJORGUM, 97}\)

\(\text{MUKHTAR, 45}\)

\(\text{HUEY & WITMER, 10}\)


connected group of youth in the ISIL ‘fan girls’. The natural extension of this social network may have been, for some of the women, to join the organization and engage with the social network in real life.

Certainly, even in their own stories, one can hear the various push and pull factors of what drew these women to the Islamic State. Missing from these stories, however, are explanations involving desires to join a terrorist group or to fight. This is not to say that those stories do not exist; instead, it may simply be rare that women express them. This may be due to several reasons, ranging from societal expectations (both in the Islamic State and without), as well as legal consequences from fully articulating their terrorist intent.

Fundamentally, the radicalization process for men and women joining the Islamic State is largely the same. As one author notes, women who join ISIL do so out of religious, economic, political, psychological or philosophical reasons. There are some differences however in how men and women are radicalized and join terrorist groups. Men are much more likely to join a terrorist group for risk and status than women are. For women, they are unlikely to join a terrorist group without some sort of social connection into the group. This is due in part to the “barriers to entry” for women into terrorist groups. These barriers also include the dangers of travelling to secluded, isolated, and dangerous places as a woman. While women may join ISIL out of their own personal motivations, research has repeatedly demonstrated that the vast majority have a personal / social connection to the group. For instance, according to Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, two British girls who joined the Islamic State from Manchester, were indoctrinated by their elder sibling. A Saudi Arabian woman was also recruited through her brother’s connections in the Islamic State, and other examples abound. Of the girls and women studied by Huey & Witmer, the only ones who took action on their extremist ideas were both “fairly young, connected to IS recruiters through social media, had extensive IS connections (online and in the real world) and were involved in romantic relationships with males who also actively ascribed to IS ideology.” The requirement for women to have some sort of tangible social network connection to a terrorist group is one of the rare differentiations between male and female radicalization and engagement in terrorist activity, and one that appears to hold for the women and girls in joining ISIL.

**Women’s Roles in the Caliphate**

ISIL’s manifesto clearly lays out the role that women will play in the Caliphate. Women were expected to become mothers and wives, and could also serve as propagandists and recruiters. Many women were involved in the recruitment efforts of the Islamic State, and some of the

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22 HUEY & WITMER, 10

23 GHANEM-YAZBECK, Sisters in Arms

24 DAVIS, Women in Modern Terrorism, 44

25 GHANEM-YAZBECK, Sisters in Arms

26 HUEY & WITMER, 15
women blogged about life in the Islamic State. Women also served as enforces of the Islamic State’s rules and regulations. Despite this variety of work available to women, there was a significant difference in the types of roles promoted for women compared to those that are promoted for men. Women, by and large, were promoted as playing a role in the state formation aspects of ISIL, while men were promoted as fighters.

The actual roles of women in the Caliphate diverge somewhat from the officially disseminated propaganda. Some researchers have found that terrorist organizations portray women in their ranks to normalize extremism as a lifestyle choice, rather than simply a way to recruit more women and increase their numbers. Women played a significant role in the Islamic State, and the propaganda around this served to recruit women and to normalize choosing the life of jihad. However, the propaganda cannot be taken as exhaustive in terms of the roles that women played, as few terrorist organizations adhere to the letter of their ideology, and instead take significant liberties with their actions as required by the strategic and tactical situation within their area of operations.

Information suggests that women’s fundamental role in the Caliphate was procreation and raising the next generation of jihadis. Indeed, this was a frequently promoted role for women in the Islamic State. This portrayal had a significant presence in the Islamic State’s propaganda, and likely appealed to a proportion of their western recruits who might not otherwise travel to join a terrorist group, but were interested in living in the Caliphate. Women were also employed by ISIL as recruiters, and were also responsible for enforcing Sharia law. However, the all-female regulation-enforcing brigade (Al Khansaa) was reportedly disbanded over complaints that the women had used excessive violence in the enforcement of the regulations, striking women for offences, even minor.

These roles were widely acknowledged by ISIL in its propaganda and external communications, as well as by its recruiters and propagandists on social media. However, other roles also likely existed for women in the Caliphate that the group was less inclined towards acknowledging publicly. According to the Middle East Monitor, women played a role in ensuring the functioning of the state and its institutions, and were employed in the medical, educational and tax departments of the group. At least two female doctors joined the Islamic State. While ISIL has rarely admitted to these types of roles for women, the needs of the state likely outweighed their interest in preventing women from taking on these types of responsibilities. The group likely

27 BJORGUM, 92
28 DAVIS, Women in Modern Terrorism, 125
30 THOMSON, 176, 179, 181-2
downplayed these roles in order to continue to encourage men with these skills to join the group, but at the same time benefitted from the work of women with the requisite skills.

Other, unstated roles for women may have included intelligence collection. Women are reported to have played a role in ISIL's intelligence organization, Emni. Women took on the role of spies, and in some instances were responsible for the interrogation of female prisoners arrested by the intelligence organization.32 Certainly, the group has a vested interest in not advertising the activities of its intelligence organization, including the activities of women within its ranks. At the same time, the collection of intelligence for the terrorist organization is indisputably an operational role, one that may pave the way for women in combat operations.

Looking at these various motivating factors, it is clear that women likely fall into various categories in terms of their motivations for joining the Islamic State. Jacoby presents an explanatory theory on how to understand and typologize so-called jihadi brides, or women who travelled to join ISIL, describing them as victims, warriors, and feminists.33 However, it remains difficult to test or prove a theory of the types of women who joined the Islamic State, given limited access to ISIL women. From what has been reported, there are likely very few examples of clear cut distinctions between these groups. Instead, the women who travelled to join the Islamic State, or those that joined the group from within Iraq or Syria, likely embody some combination of two, or all of, these categories.

While likely rare, extremes do exist. For instance, Umm Ibrahim was brought to Syria by her father when she was 13 years old. A year and a half after arriving in Syria, ISIL killed her father and forced her to marry. She had a child shortly thereafter, and when her first husband was killed, she was forced to marry again.34 In this instance, Umm Ibrahim likely had little agency in her move to the Islamic State, and was victimized both by her father and the terrorist organization. Umm Ibrahim falls squarely within the category of victim in terms of her engagement with the Islamic State.

Even young women / girls may demonstrate significant agency in their recruitment process, and age alone cannot be the deciding factor in terms of whether a female ISIL member is victim, combatant, or feminist. Two UK schoolgirls, 15 years old at the time, travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State. They married ISIL fighters upon arrival, and claimed to be happy in their new home.35 In this instance, it is unclear what their motivation was, but it is reasonable to assume that they were likely motivated by the draw of the group (in whatever way that manifested); it may also be crucial to see them as victims of its propaganda and recruiters. In this in-

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33 JACOBY, Tami Amanda, 'Jihadi Brides at the Intersection of Contemporary Feminism,' New Political Science, 2015-37/4, 537


stance, these girls can be seen as victims, but may also have had motivations in line with the warrior and feminist typologies described by Jacoby.

On the very other end of the spectrum is the case of Sally Jones, a UK citizen who travelled to join the Islamic State. Jones is difficult to see as a victim in any sense: she was originally married to Juneid Hussein, an ISIL propagandist and recruiter. Jones herself is believed to have recruited hundreds of women to join the terrorist organization. Upon Hussein’s death in an airstrike, Jones stated that he was killed by the greatest enemy of Islam (the United States), and that he was a good role model for her son. Jones was also reported to have trained all European female recruits in tactics including suicide missions. Following the death of her husband, Jones led the female wing of the Anwar al-Awlaki battalion. The battalion was formed by her late husband with the sole purpose of planning and executing attacks in the west. She is believed to be the only woman with an overt, stated leadership role in the terrorist group. Sally Jones demonstrates a clear instance of a woman joining the group of her own volition, and not only engaging in terrorist activity, but also victimizing other women through their recruitment into the terrorist organization. Clearly, the dynamics of terrorist recruitment and women’s agency in that recruitment is complex; it is important to resist the urge to consider them all as victims or as terrorists, a dynamic illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Spectrum of Agency & Victimization in Female ISIL Members

One of the many ways in which the Islamic State is unique is in its ability to hold territory, a factor that impacted the recruitment of women because it opened up new roles for them, outside

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the roles that an insurgent group would normally be able to offer. Through this territory women became mothers, wives, and perhaps also fighters in the Islamic State. This abundance of roles may have made joining the organization more appealing than it would have been had the group been a land-less insurgency. In that case, the ability of women to become involved becomes limited to more operational or combat roles, roles that most terrorist groups in a modern context generally try to avoid for women.

As the Islamic State continues to lose territory, it is likely to revert to its roots: those of the insurgent-style Al Qaeda in Iraq, in order to continue to pursue its ideological and political objectives. As such, the roles of women in ISIL are likely to be constrained to the usual roles of women within terrorist organizations. These can include wives of fighters, mothers to the next generation of jihadi children, but also fighters and suicide bombers. From a recruitment perspective, this means that women who might have been attracted to other roles within the group may not find a place for themselves. On the other hand, women who are attracted to the more kinetic aspects of a terrorist group may find this an appealing time to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.

The case of the missing female bomber

According to numerous sources, many of the women in ISIL dream about carrying out attacks, be they in Syria, Iraq, or in their country of origin. Some of them carry kalashnikovs and wear suicide belts, and at night, they plot out scenarios together. According to the returnees interviews by David Thomson, all the women in ISIL want to fight. In fact, ISIL may have actively encouraged women to train as female suicide bombers. ISIL has established the Al-Zawra school; the school provides education and training for women, including in explosive belts and suicide bombings as well as domestic work, first aid, Islam and Sharia law, social media and computer programs. There are also other sporadic media reports of women being trained as suicide bombers for ISIL. For instance, in October 2016, news reports surfaced of a woman thought to be responsible for recruiting female suicide bombers. She was reported to have fled with another ISIL member (a man responsible for ISIL finances in some capacity), taking millions of dollars with them. Given the difficulty of collecting information in Syria and Iraq, it is difficult to judge the veracity of these claims. While it is possible that the group has trained women in operational roles, these reports could be ISIL information operations / propaganda disseminated to confuse counter-terrorism practitioners, or to encourage women to join the cause.

While the evidence was relatively scarce, Winter, Margolin and al-Tamimi effectively demonstrated that ISIL propaganda has shifted, and now supports the concept of the female suicide bomber due in large part to the group’s shift to a defensive posture. While women have tradi-

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38 THOMSON, 180-1

39 KEHLGHAT-DOOST

tionally been discouraged from participating in jihad, this shifted in the 1980s when the concept of defensive jihad became acceptable for women. Further, the Islamic State has also referred to women engaging in combat operations in its internal documents and celebrated their actions, and that there was no evidence of an explicit and outright prohibition on women in combat.

Evidence of ISIL using women as suicide bombers or operations is scarce, and Cottee & Bloom are right to point out that the sources that allege these actions by the group are not always known for their accuracy. The Islamic State is believed to have conducted at least 6 suicide bombings using women since 2016 in Iraq and Syria, and their use of women in suicide operations dates back to 2015 in Turkey. Austrian media has also reported that of the women from Austria who travelled to join ISIL, 13 had returned home, and 44 were killed in Syria. Of those 44, some had carried out suicide bombings and other combat duties, while others married fighters. These reports indicate a variety of sources saying the same general thing: that women have been used by the Islamic State in terrorist operations. However, none of these reports demonstrate widespread use of women in combat operations, and in the last days of the Caliphate (late 2017), there have not been any new female suicide bombing attacks.

According to one former ISIL member interviewed prior to 2016, women will be granted permission to engage in combat or operational roles soon as a result of the reduction in new male recruits and the losses that the group has suffered. This shortage of “manpower” is occurring because the borders are increasingly closed, many are being arrested at the border or the airport, and lots of men are dying. ISIL propaganda has outlined a role for women in combat operations, specifically citing the need for defensive jihad in the former Caliphate.

Indeed, most terrorist groups employ women in operational roles for similar reasons. They do so because of a variety of factors, including:


42 AL-TAMIMI, Aymenn Jawad, ISIS’s Female Suicide Bombers Are No Myth, Foreign Affairs, September 22, 2017

43 COTTEE, Simon and Mia BLOOM, The Myth of the ISIS Female Suicide Bomber, The Atlantic, September 8, 2017

44 According to the author’s dataset, which consists of over four hundred terrorist incidents derived from media reports, articles, and books. These incidents are defined as events, attacks (successful or failed), or descriptions of women’s involvement in terrorism. The first instance in the database dates from 1968, while the most recent is from 2017. The dataset also includes 345 successful terrorist attacks perpetrated by women, ranging from hijackings to suicide attacks in a variety of conflict zones. Each incident is fully sourced, and whenever possible, corroborated by multiple sources. The dataset includes the data of the attack, age of the attacker, group affiliation, number of individuals killed and injured in the incident, as well as its location, and many more characteristics of both the event-instance and the women involved.


46 THOMSON, 181
• “desire or need for increased media attention
• group outbidding or a requirement to differentiate themselves from other groups
• a tactical requirement to penetrate hardened targets
• a literal lack of “manpower” available to the terrorist organization (recruitment pressures)
• pressure from women to be incorporated into the struggle”\(^\text{47}\)

Many of these factors exist for ISIL, while at the same time, the factors that may restrict the use of women are much less apparent. Most terrorist groups in a similar position to ISIL have employed women in significantly greater numbers in operational roles. Comparatively speaking, a more fundamental question remains: where are all the female bombers?

\textit{The appeal of ISIL extends beyond the Caliphate}

Around the world, ISIL’s ideology and brand has resonated with female adherents. Women have been involved in 28 plots or terrorist activity in support of ISIL. Seven of those plots led to attacks that have taken place in Turkey, France, Germany, the United States, and Kenya. In the United States, Tashfeen Malik participated in an active shooting attack in San Bernardino, California in 2015 (ISIL claimed that she and her husband were supporters)\(^\text{48}\) while France has seen a number of stabbings relating to the Islamic State and its ideology. For instance, in 2016 Ines Madani stabbed a police officer during her arrest for a gas canister attack attempt in Paris that also involved two other women.\(^\text{49}\)

Some of the plots in which women have been implicated have been thwarted, including planned or attempted terrorist attacks in Canada, Australia, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Many of these incidents have involved individuals being arrested relatively early in their plotting process or low sophistication attacks, such as attempted stabbings. A significant plot was also disrupted in Morocco, in which ten women were planning a suicide attack on election day.\(^\text{51}\) In other instances, women have been arrested on financing and material support charges.\(^\text{52}\) While the numbers are not high, women in Europe, North America and

\(^{47}\) DAVIS, Women in Modern Terrorism, 135


beyond have worked to support ISIL, and in some instances have sought to conduct attacks on their behalf. There is likely no lack of women who would be interested in conducting a suicide bombing on behalf of ISIL in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere.

Previous research has demonstrated that when a terrorist group faces a challenge to its existence, it is significantly more likely to use female suicide bombers. This is true for a number of reasons: women can help the group achieve strategic surprise, access to hard to reach places, evade detection more easily, and shame men into participating in the cause.\(^{53}\) This raises an interesting question, given the shift in ISIL’s fortunes over the last year: if there is a female wing of the Anwar al-Awlaki battalion, why have there been so few attacks in Syria and Iraq, or by women in the west? It remains possible that these groups did exist, but the members were killed during the heavy fighting and bombings of 2016-2017. Alternatively, these groups may have been fictitious, meant to encourage recruitment while also serving as an information operations campaign against the group’s enemies. Alternatively, it is also possible that the groups / women exist, but ISIL has not yet determined that it is in the final stages of its existence, and therefore will not deploy women yet.

The Islamic State shifted from a state-based terrorist group to an insurgency throughout the fall of 2017. This shift was reflected in the group’s propaganda: Al Naba drew a parallel between where ISIL is today and where its predecessor, AQI, was heading into 2008, following the intense battles of 2006 and 2007. Indeed, in March 2008, AQI shifted its tactics from fighting combat operations and trying to seize and hold territory to using improvised explosive devices and hit and run tactics,\(^{54}\) the hallmark of insurgencies worldwide. That same year marked a significant increase in the number of suicide attacks perpetrated by women on behalf of AQI.\(^{55}\) Extending these parallels, a wave of female suicide bombings by ISIL may yet emerge. This is only likely to take place once ISIL has firmly established its insurgency. Many, if not all of the conditions exist for ISIL to engage in a significant number of female suicide bombings; to do otherwise would indeed novel for this terrorist group.

- suicide bombings
- what we can expect from female returnees

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\(^{53}\) DAVIS, Women in Modern Terrorism, 122-123


\(^{55}\) DAVIS, Women in Modern Terrorism, 120