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## Beyond Good and Evil - An examination of Women joining 'Islamic State'

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### Introduction

The spectacular ambitions of the Islamic State (IS) came to an end in October 2017 when, after weeks of street-to-street battles and bombings, the final strongholds in Raqqa fell to Kurdish fighters.<sup>1</sup> More than three years after IS surged to global notoriety with a spectacular campaign of conquest, the end came with a whimper, not a bang. Following the organization's demise, the US-backed Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) forces in Syria captured thousands of its remaining fighters and supporters, with many occupying camps such as the famous Al-Hol refugee camp. Though once effective to initially detain and process IS-affiliated persons, the camps now hold an estimated 20,000 women and 50,000 children from the former IS 'Caliphate'. Across Europe, governments are wrestling with how to deal with the dilemma of repatriation - a problem of astonishing complexity, traversing everything from evidential requirements for terrorism prosecutions to appeals of humane treatment of their citizens. The challenging, albeit highly remarkable aspect of the phenomenon lies in unprecedented number of Western women who have travelled to the so-called Caliphate, and the extent to which they can be held accountable for participating in terrorism acts.

Since its inception, IS has been successfully recruiting women across national and ideological lines to undertake key positions in order to advance the terrorist organization's goals.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of women joining IS has proven to be a highly contentious issue that has received widespread attention. Despite holding the reputation of being amongst the world's worst perpetrators of gender-based violence<sup>3</sup>, displaying incredible inhumanity towards women, many flocked to its ranks in Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, due to traditional perceptions that women do not participate in violent extremism nor are perpetrators of terrorist actions, women have generally been overlooked in this context by law enforcement as well as academic research. In the same vein, female participation in IS has been disturbingly reductionist in terms of their roles, whereby women have been either labeled as passive victims or purely subsidiary supporters of male guardians with insignificant influence. This approach not only overlooks the multiplicity of roles played by women to enlarge IS' ideological and operational agenda, but also completely disregards the meticulous

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<sup>1</sup> Burke, Jason. "Rise and fall of ISIS: its dream of a caliphate is over, so now what?" *The Guardian*, 21 October 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/21/isis-caliphate-islamic-state-raqqa-iraq-islamist>

<sup>2</sup> The Carter Center. "The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda." May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer, Amanda N. "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016): 74-98.

radicalization and recruitment strategies behind the phenomenon. If female recruits are simply viewed as a monolithic entity, characterized solely by their relation to male relatives, little emphasis is given to the manner in which they are indoctrinated and recruited, and the extent to which they are involved within the organization.

This paper presents an examination of the phenomenon of women joining IS; it provides a detailed analysis of the complex tactics implemented by IS for the purpose of radicalizing and recruiting women into its ranks – however, the paper equally acknowledges women’s agency insofar as to holding various positions within the organization as a result of their own willingness and determination. The paper begins by highlighting the largely disregarded phenomenon of female participation in extremist violence, further drawing attention to the history of *‘female Jihadism’*. Thereafter, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of the various recruitment narratives used by IS in order to attract new female recruits, underlining the disguised offer of female empowerment that IS offers to its audience. This is followed by an examination of the various roles that women have taken up, and been assigned, while present in the so-called Caliphate. Yet, the disillusionment of gender equity has been broken for many as a result of IS’ brutal treatment of women, thereby raising the question over what Western governments ought to do with their female nationals, now residing in inhumane conditions in refugee camps. The argument put forward in this paper is that despite offering a vision of female empowerment, IS’ dialogue is essentially grounded on highly patriarchal norms and ultimately accords little agency to females. By romanticizing the life of women in the Caliphate, IS has succeeded in manipulating and recruiting more women than any of its Jihadist predecessors. However, this paper contends that women should not be perceived as mere victims of IS; instead, it is necessary to hold them accountable on the basis of their roles within the outfit, especially in the context of current repatriation efforts conducted by Western governments.

### [Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective](#)

Historically, there are numerous examples of women involved in terrorism and violent extremist organizations – from the People’s Will and the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, to the suicide bombers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Black Widows of Chechnya.<sup>4</sup> Despite traditional perceptions that women do not participate in violent extremism nor are perpetrators of terrorist acts, evidence suggests that during moments of heightened conflict, women have willingly joined terrorist organizations, fought for what they believed, and suffered the consequences of involvement similar to their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup> However, the aforementioned examples have mostly sought to obtain either political and social goals,

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<sup>4</sup> Bhattacharya, Srobana. “Gender, insurgency, and terrorism: introduction to the special issue.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30 (2019): 1078-1086.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer, Amanda N. “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 9, no. 3 (2016): 76.

whereas religiously fueled Jihadist groups have been less enthusiastic in visibly incorporating women into their agenda.

Classical Islamic literature, in the words of Seran de Leede, Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at the Hague, does not provide for one particular reading of what *'permissible'* roles are for women in Jihad.<sup>6</sup> During the early Islamic battles that took place throughout the seventh century, women predominantly took care of wounded fighters, brought food and water to the battlefield and encouraged their (male) family members to support and join the struggle. Yet, classical Islamic texts also refer to women who fought in the early years of Islam; for example, Umm Umarah defended the Prophet in the battle of Uhud.<sup>7</sup> While women were never commanded by Prophet Mohammed to fight, it is said he praised them for their sacrifice and bravery. Similarly, contemporary prominent Jihadist ideologues and clerics are equivocal vis-à-vis acceptable roles for women in Jihad. Whilst they tend to honor women in history who fought to defend Islam, clerics have rarely explicitly encouraged women to take part in hostilities.<sup>8</sup>

Most Islamist extremist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and Hamas, have defined the responsibilities of women to simply provide moral and logistical support. Predominantly, women have been ascribed supportive and facilitative roles, acting as principal actors in the *'vertical transmission'* of family morals and values.<sup>9</sup> *"Women were to remain hidden and veiled and play background positions, only authorized to pass on family traditions and systematically restructure, repackage, and recycle cultural traits"*<sup>10</sup>. So far, only organizations such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Boko Haram have allowed women in militant positions on a significant scale, mostly as suicide operatives.

In the contemporary operating environment, terrorist organizations are increasingly implementing women to achieve their political or ideological objectives.<sup>11</sup> The Islamic State is no exception. When the declaration of the so-called Caliphate was announced in 2014, IS developed a unique Jihadist strategy that immediately recognized the importance of bringing women more actively into propaganda and recruitment efforts. Alike other terrorist organizations operating in the contemporary era, IS perceives female participants as an untouched resource and is progressively eager to make concessions in its ideology to lure women into its ranks.<sup>12</sup> Some have contended that the presence of women evolved into a

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<sup>6</sup> De Leede, Seran. "Women in Jihad: A Historical perspective." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*. 3 September 2018, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Farhana, Oazi. "The Mujahidaat, Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam", in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, ed. Laura Sjoberg & C.E. Gentry (Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 36.

<sup>8</sup> De Leede, Seran. "Women in Jihad: A Historical perspective." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*. 3 September 2018, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Byrd, Winn and Decker Gretchen. "Why the U.S. Should Gender Its Counterterrorism Strategy," *Military Review*, (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Spencer, Amanda N. "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 9, no. 3 (2016): 76.

<sup>11</sup> Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Marne L. Suttan. "The Rise of the Importance of Women in Terrorism and the Need to Reform Counterterrorism Strategy", *Unites States Army Command and General Staff College*, (2009): 17.

strategic advantage for IS, chiefly due to the sensational, international media attention devoted to *'female Jihadism'*.<sup>13</sup> Morbidly fascinated by the roles that women held within the terrorist outfit, foreign media outlets devoted a significant amount of attention to the phenomenon, eventually resulting in a new wave of potential recruits becoming aware of the ideological cause. Cognizant of the important tool that suddenly was at its disposition, IS began to vigorously exploit women not only for propaganda purposes<sup>14</sup>, but also to occupy central roles for its state-building goals. Employment of women became a critical strategic technique for IS, whereby the outfit undertook increasing efforts into attracting more women to join its ideological cause.

Considering this, it is therefore somewhat unsurprising that when mentioned, women continue to be depicted as victims of radicalization or passive bystanders in times of hostilities. An empirical study conducted in Germany, France, United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Canada during 2017 concluded that although the same factors largely contributed to men and women's radicalization and subsequent joining of IS, a gender bias was evident on a social level regarding the belief about the factors behind male and female radicalization.<sup>15</sup> Women's agency and ideological commitment to the terrorist organization was largely questioned or doubted, whereby the general narrative considered women as innocent and vulnerable victims of radicalization. The study suggested that society tends to perceive women who join IS as naïve, who have been groomed to join the terrorist outfit. For many, it is difficult to understand how an organization like IS, fundamentally misogynistic and patriarchal in nature, has succeeded in appealing and recruiting a significant number of women from various national and cultural backgrounds.<sup>16</sup> Terrorism remains perceived as a largely male-dominated phenomenon whereby little to no individual agency is ascribed to women. This perception is clearly manifested in the manner in which women who have traveled to IS-controlled territory and Iraq and Syria are referred to in the mainstream discourse notably as *'Jihadi brides'*, *'muhajirat'*, or *'female IS affiliates'*, but not as *'foreign terrorist fighters'*. The problem with such wordings is that women are potentially stripped from their agency and furthermore this may bear severe ramifications on the responsibility of their own actions.

### **Misuse of Islam, Propaganda and Recruitment Strategies**

As is the case with several religious extremist organizations, IS has attempted to misuse religion – specifically Islam - in order to advance its own strategic objectives. The publication of the *"The Bible of Jihadists"*, written by IS ideologue Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir in 2018, attempts to legitimize the barbarous acts of the terrorist organization with 'twisted'

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<sup>13</sup> Spencer, Amanda N. "The Hidden Fact of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2006): 78.

<sup>14</sup> Gardner, Frank. "The Crucial Role of Women within Islamic State." *BBC News*, August 20, 2015, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33985441>

<sup>15</sup> Pearson, Elizabeth and Winterbotham, Emily. "Women, Gender and Daesh." *The RUSI Journal* 162, (2017): 3.

<sup>16</sup> The Carter Center. "The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda." May 2017.

interpretation of Islamic teachings.<sup>17</sup> The *Fiqh al-Dima (The Jurisprudence of Blood)* provides a theoretical and legal framework to attempt to justify the use of weapons of mass destruction, perpetrating genocide, the murder of non-combatants, and the taking of sex slaves and hostages. Sheikh Salah al-Ansari, a senior Quilliam researcher who translated the manual from Arabic and wrote a theological rebuttal to the manual, said there is no religious requirement to “fight to the death” and that the Islamic tradition of warfare encouraged the humane treatment of prisoners of war. “Our work comprehensively debunks and rejects ISIS’s proto-Islamic arguments, demonstrating their ignorance and disregard for traditional Islamic scholarship as well as for the basic humane and Islamic values of mercy and compassion”.<sup>18</sup> Despite the religious legitimacy that IS so desperately seeks, Muslims scholars have widely used the Qur’an, and Islamic teachings and references for acts prohibited by Islamic warfare, ethnic and Islamic morality, to rebut justifications presented by IS.<sup>19</sup>

This misappropriation of Islam has been significantly visible not only on the operational level, but equally in the propaganda deployed by IS. In the course of the past few years, IS has become notorious for its ability to utilize and weaponize modern technology to its favor. Albeit the recorded brutalities perpetrated by the terrorist outfit, the intriguing element lies in the organization’s ability to create an empathic quality and a sense of understanding in its propaganda strategies that serves to encourage potential recruits to join. The manner in which men and women process and respond to recruitment narratives depends on both the circumstances in which the individual finds themselves in, but perhaps more importantly, the resonating power of the propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Primarily, the reasons for why both men and women join violent extremist groups are multidimensional, complex and contextually dependent. Cognizant of this, IS “expertly customizes its propaganda to offer a political and social vision that directly addresses the pressing needs of its intended audience”.<sup>21</sup>

For local and regional recruitment, IS exploits people’s intensified disillusionment with their national governments. Just like men, women living in Middle East and North African countries face a range of challenges such as lack of employment, poor governance, limited access to basic services, and political oppression and insecurity. Such conditions predispose them to IS’ idealistic representations of a well-required “State” that offers a higher standard of living and promises conveniences that specially cater to the needs of women. IS demonstrates, through

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<sup>17</sup> Townsend, Mark. “The Core Isis manual that twisted Islam to legitimize barbarity.” *The Guardian*, 13 may 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/12/isis-jihadist-manual-analysed-rebutted-by-islamic-scholar>

<sup>18</sup> Townsend, Mark. “The Core Isis manual that twisted Islam to legitimize barbarity.” *The Guardian*, 13 may 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/12/isis-jihadist-manual-analysed-rebutted-by-islamic-scholar>

<sup>19</sup> “Muslim Scholars Release Open Letter to Islamic State Meticulously Blasting Ideology.” *Huffpost*, 24 September 2014. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/muslim-scholars-islamic-state\\_n\\_5878038?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAALFoJns\\_fr7L3UkjmIvNROwjaOuN18RwgqzFLE2rrK64-1t6IIQLklnDMvE9wk6YqMpkMNE6xjBiO8FJ-6XECRRBsOlxJD-4NSZWNW0ZRmTcAH2HCmG\\_-jYFqFtnirs5RJp9hgy3v1Llh84fgDabFrta5Oa0FQc6hI9ECSVmqlTt](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/muslim-scholars-islamic-state_n_5878038?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALFoJns_fr7L3UkjmIvNROwjaOuN18RwgqzFLE2rrK64-1t6IIQLklnDMvE9wk6YqMpkMNE6xjBiO8FJ-6XECRRBsOlxJD-4NSZWNW0ZRmTcAH2HCmG_-jYFqFtnirs5RJp9hgy3v1Llh84fgDabFrta5Oa0FQc6hI9ECSVmqlTt)

<sup>20</sup> The Carter Center. “The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda.” May 2017.

<sup>21</sup> The Carter Center. “The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda.” May 2017.

the voices of its female members, that it comprehends the structural challenges that led to disproportionate effects of poverty and injustice on women and is incessantly engaged in offering them a *'new meaningful life'* in a *'better society'*.

While security and prosperity are imperative factors in recruiting women to IS, the chance to contribute in a struggle for a higher cause seemingly appeals to many women. Studies suggest that several female recruits, from both Western and Muslim-majority countries, sympathize with and respond to the emotionally charged appeal of IS' narrative of the humiliation faced by the global *Ummah* (Muslim community)<sup>22</sup>. This dialogue portrays Muslims, and especially female Sunni Muslims, as the victims of the West's current aggression and tyranny, further citing historical injustices such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, in order to validate these claims. A report published by Europol concluded that a third of *al-Naba* issues, including half of the *Dabiq* issues, insinuated in one way or another that IS intended to protect Sunni women from the hands of Shia Muslims, Western *'crusaders'*, or national armed forces.<sup>23</sup> In a similar tone, another predominant narrative is that the underlying motives of the West lies in spreading its ungodliness in order to dismantle the purity of Muslim women. Indeed, IS perceives that the West is to blame for breaking societal foundations with the overlap and mixture of gender roles, whereby the encouragement of women to hold prominent positions that are rightfully intended for men, has resulted in the West abandoning responsibilities for family.<sup>24</sup> As a solution, IS offers women an escape from the insensitive commands of Western feminism and the opportunity to become virtuous yet instrumental actors in the so-called Caliphate.

Sentiments of estrangement and alienation from one's national and cultural heritage serve as push factors for many women to join the so-called Caliphate. Especially young girls who have grown up in Western countries may struggle to reconcile with their religious and national identities and are sometimes more vulnerable to discrimination based on present feelings of Islamophobia. This may potentially contribute to social isolation and anger vis-à-vis one's current society wherefore the individual is more prone to violent extremist propaganda. Aware of these frustrations, IS systematically exploits the situation in which young women find themselves in by repeatedly raising the notion of sisterhood and shared community by asserting *"You [Muslim sisters] are of us, and we of you"*<sup>25</sup>. This creates the allusion of belonging to a community, which may further serve as a push factor for several women and girls to make *hijra* to the so-called Caliphate.

Moreover, by portraying Western feminism as an exclusionary model of liberation for elite white women at the expense of women coming from minority groups, IS offers an alternative vision for female liberation and empowerment. This is notably a manifestation of IS' use of

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<sup>22</sup> The Carter Center. "The Women in Daesh: Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda." May 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Europol. *Women in Islamic State propaganda: Roles and Incentives*. Europol Specialist Reporting (2019), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Bloom, Mia and Winter, Charlie. "The Women of ISIL," *Politico*, 7 December 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Bloom, Mia and Winter, Charlie. "The Women of ISIL," *Politico*, 7 December 2015.

gendered<sup>26</sup> dynamics, motivations and strategies for mobilization and operation.<sup>27</sup> Gender stereotypical conceptions normally relegate women as sensitive, nurturing and submissive by nature, while men are perceived as strong, independent and dominant. IS propaganda suggests that the Prophet's ordained purpose for pure Muslim women is to support the *Ummah* by being a good wife and nurturing the following generation.<sup>28</sup> IS emphasizes that by embracing their 'natural roles' as child-bearing, child-rearing and care-giving, women are closer to their traditional gender roles as it is beneficial for the in-group and further serves as something that empowers women. This challenges the victimization of women within violent extremist organization by emphasizing personal autonomy. This decorative conception of gender equality appears to strike a chord with several women who do not adhere to, or feel marginalized by, Western ideals of female empowerment.

IS appeals to women's desires for agency in state-building, adventure and a sense of community. During the inception phase of IS, some women saw a chance to take part in the state-building process and to participate in the creation of a new society that would be built in contrast to the "*decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which has no respect for women*"<sup>29</sup>. The content of social media posts ranges from idealized descriptions of daily life, to Qur'anic verses, to glorifications of martyrdom, to practical advice regarding what women should and should not bring with them when making the journey to Syria.<sup>30</sup> Photos of food and sunsets, as well as selfies, stand in stark contrast to photos of themselves with weapons and images of decapitated bodies. These narratives are disguised so as to support self-empowerment of Muslim women through glorifying IS while simultaneously depicting the vicious maltreatment of IS prisoners.

IS' rhetoric appears to suggest a great level of respect for women's input and involvement in the so-called Caliphate, reaffirming that female Muslims who feel isolated in Western countries are in fact validated in the terrorist outfit. Women serve as supporters of the cause and motivation for men to fight, partly through glorification and justification of the use of violence in the name of Islam. Yet, the rhetorical power of such narratives is visibly potent, especially for females who undergo discrimination and feelings of isolation in their home countries. Women may also believe that they will enjoy greater agency in IS society than their

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<sup>26</sup> Gender is a culturally based concept that separates social and biological sex. It refers to the different roles of individuals assigned to them by society based on their biological sex at birth. The definition of gender may differ depending on the social and cultural context. The key element is that the constructed and context-dependent differences between femininity and masculinity changes over times, both within and between cultures. See, for example, Tengroth and Lindvall, 2015. 'IHL and Gender- Swedish Experiences', *Swedish Red Cross*.

<sup>27</sup> Van Leuven, Dallin and Gordon, Rachel. "Analyzing the Recruitment and Use of Foreign Men and Women in ISIL through a Gender Perspective." *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, 28 February 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Islamic State. "*Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khansaa Brigade*," Charlie Winter (translation) (London: Quilliam Foundation: 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Mark, Tran. "Police stop plane at Heathrow 'to prevent 15-year-old girl flying to Syria'" *The Guardian* , 14 December 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/dec/17/police-stop-plane-heathrow-girl-syria>

<sup>30</sup> Buner, Elizabeth. "Doing Our Part: Acknowledging and Addressing Women's Contributions to ISIS." *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice* 22, no. 2 (2016), 419-451.

own because their domestic roles will be valued, appreciated and even viewed as an imperative part of state-building.

It would, however, be naïve to assume that all women are simply ‘lured’ into the so-called Caliphate on the basis of glorified narratives and false depictions of romance and adventure. Whereas some women are arguably manipulated into joining IS, others have travelled out of their free will to take part and contribute to the outfit’s state-building objectives. This is visibly clear in the multitude of roles that women occupy, or have occupied, within the IS; as explained in the following section, females are notably ascribed roles as mothers and wives, although sometimes take on occupational roles such as recruiters, propagandists and allegedly even as fighters.

### **Female Roles under Islamic State**

Based on analysis of IS propaganda material, it is evident that IS chiefly relies on traditional gender roles to attract and lure Muslim women living in the West to move to the so-called Caliphate. As previously clarified, IS acts as an emphatic listener to those females feeling isolated in their own country, thereupon promising women a better life inside the ‘Caliphate’. The fact that Muslim women have left the West to join IS illustrates that they perceive the terrorist organization’s ideology as superior to the Western worldview, thus reinforcing the notion of individual agency and determination.

Little is known with certainty about the life and roles of women within the so-called Caliphate of IS. The assigned duties and activities of women within the organization has been largely debated between scholars, experts and government officials.<sup>31</sup> As of late, the demise of IS has provided an increased number of interviews with women who claim they have been operating inside IS - allowing an in-sight into their positions – whereas previously the main source for understanding the life of women was primarily the availability of social media. Nevertheless, either these accounts can rarely be verified. This section focuses on what has been found by previous research about the viewed general function of women within IS, not the actual reality of life of women within the so-called Caliphate as this is challenging to substantiate. However, by examining how the role of women is portrayed through official IS-propaganda and social media accounts from what is perceived to be women living within IS territory, conclusions can be drawn about the realities, activities and purpose of women within the terrorist organization.

### ***Mothers and Wives***

The issue of women’s roles in IS was first brought up in early 2015, when an organization purporting to be the media wing of IS’ all-female al-Khansaa Brigade published a 10,000-word manifesto which delineated the ideal role of women within the Caliphate. The document made extensive explanations on what women were and were not permitted to do while living in the so-called Islamic State. One of the most cited roles for women in the manifesto is that

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<sup>31</sup> Hoyle, Carolyn and Frenett, Ross. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, January 2015.



of mother and wife; emphasis is placed on traditional female roles, namely childbirth and motherhood, and therefore producers of “*lion cubs*” as women bring forth the next generation of fighters. Acknowledging that one of IS’ major objectives is to establish an intergenerational culture of violence and religious fundamentalism that can survive any potential-territorial loss, mothers are mostly assigned the task of instilling a love for *Jihad* in their offspring. Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah clarifies how a woman is to prepare her children for the moral as well as physical fight against the enemies of Islam: “*You are in Jihad when you ... succeed in raising a generation that sees honor in the pages of the Quran and the muzzle of a rifle*”<sup>32</sup>. Women are repeatedly encouraged to motivate their sons and husbands to fight and shame them if they do not comply.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the opportunity for procreation and sustainability, ‘mothers’ of IS can help project an image of a well-developed society that functions.

### **Operational Roles**

The manifesto published by the all-female al-Khansaa brigade did note, however, that there are some exceptions to the ‘*fundamental role*’ as wives and child-bearers; women can occupy the role of religious scholars, teachers or nurses. A report published by Europol argues the reason to why the nature and roles of women within the Islamic State have broadened – such as spanning media, conducting moral political roles, and actively participating in the health and education sectors – is mostly the result of IS’ objective to establish a functional State which would be unachievable without important contribution by women. Perhaps the most interesting is the formation and activities undertaken by the all-female al-Khansaa brigade; formed in 2014, executed activities in intelligence gathering, law enforcement, overseeing slaves, and recruiting. As the women’s religious police, al-Khansaa monitored women in the IS territories, ensuring that they adhered to the extremist group’s ruling, - and punishing violators. Female recruits in the unit allegedly flogged, imprisoned, and publicly punished individuals in iron cages. They also enforced attendance of mandatory sharia lessons and reportedly collected fines.<sup>34</sup> Accounts point to punishments that directly mutilated women’s bodies, such as the use of metal biters, to deter violators of IS’ ideology.

### **Woman in combat**

A topic which has been fiercely debated among scholars as well as Jihadist communities for years, is the extent to which women within the so-called Caliphate have and/or should participate in *Jihad* by carrying weapons and engaging in armed conflict. Nelly Lahoud, senior fellow in New America’s International Security program, states that the ideological literature of Jihad largely excludes women from waging Jihad in the public sphere. Yet, whereas Jihadis have generally coalesced around the perception that women should not engage in combat, the classical doctrine of defensive Jihad, *Jihad al-daf*, oblige every Muslim – men, women and

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<sup>32</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah. “A Jihad without fight” *Dabiq* 11, 9 September 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Europol. *Women in Islamic State propaganda: Roles and Incentives*. Europol Specialist Reporting (2019), 20.

<sup>34</sup> Hanoush, Feras. “The Risks of ignoring former ISIS women members.” Atlantic Council, 2019.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-risks-of-ignoring-former-isis-women-members/>

children alike – to use violence in defense when their faith and territory are under attack.<sup>35</sup> Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed in June 2006), the founder and leader of IS' predecessor outfit Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), was not hesitant about the possibility of women contributing to Jihad through means of suicide-bombing.<sup>36</sup>

Although IS initially was reluctant to accept women in fighting positions, several scholars have argued that IS' position vis-à-vis women in combat witnessed an abrupt U-turn – from prohibition to encouragement – when faced with territorial losses and imminent military defeat. Throughout most of IS 'Caliphate' years, battlefield operations were almost strictly attributed solely to men. IS repeatedly refused requests and calls put forth by female supporters regarding engagement in fighting, and instead redirected them to the aforementioned auxiliary roles. However, the most salient turning point occurred in October 2017, when IS publicly called for women to participate in Jihad. Evidence of women being publicly called to participate in combat can be traced back to July 2017, when a video was published of a woman carrying a baby, observed to be a civilian fleeing from the IS-held city of Mosul, but instead acting as a suicide-bomber by detonating the bomb when in range of Iraqi military forces. Debates continue to ensue as to whether this represents a dawning of gender equity and female empowerment within the organization or whether IS purely responded to tactical necessity.<sup>37</sup> Gina Vale, Research Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization based at King's College London, notes that although women were granted the '*right to fight*', IS' justification was framed in highly gendered terms that emphasized a woman's purity and faith, and the importance of seeking revenge for her religion and the honor of her sisters.<sup>38</sup> The use of violence is thus legitimized through the defense of the group's collective honor, further serving as a means to shame men into action.

### The Reality for Women under the so-called Caliphate

As previously established, IS' narratives offered a welcomed sense of belonging to those who had felt isolated in their home countries, further attributing roles in accordance with '*Islamic*' principles such as good wives and mothers. Women would serve as supporters of the cause and as motivation for men to fight, partly through the glorification and justification of the use of violence in the name of Islam. But despite the conclusions that have been drawn based on IS-propaganda and social media, the reality for many women under the so-called Caliphate might have been very different. Following the demise of IS, access to women who had previously lived in IS-controlled territories has enabled the execution of documentaries and interviews which point to a distinctive different reality to that of what IS has sought to portray to the international community.

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<sup>35</sup> Winter, Charlie. "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention." Global Institute, 13 September 2018. <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>

<sup>36</sup> Bryson, Rachel. "The Complex Challenge of Female ISIS Returnees." Global Institute, 7 March 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Vale, Gina "Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 2019: 5.

<sup>38</sup> Vale, Gina "Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 2019: 5.

At the peak of governance over its proto-State, IS attempted to control all aspects of life within its territory. Ideologically justified through its incorrect interpretation of Sharia law, the groups influence in both the public and private spheres resulted in disproportionate regulation of women's lives. At the center of its rules were a set of gendered norms and expectations that highlighted its vision of womanhood, embodied by purity, chastity, and modesty. Most prominently, this was manifested in a series of dress and behavioral codes designated to protect a woman's honor and end "*debauchery resulting from [women's] grooming and overdressing*"<sup>39</sup>. Basic human rights were denied, including freedom of belief, freedom from slavery, freedom of equal protection of the law, freedom of movement, and freedom to consensual marriage.<sup>40</sup> Harsh restrictions on movement and dress were rigorously enforced by religious police, thereby resulting in resentment and despair among the more moderate Muslims within the 'Caliphate'.<sup>41</sup> Recounts of mistreatment by their husbands, torture, sexual violence have also emerged. Violations of these behavioral codes were met with punishments: sentences ranged from lashing for inappropriate attire to death by stoning for adultery.<sup>42</sup>

While some women may have participated in operational tasks such as recruiters, religious police, and as fighters, others faced persecution and abuse which followed by wishes of escaping the tyranny of the 'Caliphate' and its members. The mounting evidence pointing to inhumane treatment and exploitation of women under the so-called Caliphate poses the question as to what extent women can be held accountable for joining IS after they have arguably been misled by glorified propaganda. This question is especially evident across Europe where governments continue to wrestle on how to deal with the dilemma of repatriation of their citizens – currently detained at Kurdish-held refugee camps such as Al-Hol. The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration for northeast Syria is currently holding more than 11,000 foreign women and children related to Islamic State suspects. Several reports have pointed to the appealing and sometimes deadly conditions of these camps, where diseases, malnutrition and isolation prevail. As conditions continue to deteriorate, the inhabitants remain in a limbo – some women have expressed their wish to return to their home countries, but few governments are eager to take them back, fearing in part the risk that unrepentant IS adherents might pose, and that evidence against them might not hold up in court. The following section observes the dilemma in which many Western governments now find themselves in; balancing between international law and the security of their nations, potentially undermined by radicalized IS-returnees.

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<sup>39</sup> Vale, Gina "Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps." *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 2019: 5

<sup>40</sup> Counter Extremism Project Report. "ISIS's Persecution of Women."  
<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-women>

<sup>41</sup> Mahmood, Mona. "Double-layered veils and despair ... women describe life under ISIS." *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves>

<sup>42</sup> Mahmood, Mona. "Double-layered veils and despair ... women describe life under ISIS." *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves>

## Issues of Radicalization and Repatriation

The attitudes of women within the Kurdish-held camps appear to diverge from one another. While some at the camps have expressed regret over their initial departure, others have endeavored to impose their own Caliphate by setting up a radical matriarchy in the refugee camps.<sup>43</sup> A report recently published by The Crises Groups, based on interviews conducted with female detainees at Al-Hol reveals that IS ideology is far from being completely destroyed:

*“[T]he women who hold sway over the foreigner annex cast an outside impression, harassing others who relax their niqabs, throwing stones, shouting abuse and burning down tents. (...) some were combative in conversation and ideologically committed to ISIS or Jihadism more broadly, vacillating between complaining about the harshness of their detention, and embracing it as a divine test for the Caliphate”.*<sup>44</sup>

Many women supported extreme aspects of brutality, as well as hate against their home communities. Western governments acknowledge that many females who joined the IS reported feeling more liberated, not solely because they were allowed to take on more active roles within the organization, but also because they believed that men in IS respected their commitment as Muslims.

So far, the general response of European countries to their detained IS supporters has been shaped by their governments’ determination not to bring them back home. Some governments have taken active steps to prevent individuals from returning by revoking their citizenship, while others have been more lenient with admitting their citizens inside their territories, although followed by immediate prosecution. In particular, legal issues have manifested notably vis-à-vis the handling of IS children, some of which are orphans. Aid workers from Save the Children, one of the largest organizations working with children in the refugee camps, stress that children show signs of deep trauma. Boys tend to be aggressive, whereas girls have faced early marriage and sexual violence.<sup>45</sup> The vast majority of children reside in camps with their mothers, and how the government intends to deal with this is unclear: child separation is illegal without the mother’s agreement and the SDF is adamantly against it, cognizant that left-behind mothers may remain in the camps for several years.

In the act of balancing between national security and international law, States are required to make difficult decisions on whether to repatriate children, and in most cases, both children and their mothers. Whereas some have indeed been relatively, if not fully, aware of the ongoing brutalities within the ‘Caliphate’, many have joined through misapprehension,

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<sup>43</sup> Sancha, Natalia. “ISIS Women impose their own caliphate in Syria’s Al Hol camp.” *El Pais*, 25 October 2019. [https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/10/25/inenglish/1571990542\\_345221.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/10/25/inenglish/1571990542_345221.html)

<sup>44</sup> International Crises Group. “Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS.” 18 November 2019. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/208-women-and-children-first-repatriating-westerners-affiliated-isis>

<sup>45</sup> Loveluck, Louisa and Mekhennet, Souad. “At a sprawling tent camp in Syria, ISIS women impose a brutal rule.” *The Washington Post*, 3 September 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcd14-c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055\\_story.html?arc404=true](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcd14-c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html?arc404=true)

circumstances or coercion. Therefore, not all women and children affiliated with the extremist group are necessarily guilty of committing atrocities – and leaving them to languish in unimaginable conditions is perceived as inhumane by a large part of the international community.

## Conclusion

The complications surrounding detained Western IS supporters stem from the ambiguity of their situation. In a contemporary era where State borders remain essentially important to the operation and application of law, the detainees are suspended in limbo created by the interaction of two territorial entities that both fell short of Statehood. As the Kurdish administration is not a State, Western governments cannot conclude an international agreement with it on how to handle the detainees. Public attitudes, domestic and international law, the probability of successful prosecution, the potential risk to public safety, and humanitarian concerns all influence and complicate policy decisions.

This paper has attempted to elucidate the primary reasons to why women have travelled to the so-called Caliphate, highlighting the various roles which they have occupied within the group, while simultaneously shedding light on the disappointing realities of mistreatment and abuse that many have come to face upon arrival to IS-held territories. Indeed, these are all elements that Western governments ought to consider in order to make meaningful distinctions within the populations residing in Kurdish-controlled camps. It is imperative to separate and assist genuine victims while simultaneously identifying those who remain committed to Jihadist ideologies and preventing them from escaping to new Jihadi fronts or bringing them home where they may pose new threats to the national security of their homeland. Sorting out the fighters and families for repatriation and prosecution and potential incarceration or rehabilitation and re-entry into society are separate processes with different goals. Individual assessments regarding the level of militancy are imperative, whereby it will be easier to differentiate individuals who have travelled to IS with initial disillusionment, from those who continue to uphold commitment to the extremist cause. The objective of this screening would be to move people out of the camps and back to their home countries where they can be formally prosecuted or reintegrated into society according to national policies.

De-radicalization and reintegration are options that deserve special attention. Numerous Western countries – such as Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – have installed prevention or de-radicalization programs, but the challenges involved appear to be more complicated than they had initially anticipated and therefore they are still struggling to refine these efforts.

Although the risks posed by returning active IS supporters cannot be dismissed, Western governments cannot allow for those currently detained to become the next generation of terrorists by failing to reintegrate them or remove them from society.

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