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AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND TERRORISM: PERPETRATORS, VICTIMS, BOTH?

by

ELIZABETH L. MILLER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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Elizabeth L. Miller

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

An Analysis of Women and Terrorism: Perpetrators, Victims, Both?

by

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Advisor: Professor Anna Akasoy

This paper will analyze women's participation in terrorism under groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. It will research the use of violence within terrorist organizations, perpetrated by female participants. What leads women to join groups like the Islamic State? There will be an analysis of the factors that attract women to joining terrorist organizations, in addition to the practices of recruitment that aid in their radicalization. There is a misconception that women who join the Islamic State lack education, which is seen as the sole reasoning for their radicalization or involvement. In reality, several reasons exist leading to their participation. Women knowingly join the organization, and while some actively participate, others seldom understand the magnitude of what it means to be members of the organization.

Although women are in fact perpetrators within the Islamic State, they are often also victims within the organization. I will focus on the Islamic State's manipulation of those women involved with the organization, but also recognize that women's agency exists as they inflict violence. There is growing focus on the examination of the Islamic State's levels of violence, specifically their use of gendered violence regarding women. The Islamic State carries out violence against women in several different ways, including both physical and non-physical. More often, scholars focus on the violence perpetrated outside of their organization. It is

essential to examine both the violence within and outside their organization to fully comprehend the massive violence they perpetrate, including the nonphysical violence

As women are involved within the organization, or outside of the organization, they are often placed into categories, as guilty, or innocent, as victim or perpetrator. I intend to show that these are not mutually exclusive. Women can be categorized as individuals who are perpetrators, but who also experience violence. Associating women's positions with only one of these categories fails to recognize the complexity of their position and experiences within terrorist organizations. Do individuals deem the violence the Islamic State perpetrates against the women inside their organization as a lesser form of violence? Gendered constructs also create the perception that women are more susceptible to violence. I plan to examine the ideas of victim versus perpetrator, as these are not always separate characteristics of women.

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I. Introduction

In today's representation of terrorist networks, the roles of women are often overlooked and women's willingness to join terrorist organizations and participate in violence is questioned. This is seen especially in jihadist militant organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Women are actively joining and carrying out both violent and support roles within terrorist organizations. It is essential to examine the process of women's involvement in terrorism: why they join, how they are recruited, the rationale, and other important components of their radicalization. This paper will examine women's involvement, examining their roles, positions and power. It will highlight women's active agency in implementing violence, and carrying out certain roles and responsibilities for the Islamic State specifically. However, aspects of women's agency and the limitations will be questioned. Although these roles exist for women, what are the power dynamics, and are they monitored and controlled by the authority of males within the group? In order to analyze these limitations, it is essential to discuss the gendered constructs in which individuals perceive and understand violence in general, and more specifically women's contribution. Comparisons will be made by evaluating women involved in two well-known terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Additionally, these prominent organizations will be examined, as their ideologies are not completely compatible when it comes to permissible levels of female participation in violence.

I will argue that women willingly participate in violence and act as perpetrators, they can also be the target of terrorism. Women can be both perpetrators and victims. They have agency in deciding to radicalize, but they also experience limitations in choice once involved. Women involved in the Islamic State especially act as perpetrators but are not free from experiencing the violence from male counterparts within the group.

II. Terminology

What is Violence?

The visibility of women's active participation in terrorism requires an analysis of the broader understanding of violence. What is violence? Is violence always visible? Is it always physical? There is a common tendency to associate violence and its use solely with its physical attributes. According to Merriam-Webster, violence is defined as, "the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy," and, "an instance of violent treatment or procedure."¹ This general definition alludes to violence being understood through action, usually through physical force. The World Health Organization expands upon the more general definition, noting violence is considered, "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation."² This description of violence allows for better examination of different types of violence. Although it specifies that physical force can be used, it broadens the definition showing that it is also use of power, which may not always be physical. This expansion of the definition allows for an examination of what can be considered invisible or nonphysical violence.

In the chapter "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors Involved in Jihadist Radicalization Process and Terrorist Violence," Jesús Pérez Viejo and Ángeles Martínez Boyé³ analyze the World Health Organizations classification and the complexity of violence types

¹ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "violence," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/violence>.

² "Definition and Typology of Violence," *World Health Organization*, November 21, 2011; See also, Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors Involved in Jihadist Radicalization Process and Terrorist Violence," In *Radicalism and Terrorism in the 21st Century: Implications for Security*, 93.

³ For information on the contributors' backgrounds see, "Notes on Contributors," *Radicalism and Terrorism in the 21st Century: Implications for Security*, 317-318. Jesús Pérez Viejo and Ángeles Martínez Boyé both have backgrounds in social work, act as professors, and analyze gendered violence.

further. They describe violence as “an intended behavior destined to obtain domination and control, using force in an explicit or implicit manner with the aim of obtaining from a person or group of people what they do not want to freely consent to do.”⁴ In providing their own description of violence, they recognize that force is evident, but not necessarily always physical force. However, one interesting aspect of their definition highlights the idea of consent. What is considered free consent? Are there limitations? As an examination of women’s place in terrorist organizations, and their relationship with violence occurs, one will see the intricacy surrounding consent, when in the confines of a terrorist organization, like the Islamic State, whether their involvement is willing or unwilling.

In addition to providing a description of violence, the article includes an account of the three types of violence as discussed by the sociologist Johan Galtung.⁵

- Direct Violence, which refers to physical and/or verbal violence, which is the most visible type and the one referred to by most people; it is the one where we can identify victims and also killers.⁶
- Structural violence, which is a part of the social structure and its mechanism. It is easy to identify the victims but not the killers, as the origin is not in specific people.⁷
- Cultural violence refers to the group of values, ideas and convictions used to justify or legitimize structural or direct violence, and is the one that gives the perception of normality in exercise.⁸

It is critical to specify these three types of violence. As noted, direct violence is what most consider when thinking about violence, and the violence of terrorist groups. This direct violence can be seen in terrorist attacks, through suicide bombings, or other physical warfare methods.

The structural violence of terrorist groups, is often seen in manipulation, and exploitation, in

⁴ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors," 93-94.

⁵ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors," 94.

⁶ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors," 94.

⁷ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors," 94.

⁸ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors," 94. The types of violence described in this paper were pulled directly from this source and not rephrased.

addition to sexism and strict permissions of women's place. The cultural violence of groups like the Islamic State, can be seen in their implantation of violence, of how they provide religious and political justifications for it. In terrorist organizations all three forms are utilized. Women participate in this violence as active members of terrorist organizations but also experience this violence as victims. These categories of violence are not rigid, and more often than not, overlap when utilized by groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

What is Terrorism?

In order to examine levels of violence and its relation to women, it is also necessary to provide a clarification of a certain type of violence being evaluated. Terrorism is a well-known form of violence that has garnered major attention during the 21st century.⁹ What is terrorism? What type of violence is terrorism? Like the definition of violence, there are several intricacies surrounding the understanding of terrorism. There is an absence of a universal definition of terrorism, although there are attempts to provide insight. Rushworth Kidder noted that, "terrorism is a phenomenon easier to describe than to define."¹⁰ Kidder also provided further discussion about terrorism from Paul Wilkinson, who noted that the main component of terrorism "is the deliberate attempt to create fear, intensive fear, in order to coerce the wider target into giving in to what the terrorist wants."¹¹ Terrorism is further described as the "unlawful use or threat of violence against persons or property to further political or social objectives."¹² It is usually intended to intimidate or coerce a government, individuals, or groups, or to modify their

⁹ Bruce Riedel, "The Grave New World: Terrorism in the 21st Century."

¹⁰ Rushworth Kidder, "Terrorism- A Term Notoriously Difficult to Pin Down," 8.

¹¹ Rushworth Kidder, "Terrorism- A Term Notoriously Difficult to Pin Down," 8.

¹² Rushworth Kidder, "Terrorism- A Term Notoriously Difficult to Pin Down," 9.

behaviors or policies.”¹³ Acts of terrorism attempt to instill fear in individuals, while the underlying agenda is often politically motivated.

Terrorism is often seen as direct violence, understood only when seen, although there are several other invisible components of the violence types utilized in terrorism. The violence used by terrorists is in fact direct, but also falls into the category of structural and cultural violence. Groups like the Islamic State demonstrate types of structural violence by embedding violent ideology in their social structure.¹⁴ Terrorist organizations aim to obtain complete domination and control, and do not solely use physical violence to achieve this. Their methods include propaganda and manipulation, against those outside of the terrorist group and those within. The recruitment and radicalization process are major examples of a terrorist group exerting violence in a nonphysical way. By utilizing different types of violence, like structural and cultural, terrorists attempt to legitimize their direct violence.¹⁵ It is important to evaluate the different forms of violence when analyzing the position of women involved in terrorism. Although women willingly participate in radical groups, they also can experience different types of structural and cultural violence during their recruitment process into a terrorist organization. Furthermore, violence of different types, like manipulation, coercion, and other forms of force are often used on women, even in the terrorist organization. These types of violence will be evaluated throughout the course of this research; however, it is crucial to note that this is not specific or unique to the Middle East, or Islam.

¹³ Rushworth Kidder, “Terrorism- A Term Notoriously Difficult to Pin Down,” 9.

¹⁴ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors Involved in Jihadist Radicalization Process and Terrorist Violence," 93-94.

¹⁵ Jesús Pérez Viejo, and Ángeles Martínez Boyé, "An Analysis of the Psycho-Social Factors Involved in Jihadist Radicalization Process and Terrorist Violence," 94.

III. Complexities

Perpetrators & Victims – Both?

In addition to examining forms of violence, further evaluation is needed regarding the constructs of perpetrator and victim. These characterizations are often considered mutually exclusive and rigid. What is a perpetrator, a victim? Can someone be a perpetrator and a victim? How can an individual be a perpetrator and a victim simultaneously? A perpetrator is someone who carries out an immoral act, which is often violent. A victim is one who is harmed or affected by that action. Are these rigid classifications? In evaluating women's involvement in terrorism, it is necessary to analyze this complexity in each case study. In conflicts, women are automatically assumed to be victims.¹⁶ This paper will analyze women's involvement in terrorism showing their willingness to participate in violence. They are also perpetrators. However, there are some situations in which women involved in terrorist groups are both a perpetrator and a victim. There are cases where a "woman has been abused, victimized, or targeted in ways that leave her little choice but to join the terrorists."¹⁷ The choices made by women to join terrorist organizations are complicated and multifaceted. Choices are made, but are those choices limited, controlled, manipulated? This complexity will be explored in examples throughout this paper, especially through examples of women in the Islamic State policing other women, and inflicting violence against them. In conducting this analysis and research, each example of women's involvement in terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, can be shown to challenge conventional constructs.

¹⁶ Caroline O.N Moser and Fiona C Clark, "Introduction," *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, 4.

¹⁷ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 31.

Gender & Agency in Violence

For an analysis of women's participation in violence, and more specifically terrorism, it is imperative to recognize the assumed gender constructs and limitations when discussing agency. What does this mean? Looking at scholarship from experts in gender can shed light on the analysis of gender in global politics. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, both scholars of gender and violence evaluate the complication of gender constructs when examining women's violence. They note, "deviant women are set up in opposition to idealized gender stereotypes."¹⁸ Gentry, in "Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women's Involvement in al-Qaeda," mentions that when women contribute to violence, it is viewed as a disruption of an understood gender norm.¹⁹ This gender norm insinuates that women are inherently not violent. Recognizing that analyzing agency through gender shows a different power dynamic within terrorism. Sjoberg and Gentry assert that in evaluating the place of women in global politics, one should challenge the gendered norms that continue to incorrectly influence the understanding of women's agency.²⁰ By doing this, research should be conducted through what they consider a "gendered lens" in which the power relation of gender is recognized, as are the "everyday experiences of women, taking into consideration social factors."²¹

They also discuss existing notions of feminist theory in relation to women's agency when it comes to violence. Sjoberg and Gentry stipulate that, "portrayals of women terrorists rarely if ever characterize them as having individual agency in general or with respect to their violence

¹⁸ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 7.

¹⁹ Caron Gentry, "Neo-Orientalist Narratives of Women's Involvement in al-Qaeda," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, 178.

²⁰ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, 22.

²¹ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, 6.

specifically.”²² They also note, according to a feminist understanding of relational autonomy, human choice is never entirely free, but it is also never entirely constrained.”²³ This reiterates the complexity of women’s choice when participating in violence, but shows that it is not always clear-cut. “Violent women have agency in their violence,” but the decision to participate in violence is often influenced by social and political factors.²⁴ Additionally, the idea that choice is not necessarily free, but impacted by limitations, displays the power dynamics of choice in violent groups. Women do rationally and knowingly choose to participate in terrorism but their actions and radicalization is often examined through gendered constructs. Instead, women should be viewed as violent people, not just violent women, women are involved in violence in global politics.²⁵ In order to fully comprehend women’s participation and roles in terrorism, one has to look beyond the common focus of viewing women as subjects of a patriarchal structure. Women do participate in violence, but it is the representation of these women in global politics that needs to be analyzed, not necessarily the violence.

As mentioned above, there seems to be an overwhelming notion that women are not capable of being violent individuals or even worse, terrorists. Women who participate or support terrorism are often demonized and criticized more harshly than their male counterparts. Why is that the case? In *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, open their book with the example of a female suicide bomber to show that the image of women as mothers, peace lovers, and emotionally driven is not always an accurate depiction.²⁶ People need to look beyond the misperception of women solely as maternal and nonviolent beings. Farhana Qazi, a scholar

²² Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, 4.

²³ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 196.

²⁴ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 21.

²⁵ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, 2.

²⁶ Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1.

on conflicts in the Middle East with a focus on women in war, notes that even researchers are guilty of falling into the trap of considering these Muslim women as second class, because the “idea of it [their participation in political violence] runs counter to Western stereotypes and misconceptions of male terrorists.”²⁷ Additionally, Mia Bloom analyzes that even the women who were suicide bombers are not viewed the same as men who perpetrate the same violence.²⁸

Sjoberg and Gentry explain the title of their book, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* by arguing that women are usually seen in three categories when it comes to violence. As mothers, who act violent, they are considered to be driven by their “biological destinies,” as monsters, they were categorized as being a lost cause, damaged, broken, or preeminently driven to violence. The last categorization, is women as whores, and the misconception is that these women are just too sexually depraved or dependent.²⁹ These ideas and labels are all part of gender constructs that are based on what is an “appropriate” description for a female. In “Women fighters and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative,” Laura Sjoberg discusses Jean Elshtain’s examination of women as an object of war.³⁰ Women are described as ‘beautiful souls,’ and categorized as innocent and completely removed from war. They again are only categorized in their assumed gender classification, as mothers and nurtures, considering them automatically as more peaceful than men.³¹

It is unfortunate that these gender norms are not looked beyond. Women, just like men can be violent with no correlation to the constructs of mother, monster or whore. As some women step out of these “normal” classifications, they become subject to more criticism for

²⁷ Katherine Brown, "Blinded by the Explosion? Security and Resistance in Muslim Women's Suicide Terrorism," 204.

²⁸ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 216.

²⁹ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, 12.

³⁰ Laura Sjoberg, “Women fighters and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative,” 55.

³¹ Laura Sjoberg, “Women fighters and the ‘beautiful soul’ narrative,” 57.

defying those norms. In reality, women who join terrorist networks are not completely disconnected or different from men who join. As evaluations continue about women's relationship to violence, it is important not to solely focus on the gender constructs. Although female participation is currently at a lesser rate than male participation, it is essential to avoid the idea of women being "strange," and unlike others for being attracted to terrorism, based purely on their gender. For the sake of this research, I will analyze the violence, and ultimately argue women's agency is evident, but like Sjoberg and Gentry suggest, relational autonomy must be considered. Limitations surrounding agency exist, as does the complication of free choice while existing under a patriarchal structure like the Islamic State or al-Qaeda.

IV. The Phenomenon: Violent Women

History of Women's Involvement in Violence

Women's participation in terrorism and presence in violent organizations is not necessarily a new phenomenon. In order to understand the more recent cases of female perpetrators, a brief literature survey of the history of women's involvement in other violent groups is needed. It is essential to note that that women's participation in violence is not embedded in only one region, religion, or ideology. This occurs globally and not only in Muslim-majority countries. Women have been involved in terrorist organizations and violence long before the emergence of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Mia Bloom, a scholar of International Studies with expertise in terrorism discusses women's presence in violence in her book *Bombshell*. She notes, "female terrorists came from all parts of the globe and from all walks of society – they were part of Italy's Red Brigades, Germany's Baader-Meinhof group, the American Black Panthers, and Weatherman, and the Japanese Red Army..." among many

others.³² By pointing out other organizations over the course of many decades one can understand that the presence of women in violent organizations is not uncommon.

For more specific examples, Azza Karam, a scholar of political Islam, examined three individual women in Egypt who were politically active and from middle class backgrounds during the 20th century, specifically from the 1920s to 1960s.³³ In her article “Islamisms and Feminism in Egypt: Three Generations of Women’s Perspectives,” she analyzed a woman named Zaynab Al-Ghazali, who encouraged other women to maintain their roles as mothers and supporters of their husbands, who were fighters.³⁴ It was their way of contributing to jihad, by encouraging and supporting their husbands.³⁵ Karam analyzes these specific cases, which relate more to the scope of this paper.

Several other scholars have explored women’s involvement in terrorism. Rushworth Kidder discussed a young girl, as one of the first recognized female suicide bomber in 1985.³⁶ Bloom also mentions this same example in *Bombshell*, where she provides further details about the young girl. Sana’a Mehaydali was seventeen years old when she was sent by the Syrian Socialist National Party, where she detonated herself near an Israeli convoy.³⁷ Although all details of this act are not known, Bloom explains that the group was pro-Syrian and Lebanese.³⁸ Mehaydali may have been influenced heavily by her participation in the political group.

³² Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 33.

³³ Azza Karam, "Islamisms and Feminism in Egypt: Three Generations of Women's Perspectives," in *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*, 229.

³⁴ Azza Karam, "Islamisms and Feminism in Egypt," 229.

³⁵ Azza Karam, "Islamisms and Feminism in Egypt," 229.

³⁶ Rushworth Kidder, "The Terrorist Mentality," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 15, 1986, in *Violence and Terrorism 90/91*: 31.

³⁷ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 23.

³⁸ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 23.

Mia Bloom also discusses the case of female suicide bombers in Chechnya, known as the Black Widows.³⁹ Women participated in taking hostages along with the Chechen men.⁴⁰ Bloom provides information noting that some of the female terrorists had previously suffered themselves.⁴¹ What could their own experiences of violence mean? Their actions may have been in response to the loss of life during conflict. Was the violence they perpetrated a form of cultural violence, a justification for the loss of life? Some of the female terrorists had asked for male guidance and permission before instructing the hostages or before carrying out the suicide bombings. One woman mentioned specifically, was Zura Barayeva, who was noted to have more control than many of the other women who participated.⁴² Although these women were involved, some willingly, inflicting types of violence on others, this example provides insight about the complicated nature of choice. The women's agency existed, but in this case, men were still involved and wielded a certain level of assumed authority.

The violence perpetrated by women is not unique to any group or religion, however women's participation in violence is increasing.⁴³ The scholarship demonstrates that there are several instances of women's participation, encouragement, or both, in politically motivated violent groups, and terrorist organizations in the past. These examples briefly show the history of women's association with terrorist organizations, or similar violent groups. This foundation, allows for a closer examination of the more current and increasing involvement of women within the Islamic State, which will be explored later.

³⁹ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 52.

⁴⁰ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 54

⁴¹ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 56.

⁴² Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 57.

⁴³ Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "Women of the Islamic State: The Evolving Role of Women in Jihad," 25

V. Terrorist Groups

Al-Qaeda & the Islamic State

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are well-known terrorist groups that perpetrate violence globally. Before discussing the viewpoints of these terrorist organizations concerning female participation in violence, it is first essential to introduce them. Al-Qaeda is the terrorist organization founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988.⁴⁴ Several of the original members of the group acted as mujahedeen, or fighters, who participated in defeating the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ By the mid-1990s, the terrorist organization had grown greatly, and after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it had garnered major attention as one of the deadliest terror groups.⁴⁶ The Islamic State has its origins in Iraq. Although it did not grow specifically out of al-Qaeda, one of the branches, al-Qaeda in Iraq, helped influence the formation of what would be known as the Islamic State.⁴⁷ A Jordanian, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁴⁸ Members of AQI eventually joined the Islamic State around 2013, whose goal was similar to al-Qaeda's, in perpetrating global jihad, but also expanded upon it.⁴⁹ The Islamic State desired to create a physical Islamic State, and in doing so, carried out some of the cruelest violence in the Middle Eastern region and around the world.⁵⁰ Although al-Qaeda had discussed the idea of a broader ideological state, there was little emphasis on obtaining physical territory.

⁴⁴“Al Qaeda,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation. Stanford University*; Daniel Byman, “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets.”

⁴⁵ “Al Qaeda,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation. Stanford University*; Daniel Byman, “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets.”

Qaeda.” *Center for International Security and Cooperation. Stanford University.*

⁴⁶ “Al Qaeda,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation. Stanford University*; Daniel Byman, “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets.”

⁴⁷ “The Islamic State,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation. Stanford University*; Daniel Byman, “Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets.”

⁴⁸ “The Islamic State,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation.*

⁴⁹ “The Islamic State,” *Center for International Security and Cooperation.*

⁵⁰ Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, “Women of the Islamic State: The Evolving Role of Women in Jihad,” 21.

Although there are many other terrorist organizations around the world, these two specific organizations were chosen for analysis. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are often viewed as similar organizations, one even stemming from the other, when in reality there are major differences between the groups. However, both organizations speak to their ideals about the women's place in terrorism, but provide insight into the complex nature of decisions within a terrorist organization. The Islamic State's ideology and al-Qaeda's viewpoints about women's involvement in jihad differ, Al-Qaeda is introduced to serve as a comparison, to show the drastic and cruel tactics of the Islamic State, as they utilize women's participation in carrying out violence.

Differing Viewpoints of al-Qaeda

The increase of appeal towards joining terrorist organizations does not mean that women's participation is necessarily welcomed. Al-Qaeda, spearheaded by Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, did not necessarily accept the idea of women's involvement in jihad in its violent form. Ayman al-Zawahiri was known for rejecting women in jihad armed military action, and so was his wife, Omayma, although she encouraged women recruitment strictly in support roles. She noted that women should not be a part of jihad, "'It is not easy for women...and it is forbidden for her to move without being accompanied by male relatives and jihad requires mobility," she argued."⁵¹ Bin Laden himself rarely spoke about women fighting jihad. One of the only times he did approve of violence done by women was when he spoke about becoming a father to a daughter, Safia, after 9/11 and he said she would "kill enemies of Islam like Safia of the Prophet's time."⁵² He named his daughter after a woman who previously participated in

⁵¹ Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Is the role of women in al-Qaeda increasing?"

⁵² Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," 46.

religious violence, at least according to him. Bin Laden was more known for his views for women fulfilling support roles. In one of his fatwas he praised women for setting “a tremendous example for generosity in the name of Allah. They motivate and encourage their sons, brothers and husbands, to fight for the cause of Allah... they encourage jihad.”⁵³ Bin Laden offers his praise for the support roles that women carry out, not for violent tactics or participation themselves in the actual jihad. It is often the case of older leaders, like Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri to have a more conservative ideology when it comes to the place of women. It is also essential to note that terrorist organizations view jihad in a specific and gendered way. They have a singular understanding of jihad and therefore do not always incorporate women into that ideology. Although, it is not strictly just the older figures of the organization that view women’s position as strictly within the family. In 2016, in an online publication in *Inspire*, one of al-Qaeda’s members, Al Malahelm, who controls the media of the magazine urged men not to incorporate women into attacks. He further stated, “In accordance with this incident, we guide and advise our mujahedeen brothers in the west not to allow our Muslim sisters to participate in any lone jihad operation.”⁵⁴ Certain al-Qaeda members harshly criticized female participation in jihad that occurred under the Islamic State’s leadership, although that is true for some, it is not always the case.

Some affiliates, and other infamous leaders of branches of al-Qaeda have knowingly used women to participate in jihad and encourage their incorporation into the organization. Al-Qaeda in Iraq led by the well-known Abu Musab al-Zarqawi started using females as suicide bombers in 2005.⁵⁵ This proved to be an effective tool for him, because it heightened his recruitment and

⁵³ Farhana Qazi, “The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam,” 46.

⁵⁴ Lisa Daftari, “Al Qaeda criticizes ISIS’ use of women in attacks.” *The Foreign Desk*, September 14, 2016.

⁵⁵ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 15.

enabled him to carry out less obvious attacks. He was the first to utilize women as suicide bombers in al-Qaeda in Iraq and this separated him from other leaders.⁵⁶ It appears as if his ability to make such decisions may have been due to Bin Laden's lack of major power at the time. Al-Qaeda leaders Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri did not approve of al-Zarqawi's more violent tactics. Bin Laden had disagreed with al-Zarqawi's violence, as he was concerned with "alienating local populations."⁵⁷ Additionally, Al-Zawahiri condemned al-Zarqawi more than once and this created a tension between the two major affiliates at the time.⁵⁸ As of 2011, al-Qaeda in Iraq under al-Zarqawi was the only al-Qaeda affiliate to use females as suicide bombers.⁵⁹ In a way, his decision to include women's participation in jihad as suicide bombers shows his ideology was more aligned with the future Islamic State, whose ideology and formation was influenced by al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁶⁰ These decisions to allow for women's participation severed al-Qaeda in Iraq with al-Qaeda Central under Zawahiri and bin Laden.⁶¹

Shifting Perspectives of the Islamic State

In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State originally maintained that women should remain caretakers and supporters of those already fighting.⁶² Furthermore, "ISIS propaganda clearly propagates women as vital components of the 'state', but stipulates that they cannot engage in combat, unless attacked," so using them as suicide bombers runs contrary to their initial

⁵⁶ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 160.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Philippa Eggert, "Women Fighters in the "Islamic State" and al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis," 371.

⁵⁸ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 161.

⁵⁹ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 162.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Pearson, "The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad," 5.

⁶¹ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad After the Caliphate," 5.

⁶² "ISIS Violates Ideology on Female Militancy." *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*. November 17, 2016.

viewpoints.⁶³ Although ISIS in Syria and Iraq were not originally known for deploying female suicide bombers, other ISIS affiliates have, and with little condemnation from the main group.⁶⁴ Affiliate groups like Boko Haram and ISIS in Libya have both used female suicide bombers and all over women are rising and attempting to become suicide bombers for the groups.⁶⁵ These groups and even some lone wolf actors are considered affiliates of the Islamic State, where the main organization even claims responsibility of the attack, or influence over the affiliate.

The Islamic State garnered more power and authority as they gained territory in Iraq and Syria. However, when their territory came under threat, some of their ideals regarding women's involvement in combat shifted. In July of 2017, the Islamic State had several female suicide bombers carry out attacks in Northern Iraq.⁶⁶ Women were encouraged to participate in jihad, in different magnitudes, different roles, which will later be explored. The place of women began in the home, as mothers and supporters of jihad, but over time this expanded to also being recruiters.⁶⁷ One of the major functions carried out by women within the Islamic State was security, where they were responsible for policing communities.⁶⁸ This leads to the question, what is considered combat? What is an active role? Women acting as a police force can be considered a combatant on the home front compared to the front lines. The Islamic State's ideology shifted further as they began losing even more territory and fighters. In 2016 and 2017, the terrorist group called on women in their publications *al-Naba* and *Rumiya*, explaining that it was necessary for women to take up arms and participate out of their love for jihad. Women

⁶³ Rachel Bryson, "Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq," *Institute for Global Change*, July 12, 2017.

⁶⁴ Rachel Bryson, "Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq."

⁶⁵ "ISIS Violates Ideology on Female Militancy." *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*.

⁶⁶ Jack Moore, "ISIS has deployed dozens of female suicide bombers in battle for Mosul." *Newsweek*, July 05, 2017.

⁶⁷ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil: Women in Jihad After the Caliphate," 7.

⁶⁸ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil," 7.

were allowed to participate to defend the caliphate.⁶⁹ Rachel Bryson from the *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change* argues that this ideological shift can prove the weakness of the organization.⁷⁰ They are realizing the advantages of using women as suicide bombers, meaning they are less conspicuous. Lydia Khalil, a scholar of International Relations with a focus on the Middle East, spoke about *The Washington Post* in her own report, noting they considered the Islamic State to be losing when it began asking women to participate in combat.⁷¹

Ultimately the Islamic State is exploiting the place of women and using them solely when it is beneficial to them. If that means as suicide bombers, then they get to make that shift and deem it acceptable. Although this exploitation is not always visible, it is another demonstration of the Islamic State's use of structural violence, even against women within their own organization. It is difficult to evaluate the place of women in the Islamic State, specifically within combat. They are usually seen as "tactical tools at the hands of men rather than active members of combat."⁷² Although women's involvement can be manipulated, that does not mean that they are not willingly deciding to be active members of the Islamic State participating in combat as will be shown below.

The Islamic State & al-Qaeda: Brief Comparison

It appears as if al-Qaeda and the Islamic State initially struggled with the idea of allowing women to participate in jihad. They both asserted that the women's place was in the home, as a supporter, cook, or a mother of future fighters. Her position was essential to raising new fighters, but staying on the sidelines. Women of course could not be equal to men, having the same

⁶⁹ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil," 9.

⁷⁰ Rachel Bryson, "Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq."

⁷¹ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil," 10.

⁷² Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "Women of the Islamic State," 24.

positions or becoming martyrs as suicide bombers like the men. The understanding of martyrdom by terrorist organizations is viewed completely in a masculine construct. Specifically, al-Qaeda was apprehensive about permitting women in combat.

There is a shift, however, when the use of women becomes more beneficial to some these organizations. This shift was seen in al-Qaeda in Iraq, and eventually the Islamic State. Some of the more conservative leaders still speak out against women's involvement, but there is a major shift in ideology around 2005 where some predecessors and affiliates of the organization encourage women's participation. Even further, this support of women's involvement may be due to the lower numbers of males willing to participate. For instance, al-Zarqawi's, "intent in using women may partially have been to shame Muslim men into participation," he additionally noted and spoke out saying things like "are there no men willing, so that we must turn to women?"⁷³ The use of women in both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State highlights the differences in ideology among these groups. Al-Qaeda central completely distances themselves from al-Qaeda in Iraq after al-Zarqawi's violent tactics were utilized, and female suicide bombers were encouraged. The Islamic State took this further by encouraging women to join the organization, under the guise of empowerment. However, women seem to be the last resort, or the perfect tool, but never the first choice for either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

VI. Deemed Permissible

Terrorist's Talk

The analysis of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State shows that both terrorist groups specify the roles for women belonging to the groups. The two terrorist organizations indicate what

⁷³ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 161.

responsibilities women may have, but some Islamic scholars, and even women partake in dictating the appropriate positions of other women. As these evaluations are made about the place of women, it is essential to recognize that these thoughts are not representative of the larger Muslim community. Even the Islamic scholars who speak to the place of women in terrorism can be discredited by others. It is also important to note, that mostly men are defining what roles women are *allowed* to have. This dictation of roles is a form of structural violence, as briefly mentioned previously. This can be seen when the terrorist organization attempts to control the social structure and define women's roles, perpetuating inequality. By commanding what women can and cannot do, results in injustices, which a form of violence that is not always seen or understood. The two terrorist organizations mostly note that women are supposed to remain in the home as supporters of jihad. They should raise future lions, and care for husbands, brothers and other fighters. Rachel Bryson again speaks on this notion saying, "The perverted ideology that the group [ISIS] adheres to ordinarily maintains that women must be constrained to domestic isolation."⁷⁴ Again, al-Qaeda reiterates the same notion, cheering women's moral support.

Religious Scholars?

There have been some male religious leaders who have expressed their position on the place of women within jihad. Farhana Qazi evaluates the major questions these religious scholars ponder. They question whether or not women should operate independently without male guardians when it comes to jihad.⁷⁵ One Islamic scholar, Abdel Fattah Idrees describes the stipulations that need to be met for women to participate in jihad. He notes that women should participate in jihad if the Muslim lands are invaded, if the community calls for all Muslims' help

⁷⁴ Rachel Bryson, "Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq."

⁷⁵ Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," 44-45.

in the matter, and if those women are specifically selected by male leaders.⁷⁶ Yusuf al-Qaradawi takes this further and claims that women definitely have a place in jihad, arguing that they can attain martyrdom and sometimes achieve what men can't.⁷⁷ Another scholar argues that women can participate in jihad but only with a male guardian.⁷⁸ It is interesting to see levels of approval of certain scholars that have published fatwas and other statements allowing women to participate.

Al-Khansaa Brigade

The al-Khansaa Brigade reiterates the ideology of the terrorist organization in persuading women to join and encouraging support of terrorism in fulfilling limited roles. However, in this case, women are stipulating the place of other women. Their messages are a compilation of both suggesting women fight in jihad and fulfill those support roles. Al-Khansaa was originally a magazine and propaganda tool controlled by al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. They published an article which discussed the roles of women as both fighters and supporters.⁷⁹ This took a more prominent role when the al-Khansaa Brigade, or the women's 'police' group of ISIS published a manifesto titled "Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study" which outlines the position of women within the Islamic State. It provides detailed and specific information as to how a woman should live her life within the organization. For example, the group mentions their major disagreements with the West's notion of gender equality and concepts for human rights.⁸⁰ Although this notion isn't completely Western, it is viewed as such as a propaganda tool and a

⁷⁶ Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," 45.

⁷⁷ Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," 45.

⁷⁸ Katherine Brown, "Blinded by the Explosion? Security and Resistance in Muslim Women's Suicide Terrorism," in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 211.

⁷⁹ Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," 47.

⁸⁰ Heather Saul, "Life as a woman under Isis: Document reveals for the first-time what group really expects from female recruits living in Syria and Iraq," *The Independent*, July 23, 2015.

way to further show disagreement and separation from the enemy, the West. The manifesto also details the education requirements or lack thereof within the Islamic State.⁸¹ Women should pursue a strictly religious education, but only until the age of 15 because, “there is no need for women to “flit here and there to get degrees and so on just so she can try to prove that her intelligence is greater than a man’s.”⁸² Furthermore, women may sometimes have more powerful roles as doctors and teachers, or even jihad, but usually only with the permission of a male.⁸³ This publication is fascinating because it is strictly women telling these other women what they should and should not do. There is a power structure of these women who have gained the authority and respect in order to outline the lives of these new women recruits and less prominent women.

VII. How to Explain “Why?”

The idea of females as active perpetrators in terrorist organizations like the Islamic State is often questioned. Scholars analyze what attracts women to these groups, and why they ultimately decide to join. There are a number of reasons behind their involvement such as: belief in the agenda or cause of the organization, a desire for being considered a “true believer,” family ties, deaths, foreign policy grievances, frustration with military presence, limited access to education, marriages and marriage arrangements, and acts of xenophobia. Although not comprehensive, these are several influences that scholars examine as they attempt to answer why women join terrorist organizations. These factors encompass some of the women’s radicalization

⁸¹ Al-Khanssaa Brigade. *Women of the Islamic State*. Translated by Charlie Winter, *Quilliam* (February 2015).

⁸² Heather Saul, “Life as a woman under Isis: Document reveals for the first-time what group really expects from female recruits living in Syria and Iraq” and Al-Khanssaa Brigade. *Women of the Islamic State*.

⁸³ Heather Saul, “Life as a woman under Isis: Document reveals for the first-time what group really expects from female recruits living in Syria and Iraq.”

causes, and provide insight as to “why” women radicalize and join terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The categories explored show the complexity behind women’s involvement. In analyzing their participation, several scholars associate women’s radicalization with only personal reasons, specific to women. In reality, women’s radicalization influences are very similar to their male collaborators. Women’s violence and participation are not fundamentally different from men’s, and it is necessary to move beyond the gendered labeling of women while evaluating their violence.

Family

Laura Sjoberg, Caron Gentry and other scholars attempt to uncover the major question in their edited book, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Why do these women join these organizations? One of the contributors, Farhana Qazi, contributes to this question an article. She contends that family units often have a major impact on why women may join terrorist groups. She notes, “Women may be driven toward suicide terrorism when pressures from within their familial units and social structures violate, weaken or constrain their right to live.”⁸⁴ There is a desire for individuality and power for these young women and sometimes certain patriarchal families may suppress that. Another example shows a young woman’s participation due to her families preexisting relationship with the Islamic State. Zaynab Sharrouf, a thirteen-year-old girl, and the rest of her family were brought into the Islamic State. Her father was already a participant in the terrorist organization and aided in the radicalization of some of his family.

⁸⁴ Farhana Qazi, “The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam,” in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 42.

Sharrouf's marriage was arranged and then eventually she participated in jihadi rhetoric on Twitter.⁸⁵

Death of women's family members is another component of women's drive to join these organizations. Another example that highlights women's participation in terrorism is the case of Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi. Al-Rishawi accompanied her husband on what was supposed to be a suicide attack in Jordan for al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁸⁶ It was speculated that her involvement and radicalization in the first place may have been influenced by her resentment towards military forces that were suspected of killing close relatives and family members.⁸⁷ This provided her with a motive to become more radical. These examples show that family can be a driving force for women's participation in terrorism. In the case of al-Rishawi, it also shows that foreign policies and military actions abroad have an effect on these women.

Foreign Policy & Xenophobia

Foreign policies and xenophobia are two factors that have some significance for women's radicalization. In the case of foreign policy, the disagreement may stem from foreign policy and military decisions of Western countries, like the United States. The Islamic State specifically dwells on what they consider the wrongful ways of the United States in their magazine *Dabiq*, which reaches wide audiences. In many sections, the authors make a point of "the thousands of Iraqis and Afghans killed in U.S. military campaigns," and use this to rile and attract individuals in joining.⁸⁸ Just like al-Rishawi mentioned above, although it was her personal connection with

⁸⁵ Atika Shubert, "The Women of ISIS: Who are they?" *CNN*, May 29, 2015.

⁸⁶ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," in *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 168.

⁸⁷ Mia Bloom, "Women as Victims and Victimiziers," *eJournal USA*, (May 2007), 3.

⁸⁸ Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy." *Dissent Magazine*, Winter 2015.

family deaths that furthered her radicalization, it was in part of the actions of U.S military in the Middle East. In many of these radical organizations one of the key frustrations cited is the foreign policy of the United States and their military presence in areas of the Middle East. Bin Laden specifically named foreign troop presence repeatedly as one of his grievances. These frustrations that motivate some to join a terrorist group are often explicitly associated with men. Women similarly experience foreign policy repercussions that can directly contribute to their radicalization.

Another potential area of radicalization may be based on experiences of xenophobic treatment. Islamophobia, “an extreme fear of and hostility toward Islam and Muslims,” occurs in both small and large scales in both the private and public spheres.⁸⁹ Malika el Aroud is an example of a woman who noted that her radicalization was in part of the racism she faced in Belgium. She was originally from Morocco and moved to Belgium at a young age. She went to school and was eventually expelled for attacking one of her teachers who made a racial comment.⁹⁰ Malika stated that she was “treated like a dirty foreigner,” and radicalized partially as a “reaction to the right-wing racist xenophobia she encountered as an outsider in Belgium.”⁹¹ Malika then turned to a more “fundamental” focus on Islam, eventually leading her and her husband into being al-Qaeda supporters and eventually members.

In 2008, Gallup did a study on whether it was perceived that Muslims are respected and treated fairly in foreign countries. These are the findings...

“Globally, many Muslims report not feeling respected by those in the West. Significant percentages of several Western countries share this sentiment, saying that the West does not respect Muslim societies. Specifically, 52% of Americans and 48% of Canadians say the West does not respect Muslim societies.”⁹²

⁸⁹ “What Is Islamophobia?” *Bridge Initiative: Georgetown University*.

⁹⁰ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 198.

⁹¹ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 198-199.

⁹² “Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West,” *Gallup*, 2008.

This shows that these viewpoints exist widely, whether or not radicalization occurs in some of these individuals because of it. Furthermore, many women are susceptible to propaganda, as they view themselves “as outliers of their community because of social injustice.”⁹³ These feelings of frustration can lead women to thinking the Islamic State, for one example, can provide them a better life under their caliphate.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue provides even deeper analysis on the topics of Muslim women being outsiders in their communities. In the report “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith evaluate the push and pull factors of Western women who join ISIS. They note that these women often feel ostracized by the societies they live in, sometimes questioning their identity or how they fit into the society they live in. There is a difficulty of identifying or assimilating with other cultures in the areas in which they live, and it often feels as if no positive changes are being made for these Muslim majority communities.⁹⁴ Instead of participating in those changes some of these women turn to groups like ISIS, romanticizing the organization.

Regardless of the levels of radicalization, a specific mention from one of the Islamic State’s publications, *Dabiq*, helps to explain their viewpoints of the West. This illustrates both foreign policy disagreements but even further differences with the morals and values of the West, which plays into the religious divide that ISIS continues to push. The article in the magazine says, “The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason

⁹³ Amanda Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in the Islamic State,” 85.

⁹⁴ Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, 9.

for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam.”⁹⁵ This continued notion of the a “clash of civilizations,” helps to fuel resentment and participation in those already harboring anger towards the West. Terrorist groups repeatedly use this criticism to gain attraction and recruitment of others, including women.

Religion & Marriage

There are several other factors of radicalization that will not be explored, but religion and marriage are major components that serve as connections to recruitment, which will be discussed later. There is a connection between marriage and joining these terrorist organizations. The idea of being the “true believer” of the right religion, in this case Islam, plays a major role in why individuals join. Some of these women are even converts from other Abrahamic religions or from no religious background at all. These converts can sometimes strive to find their place and rightful way, sometimes leaning to more radical interpretations. For women especially, there is sometimes a desire of being a part of an all-Islamic utopia that ISIS depicts in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, Rafia Zakaria claims, “female recruits may ultimately discover... this is illusory and its promise of female empowerment false.”⁹⁶ In another article this sentiment of an ideal life is reiterated by ISIS who attracts these women by promising “missions of divine responsibility and duty, [and] promise[s] liberation and an idealized, utopian existence in the caliphate.” It additionally notes that women sometimes are looking to reclaim their spirituality and join an Islamic sisterhood within the organization.⁹⁷ Simon Cottee notes in an article in *Foreign Policy* that the women who join ISIS long to be a part of “the Islamic State,” not necessarily just the

⁹⁵ The Islamic State, “Break the Cross,” *Dabiq*, 33.

⁹⁶ Rafia Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy.”

⁹⁷ Codi Robertson, “What Makes Western Women Want to Join ISIS?” *Clarion Project*, February 14, 2017.

terrorism organization, but the greater notion of an all-encompassing structure governed by Islam and Islamic law...well an interpretation of Islam at least.⁹⁸ An even more interesting concept is that some of these women have a strictly conservative viewpoint on how women themselves should live their lives. They use the ideas of patriarchal societies and mix them with interpretations of Islam. Some of these women like that the ideas of ISIS match “with their militantly conservative notions of sex and gender. Hence, they support the Islamic State not despite, but *because of*, its aggressively patriarchal worldview.”⁹⁹ This shows that several of these women may like the separation of sexes and subordinate roles to men. However, what are the limitations of this? There is an attempt to include this divine notion into the ideology to attract the religious side and piety of these women, although it is often distorted.

Marriage is considered another pull factor for women in terrorist organizations, which is seen especially in future involvement in the Islamic State. This concept is one that draws attention from many, but it is crucial to not view marriage as the only appeal for these women into terrorism. To continue with previous examples, both Malika el Aroud and Sajida al-Rishawi further radicalized after their marriages. Malika and her husband Abdessater trained under al-Qaeda and interacted with Bin Laden. Her husband killed an individual, and Malika was considered complicit because of her financial aid that helped facilitate the murder.¹⁰⁰ Al-Rishawi worked with her husband on an attempted suicide mission in Jordan, where he succeeded and she did not. Mia Bloom in her article “Women as Victims and Victimizers” notes that it is not always male coercion that leads women into terrorism, but their relationships with radicalized men can enable them to make their own decision in joining the cause with their significant other.¹⁰¹ These

⁹⁸ Simon Cottee, “What ISIS Women Want,” *Foreign Policy*, May 17, 2016.

⁹⁹ Simon Cottee, “What ISIS Women Want,”

¹⁰⁰ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 200-201.

¹⁰¹ Mia Bloom, “Women as Victims and Victimizers,” 2.

examples show that women's relationships may have had a correlation to their radicalization, but their agency and decision also has to be recognized. These women are still perpetrators for participating in different levels of violence. However, the limitations and struggles that were possibly experienced in making these decisions are unknown.

There are several cases of women from abroad traveling to become jihadi brides, although sometimes their positions advance to more than just a wife. The term and idea of jihadi brides is often exploited in modern media to, in a way, diminish the agency of women as actually deciding to participate in violence. Even though some women first enter radical groups like ISIS as brides, that may not be the underlying cause of their radicalization or attraction in the first place. Additionally, women can sometimes rise to more prominent positions. The Bethnal Green schoolgirls are one very well-known group of young women who traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State. All three married ISIS fighters and two of the girl's husbands died fighting, and the girls remained in Syria supporting the Islamic State.¹⁰² Another example is of the young woman named Aqsa Mahmood, who traveled to Syria and also married an ISIS fighter. Although the marriage helped solidify her place within the created Islamic State, she rose to some level of power, as a member of the Al-Khansaa Brigade.¹⁰³ There was a peculiar case of a woman from Belgium named Laura Passoni, who joined ISIS as a bride, but claims she was seduced into doing so. Her background is interesting because she was originally a Catholic who converted to Islam and became more extreme. She married and traveled to Syria until she escaped.¹⁰⁴ This specific case raises red flags because the young woman continues to claim that she never

¹⁰² Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides: What we know about the girls and women still in Syria after the death of Kadiza Sultana," *The Independent*, August 12, 2016.

¹⁰³ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides."

¹⁰⁴ Jake Cigainero, "A Belgian woman explains why she joined ISIS, and why she came back," *Public Radio International*, December 9, 2016.

watched the news or knew of any of the harsh life conditions in Syria. Her statements do not match up because she spoke about using Facebook frequently, which would likely have even the smallest bit of information about Syria on it. Nonetheless, this is another case of a woman joining and getting a foothold into the Islamic State based on marriage.

The Four R's

The Four R's ideology examines factors that contribute to understanding women's involvement in terrorism. Mia Bloom created and examined this concept of the four R's, explaining why women join terrorist groups. She evaluates women's motivation and argues that their reasoning behind joining is often personal. To examine the personal reasons, she names the "four R's," revenge, redemption, respect and relationship.¹⁰⁵ These four R's relate to information and specific cases of women discussed above. Under the category of revenge, it is often the personal reason based on family death or foreign policy. For redemption, terrorism may be a channel for a woman to reinvent herself. Bloom provides an example in the case of a woman who may not bear children or who has a possible criminal record and misconduct.¹⁰⁶ Respect is often sought by individual women who truly believe in the cause, and join to "prove their dedication," and attempt to improve their status or others. Last is relationship, in the case of marriage or family affiliation with these organizations. Bloom provides this explanation of radicalization factors, and does note that they can also apply to men.¹⁰⁷ However, viewing these few categories as pull factors for women can bring gendered assumptions about radicalization causes. Women do not always join terrorist groups for revenge, or to reinvent themselves. If men

¹⁰⁵ Mia Bloom, Death Becomes Her: The Changing Nature of Women's Role in Terror." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2010): 95.

¹⁰⁶ Mia Bloom, Death Becomes Her: The Changing Nature of Women's Role in Terror." 95.

¹⁰⁷ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 236.

do not need a reason to join the Islamic State, why is women's participation so deeply questioned in comparison?

It is apparent that there is not typically just one pull factor for women who partake in terrorism, but often a combination of many causes that lead women to radicalizing. In analyzing what attracts women into joining groups like the Islamic State, it is evident that their radicalization is not always solely based on personal reasons. Women, like men, have concrete reasons for joining the organization. One should not look at why men join, and why women join, but recognize that *individuals* join for similar reasons. Their decisions not only based on gender. Although this is true, one must not forget that these individual women made the decision to join, support or participate in these organizations and the violence they incite and create, regardless of recruitment or persuasion by others. This should not take agency or responsibility away from these women or the groups in general.

VIII. How does this happen?

Recruitment & Propaganda:

The recruitment and propaganda tactics used by terrorist organizations helps facilitate the process of women joining these violent groups. The women are influenced and attracted by the ideology but often times interaction with recruiters and others already involved in the terrorist network help bring these women to actually participate or travel to the stronghold areas of these organizations. There is also the propaganda that calls on "good Muslims" from all over to uphold their duties and encourages them to participate in jihad. Two major methods of propaganda that both al-Qaeda and ISIS use for recruitment in general are their respective online magazines. ISIS publishes *Dabiq*, and has a new magazine as well titled *Rumiya*, but what is important to know is

that their publication is in several languages, including English, Arabic, French and Russian. This helps the terrorist organization to disseminate their information to many readers around the world, therefore attracting a wide variety of persons. In these magazines specifically, they depict graphic images of women and children hurt or killed by U.S. bombings.¹⁰⁸ This has the potential to cause anger and influence radicalization as ISIS intends it to. *Inspire*, the al-Qaeda publication, has similar tactics and depictions to *Dabiq*.

Another rising method of recruitment is through social media outlets. This tactic has been a major means of recruitment for women from many regions. The Bethnal schoolgirls were even radicalized online, where they were encouraged to join and travel to Syria.¹⁰⁹ The other woman previously discussed, Laura Passoni, created a Facebook where she posted extremist images and posts that made her the perfect target for an ISIS recruiter.¹¹⁰ The use of such media sources like their online publications, Facebook and even Twitter provides an outreaching network beyond the boundaries of the small caliphate ISIS once had. Modern methods allow for terrorist organizations to spread their ideology to areas like the West. For example, the Islamic State or any of their affiliates did not officially train or direct Tashfeen Malik, one of the perpetrators of the San Bernardino terrorist attack in California.¹¹¹ Malik resided in California, but because of modern technologies and social media it was very easy for the Islamic State to claim responsibility for attacks and for their aggressive rhetoric to spread.¹¹²

Further means of recruitment come from statements from respected individuals within the organization that resonate to others. Women already in the organizations sometimes speak out,

¹⁰⁸ Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy."

¹⁰⁹ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides."

¹¹⁰ Jake Cigainero, "A Belgian woman explains why she joined ISIS, and why she came back."

¹¹¹ Jayne Huckerby, "Why Women Join ISIS," *TIME*, December 7, 2015.

¹¹² Jayne Huckerby, "Why Women Join ISIS," *TIME*.

encourage and call upon other women to join and give their support. Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife, Omayma, even spoke out on behalf of al-Qaeda, encouraging women to support jihad, but only by support and non-violent roles.¹¹³ Additionally, a female ISIS blogger, Umm-Layth also participates in recruitment. She notes...

Our role is even more important as women in Islam, since if we don't have sisters with the correct Aqeedah [conviction] and understanding who are willing to sacrifice all their desires and give up their families and lives in the west in order to make Hijrah [migration] and please Allah, then who will raise the next generation of Lions?"¹¹⁴

This shows similar sentiment to Omayma who is urging women to provide support in raising new fighters. As mentioned previously, the al-Khansaa Brigade encourages women to join and fit into specific roles to aid in the functioning of terrorist organizations. One woman who joined ISIS from Glasgow, Aqsa Mahmood aided in spreading ISIS propaganda, and even managed to become an important figure in the al-Khansaa Brigade.¹¹⁵ Another woman, known as Shams, meaning sun in Arabic, operates a blog that is very useful for ISIS recruitment. She describes life in the Islamic State as a utopia and romanticizes what goes on within the organization and her marriage.¹¹⁶ These examples show another aspect of bringing women into terrorism, even by other women. There has also been more encouragement from men in terrorist organization for women to join. This seems to be a tactic utilized when there is lower participation of men. The organizations call upon women, who are often considered subordinate to men by terrorists, with the attempt to encourage men to join and rise, especially if more women are joining in comparison.

¹¹³ Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Is the role of women in al-Qaeda increasing?" *BBC Arabic*, October 7, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy."

¹¹⁵ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides."

¹¹⁶ Atika Shubert, "The Women of ISIS: Who are they?" *CNN*, May 29, 2015.

They Come from There?

There are many aspects that attract groups of women into joining terrorist organizations and recruitment methods help to ensure that path. What is interesting is the demographic background of where women travel from to specifically go to Syria or Iraq. There is a wide range of diversity of women who risk it all to participate in terrorism in any way they can. Sometimes individuals who do not study concepts of terrorism or the Middle East region have trouble understanding why women travel from all over the world to join ISIS. They can't fathom it. In reality, female foreign recruits, fighters, migrants, however one wants to define them, make up a surprising number. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue found in their study that, "the number of Western foreign fighters and migrants to ISIS is estimated to be up to 4,000, with over 550 women within this figure."¹¹⁷ That's a large number to consider. The Institute also created a graphic in May of 2015 that was used by many media source to provide a visual of what countries women were traveling from.

¹¹⁷ Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," 4.

Figure 1. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue –Foreign Female ISIS Recruits*¹¹⁸



This above image shows the possible nationality of female ISIS recruits up until 2015. This of course does not account for the many individuals who traveled during after this period to ISIS territory while they still held a large stronghold of land. The numbers now may be diminished but this ultimately provides a nice visual to show the background of women going to participate in terrorism. To offer another group of statistics, Rafia Zakaria also spoke about the numbers of women traveling to support ISIS.

“About 10 percent of foreign recruits from Europe, North America and Australia are women. Of these approximately two hundred women and girls, the majority are believed to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Seventy women are thought to have come from France, sixty from the United Kingdom, and scattered numbers from other European nations and from Canada. Two American women from Denver and Minneapolis have probably joined the group as well.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Figure 1: Atika Shubert, “The Women of ISIS: Who are they?” *CNN*, May 29, 2015 Chart pulled from the *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2015).

¹¹⁹ Rafia Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy.”

This map highlights that the majority of women traveling to ISIS territory are from Western countries. Additionally, several of the women previously discussed, including the Bethnal schoolgirls, Aqsa Mahmood, Laura Passoni, are all foreign recruits. It is also noteworthy to point out that one of al-Qaeda's second female suicide bombers was from Belgium. Myrium Goris, also known as Muriel Degauque, was the first female European suicide bomber.¹²⁰ Even more striking, was that she was a convert to Islam, originally being a Catholic. Her background and ability to actually carry out an attack made her a model to other Western recruits, and a model as a successful woman suicide bomber.¹²¹ Overall, these women are joining militant groups from many regions of the West.

What about Age?

Another noteworthy aspect is the age range of these women, who are mostly younger, with ages ranging from teens to young women in their mid-twenties. Several young Western women "are mainly aged between 16 and 24, but even younger girls have attempted to travel to Syria," to join the Islamic State.¹²² Are these younger women more susceptible to radical ideology? Some argue that many young ISIS sympathizers are bored and romanticize the idea of terrorism based due to their naivety.¹²³ Additionally they can be "influenced by the glamour of images of war with a case."¹²⁴ Even if these are factors are contributed to age, there are several other components that should be explored, like scientific explanations of maturity levels and brain development. Some teens may not have the capacity to understand the risk assessment and other

¹²⁰ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 165.

¹²¹ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 165.

¹²² Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction Western Muslimas and ISIS," 22.

¹²³ Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction Western Muslimas and ISIS," 25.

¹²⁴ Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction Western Muslimas and ISIS," 27.

dangerous factors in joining this type of violence. Although the age range of women who join the Islamic State, specifically from the West, are often mentioned, there is little analysis about the impact a woman's age has in her decision to participate in terrorism. Further study is needed regarding the correlation between radicalization and age. However, it may be difficult for many to comprehend, and additional research is required, but these young women are being attracted from all over the world, to the ideology of terrorist groups like the Islamic State.

Increasing Numbers

As the Islamic State previously gained territory and increased their power, more women fled to join the organization. Since 2014 the number of women in the Islamic State steadily increased. They made up nearly 10 percent of the Islamic State's foreign fighters.¹²⁵ In February 2017, it was reported that female foreign recruits "accounted for one-fifth of all foreign recruits," in Syria.¹²⁶ The Islamic State "recruited women on an unprecedented scale."¹²⁷ As they recruited these women, some of the ideological changes of the organization shifted to incorporate these women.¹²⁸ Although women may not have the authority over the roles they play once involved in the Islamic State, the increase of women's participation continued at both large and small scales. In 2019, as the Islamic State was losing the acquired territory, women still remained a large presence in their ranks. They represented "up to 16 percent of foreign nationals who traveled to join the group in Iraq and Syria."¹²⁹ Additionally, these numbers may not even reflect the female locals who were already members of the Islamic State. To date, the Islamic State may have lost

¹²⁵ Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "Women in the Islamic State," 23.

¹²⁶ Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism," 6.

¹²⁷ Gina Vale, "Women in the Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps," 2.

¹²⁸ Gina Vale, "Women in the Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps," 2.

¹²⁹ Gina Vale, "Women in the Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps," 2.

the majority of the territory, but female presence remains within the organization. Further evaluation will be needed in the future to understand the implications of women's participation on the terrorist network. As the Islamic State territory and power diminishes and an attempt to regain authority is made, new opportunities could be presented to female terrorists in the organization.

IX. Women's Roles in Terrorism

Assumed Roles

There are several women who are members of terrorist groups like the Islamic State that fulfill roles within the private sphere, or behind closed doors. These roles are those of mothers, nurturers, and educators. However, these roles, according to the Islamic State, are all roles that help further the aims of the Islamic State. These roles are also seen when women participate in recruitment. Furthermore, the Islamic State frames and shapes these roles, considering them as ways of female empowerment. Sustaining and supporting male fighters is assumed to be a powerful role.¹³⁰ In an attempt to maintain the social structure, keeping women in the private sphere, the men suggest that they educate and raise future fighters and emphasize that this can empower women. Women's role was "to give birth to, and raise and indoctrinated future generations of jihadists."¹³¹ Their assumed roles, were considered domestic and supportive. However, even in these roles, women were able to actively participate in areas of assisting the Islamic State. These roles also could have led to power opportunities, where women could eventually work their way into the public sphere.

¹³⁰ Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women," 15.

¹³¹ Lydia Khalil, "Behind the Veil," 3.

Actual Roles of Women

Women in terrorist organizations do not always settle for support roles considered fitting by their male counterparts. In many cases women start out as nurturers and supporters of those in jihad in addition to taking care of the home. But women don't stop there. Many of these radicalized women use the place of being a homemaker within the terrorist organization to solidify their place before attempting to grow. Often times they may not even realize they are defying the conservative norms of strictly adhering to what the men, or even women say about being those supporters at home. Women played a major role in actively aiding the Islamic State by conducting recruitment. The majority of the Western female recruits left for the Islamic State territory as a result of the propaganda and recruitment methods.¹³² In reality, even the women of the al-Khansaa Brigade have defied the "gender norms" of the Islamic State. Even though they speak on behalf of the men, they have earned a level of power and prominence because they are allowed to even speak out and continue to do so, asserting their own authority over other women. Aqsa Mahmood is an example of a young woman who had an actual role in the Islamic State by being a leader in the Al-Khansaa Brigade.¹³³ Shams is another example of a women who entered through marriage, but gained prominence through her blog and within the healthcare system of the Islamic State. She operates a clinic and provides services for women and children.¹³⁴ Although these roles are not necessarily ground breaking, for these women in the Islamic State it shows that they do have some levels of legitimate positions and responsibilities.

¹³² Sofia Patel, "The Sultanate of Women," 16.

¹³³ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides."

¹³⁴ Atika Shubert, "The Women of ISIS: Who are they?" *CNN*, May 29, 2015.

Suicide Bombers & Combatants

Women have also been able to participate in terrorism as suicide bombers for terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS. Although initially both groups shied away from using women as bombers, some leaders have allowed for this shift in ideology. This shift shows that women do have responsibilities, even as suicide bombers in the organization. The use of female suicide bombers to carry out terrorist attacks is also on the rise, “statistics show that between 1981 and 2007 women carried out approximately 26 percent of all suicide attacks and that there has been a marked rise in women’s participation in such attacks since 2005.”¹³⁵ In the study of al-Qaeda and ISIS, use of female suicide bombers was and still is usually carried out in Iraq. In July of 2017 alone, around 20 female suicide bombers detonated themselves in civilian areas around Mosul.¹³⁶ Prior to that, many other attacks were carried out in Iraq under the instruction of al-Zarqawi from al-Qaeda. The first, whose name to this day is still unknown, was dressed as a man as she carried out her attack in Talafa, Iraq in September of 2005.¹³⁷ As previously mentioned, Myrium Goris, the Belgian woman, detonated herself as a suicide bomber in Iraq in November 2005.¹³⁸ Just these few examples show that women have been, and are in fact given responsibilities and enough power to participate in violence, and in this case, direct physical violence. There is a “significant increase in the number of women joining in combat.”¹³⁹ Whether or not women’s willingness to partake in suicide bombing is utilized for the patriarchal agenda of the terrorist organization, they still have a certain level of agency in implementing violence.

¹³⁵ Katherine Brown, "Blinded by the Explosion? Security and Resistance in Muslim Women’s Suicide Terrorism," 194.

¹³⁶ Rachel Bryson, "Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq."

¹³⁷ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 209-210.

¹³⁸ Jennie Stone and Katherine Pattillo, "Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study," 165.

¹³⁹ Hallar Abderrahaman Mohamed, "Women in ISIS: Social Diagnosis and Interventions," 123.

Women's Ages & Roles

As the number of female memberships in the Islamic State rises, further evaluation is needed about their age ranges and roles. Does age factor into what roles women are given or obtain while under the Islamic State? There seems to be an increase in attraction to the Islamic State by young woman around the world.¹⁴⁰ Although the participation numbers are often examined, few scholars analyze the potential of age influencing women's roles. Amanda Spencer, in her article "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of Women in the Islamic State," provides a data examination of women's age and roles. Her findings are paraphrased here,

"Evidence regaled that 53% of women serving the role of a wife are between the ages of 14 and 18, while 56% of mothers are 25 and up...50% of female recruiters are between the ages of 19 and 24... Female patrol officers are predominantly between the ages of 19 and 22. Women that occupy an authoritative position are generally older, between the aged of 24 and 27, with only one case that is under 21 years old."¹⁴¹

These numbers indicate that there could be a relationship between age and role for women within the Islamic State. Women who are older may possess or earn power in roles overtime. However, what is considered older? What is considered a powerful position? In these statistics, it is evident that each age range of women occupy certain essential roles for the Islamic State. The majority of women in this case study are still within their young adulthood. The study does not specify whether this data is based on only foreign recruits or if it contains information about the local population of women involved in the Islamic State, and those categories are also blurred. As the Islamic State does recruit more women, it is evident that many recruits are young women from

¹⁴⁰ Debangana Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," 209.

¹⁴¹ Amanda Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of Women in the Islamic State," 93-94.

the West. However, findings and statistical information about women's age within the Islamic State and their roles is limited and should be studied further.

Women in the Islamic State

Women involved with the Islamic State both inflict violence upon others and experience levels of violence themselves. In 2019, filmmaker Thomas released the third part of his documentary titled, "Women of ISIL."¹⁴² Al-Jazeera, a news network based in the Middle East, provided an edited five-part series of the documentary that highlighted the lives of several women living under the leadership of the Islamic State. In these recollections, women tell their stories of being, torturers, wives, a teacher, a nurse, and a hairdresser.¹⁴³ Each woman who shared parts of their trauma had different levels of experience and exposure to violence. However, there is a commonality that although all of these women have different stories, some were victims, some were perpetrators, and some were both.

In the first installment, women who acted as torturers for the religious police in the Islamic State share their stories. These women inflicted harsh violence on other women, but how can their choice be analyzed? One woman, Aisha, also known as Umm Qaqaa, became a widow after her husband became a martyr for the Islamic State. She noted "I had no more money. I had no choice but to work for them."¹⁴⁴ How can someone evaluate her levels of complicity and agency while working under the Islamic State? Aisha worked for the policing unit and often policed other women. She was in charge of looking for women who violated the Islamic State's dress code.¹⁴⁵ She recalled "sometimes we had 30,40 women, sometimes 10, or 20. It depended

¹⁴² "Women of ISIL: Life Inside the Caliphate." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴³ "Women under ISIL: The Torturers." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴⁴ "Women under ISIL: The Torturers." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴⁵ "Women under ISIL: The Torturers." *Al Jazeera*.

on the number of violations. But we never came back empty.”¹⁴⁶ Her experience demonstrates the complexity of women’s position in the Islamic State. Aisha was responsible for policing and implementing torture against other women in the territory. This shows that she acted as a perpetrator, participating in violence, but what were the limitations behind her choice? Was she also a victim of the Islamic State’s manipulation? Was she forced to participate? She also mentions that other women, the women of the Islamic State were in charge of policing her in carrying out this violence. This also shows that women do possess levels of authority, even if that authority was given by male leadership.

X. Violence against Women

Although this paper has examined the place of women within terrorist violence, it is also essential to briefly discuss the violence that the Islamic State perpetrates against women, both within and under their organization, and towards those they capture. This brief examination demonstrates that although women actively participate in violence in the Islamic State, women are often the target of some of the harshest violence of organization, and this violence takes several different forms.

Women Under the Islamic State

The remaining four installments of the “Women of ISIL” documentary highlight the stories of women who were victims of violence at the hands the Islamic State. These women experienced both physical and emotional violence. In one of the stories, a wife of an Islamic State militant was forced to watch punishments carried out by other members against a

¹⁴⁶ “Women under ISIL: The Torturers.” *Al Jazeera*.

woman.¹⁴⁷ Although this woman did not endure the physical violence herself, being a part of this situation was a different form of inflicting violence and fear, a type of structural violence. This structural violence is represented through the restrictive social structure of the Islamic State demonstrated through male control in this specific example. This same kind of fear was experienced by a school teacher in the Islamic State territory. Ayat, a 27-year-old teacher was threatened by the Islamic State for deviating from their jihad centered curriculum. In sharing her experience, she reported that she was always on guard after that, even in her home, in constant fear.¹⁴⁸ A fellow teacher also deviated from the Islamic State's teaching requirements and was stoned to death.¹⁴⁹ These examples demonstrate different levels of both nonphysical and physical violence as perpetrated by the Islamic State. These women even belonged through the organization through relationships with their husbands, and they endured the same violence the terrorist organization perpetrates against innocent victims around the world.

Two other experiences were shared by a hairdresser and a nurse, who like the other women, experienced nonphysical violence by the Islamic State. The young nurse, Yasmine was responsible for delivering future Islamic State children, but had limited influence over her own medical practices, and no mobility outside of the home to shop.¹⁵⁰ Her freedom was completely restricted. She also divulged that there were surveillance cameras all over the hospital.¹⁵¹ Is constant surveillance a different form of violence of the Islamic State, a type of structural violence? Another method of instilling fear? Lastly, the hair dresser attempted to defy the Islamic State by keeping her salon open in Mosul. They eventually found out and raided it. She

¹⁴⁷ "Women under ISIL" The Wives." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴⁸ "Women under ISIL" The Teacher." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁴⁹ "Women under ISIL" The Teacher." *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁵⁰ "Women under ISIL" The Nurse," *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁵¹ "Women under ISIL" The Nurse," *Al Jazeera*.

continued to take clients at home, but expressed how fearful it was every day.¹⁵² There were major differences between women living under the Islamic State, as they were, in comparison to women working for the Islamic State. These women, who were active participants had different privileges, such as more freedom of mobility, access to money, and cigarettes.¹⁵³ Each of these recollections illustrate that instilling constant fear, is a form of terrorism and violence. These women living under the Islamic State's territory experienced this violence daily. More importantly, it shows that violence does not always have to be visible, or physical to be real.

Women as Targets of Sexual Violence

The Islamic State has perpetrated appalling sexual violence against women taken captive from conquests but also within their already acquired territory. They use systematic rape as a weapon of war, specifically against minority communities like the Yazidis. Fawaz A. Gerges in his book *A History of ISIS*, argues that the Islamic State perpetrates ethnic cleansing when it comes to the Yazidi communities. He notes that they demonstrate a “systematic cultural cleansing” of Yazidis and the women are forced into sexual slavery.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Gerges argues “ISIS's involvement in the sex trade and its enslavement of girls and women from the tiny Yazidi religious community are driven not only by power and male (patriarchal) dominance but also by ideological zealotry.”¹⁵⁵ The acts of using rape as a weapon of war is not an exclusive tactic of the Islamic State, but their actions have garnered abundant attention from the media, human rights organizations, and other state governments. The raping and enslavement of women did not go unnoticed. The Counter Extremism Project, a non-profit policy organization, has

¹⁵² “Women under ISIL” The Hairdresser,” *Al Jazeera*.

¹⁵³ “Women under ISIL” The Nurse,” and “Women under ISIL: The Torturers.”

¹⁵⁴ Fawaz A. Gerges, *A History of ISIS*, 31.

¹⁵⁵ Fawaz A. Gerges, *A History of ISIS*, 32.

researched and gathered reports about the violence of the Islamic State. In July of 2017 they published a report titled “ISIS’s Persecution of Women” which provides an overview about the cruel treatment women experience at the hands of the Islamic State. In their report they provide one of the key findings:

“ISIS sanctions rape and physical abuse for girls as young as nine years old. Some survivors report that women are gang raped and subjected to gruesome punishments including beatings, and being forced to watch militants rape friends and family.¹⁵⁶

This information demonstrates that the Islamic State’s acts of violence are recognized and not hidden. The Counter Extremism Project emphasizes the Islamic State’s blatant disregard and manipulation of females. Most importantly, the CEP recognizes that although the Islamic State is losing territory, they are still a danger to females in the Middle East.¹⁵⁷ The Islamic State’s ideology about the place of women is not limited to their territory. ISIS affiliates and supporting groups also commit horrifying violence against women outside of the Islamic State’s remaining grounds.

Rukmini Callimachi is a *New York Times* foreign correspondent who is well known for covering the violence of the Islamic State and evaluating their ideology. In August of 2015, Callimachi published an article titled “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” which detailed the Islamic State’s practice of systemic rape of Yazidi females. She notes, “The trade in Yazidi women and girls has created a persistent infrastructure, with a network of warehouses where the victims are held, viewing rooms where they are inspected and marketed, and a dedicated fleet of buses used to transport them.”¹⁵⁸ Callimachi further discusses the process in which ISIS fighters

¹⁵⁶ Counter Extremism Project “ISIS’s Persecution of Women,” 1.

¹⁵⁷ Counter Extremism Project “ISIS’s Persecution of Women,” 8.

¹⁵⁸ Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape.”

capture Yazidi women, separate them from men, and taken into trucks and buses before being sold. The Islamic State fighters even “conducted a census of their female captives.”¹⁵⁹ The Islamic State is not only violating women, but doing it in a completely structured and organized manner, at least when they describe the practice. Is it to demonstrate power? Religious superiority? Or just patriarchal notions of ownership over women?

XI. Conclusions:

Is it Everything She Hoped For?

After women join the terrorist organizations, regardless of what roles they carry out, it is essential to examine their treatment while in the organization. These women are attracted to terrorist groups, specifically the Islamic State, and have a desire to be a participator or a supporter of jihad. Women join the Islamic State from all over the world, but major emphasis is placed on women coming from the West. The treatment of these women after they join or live under the authority of these organizations is not often what it seems. These women are promised a utopia, by the radical terrorist leaders and by recruiters but are those promises reality? Some women say no... Laura Passoni, the one woman who joined the Islamic State later fled after realizing the group’s harsh methods of brutality. One day, Islamic State fighters brought her son, who was four years old, home after being taught how to cut off a stuffed teddy bear’s head.¹⁶⁰ She had no control or power while being in the Islamic State, no control over her own life or her son’s.

When many of these women join, other and sometimes more powerful women within the organization, who are trusted to keep a close eye on new recruits or brides, keep them under

¹⁵⁹ Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape.”

¹⁶⁰ Jake Cigainero, “A Belgian woman explains why she joined ISIS, and why she came back.”

close watch. The al-Khansaa Brigade manifesto showed how repressive life was. If one did not comply or obey to the rules, they were harshly beaten and punished.¹⁶¹ This is a type of direct and physical violence women experience. The Islamic State and the al-Khansaa Brigade even mention that the age of marriage for girls is nine.¹⁶² In conflicts across the world, and in areas of violence and chaos, like under the Islamic State or affiliation with al-Qaeda, rape is a common practice in war. Women experience physical and sexual violence, inside the Islamic State, and outside of the organization's constraints. Some of this sexual violence is even facilitated with the help of other women.¹⁶³ The violation and exploitation of women is not exclusive to terrorist organizations, but occurs frequently within these organizations.

Although these women join terrorist organizations like the Islamic State, it is not always everything they hoped for. Some women experience extreme violence and mistreatment at the hands of both men and women in the organization. Foreign recruits have major difficulty adapting and locals are not always accepting to these women.¹⁶⁴ This ostracization and purposeful oppression is another form of both structural and cultural violence. This leads some women to attempt to escape, or if they are lucky, their escape is successful. "They talk about shocking experience and awareness of having made the biggest mistake of their lives."¹⁶⁵ However, once these women do leave the Islamic State, there are lasting repercussions for themselves, and regarding the possibility of their immersion back into society.

Manipulation

¹⁶¹ Lizzie Dearden, "Isis' British brides."

¹⁶² Heather Saul, "Life as a woman under Isis: Document reveals for the first-time what group really expects from female recruits living in Syria and Iraq."

¹⁶³ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 237.

¹⁶⁴ Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," 29.

¹⁶⁵ Anita Perešin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," 28.

As women gain ground within these organizations they do wield power, but often that power can be manipulated and utilized by their male counterparts. The manipulation women experience while involved in groups like the Islamic State is a type of structural violence. The tactics of the Islamic State are not always visible, but embedded in the social structure of their organization. However, many women capitalize on some of these power and leadership opportunities, even if that manipulation occurs. For example, terrorist leaders use female suicide bombers because they believe them to be more inconspicuous and therefore more successful. Women are not as suspected in public places, like airports, making them of “strategic value” to groups like al-Qaeda.¹⁶⁶ They are not used because they are like the men, but a gender discussion suddenly arises because the female is, at the time, useful. But this also allows women to take ownership of their agency, and participate in the violence if that is their goal. Some of the main reasons for even permitting women to participate is the tactical advantage, but also the publicity that follows. Another major tactic is the use of women to encourage recruitment of other males.¹⁶⁷ This plays into using those women to acquire more support. Like al-Zarqawi said, if females are participating, where are the men? At points where, male figures see female’s participation as fitting, their conservative viewpoints suddenly “go by the wayside.”¹⁶⁸ Women are active participants in the violent tactics utilized by terrorist organizations. Like all individuals, they have the freedom of choice to join, and radicalize. However, as they participate, they often experience both empowerment and discrimination.

Overall Significance

¹⁶⁶ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, 124.

¹⁶⁷ Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, 127.

¹⁶⁸ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell*, 209.

There are many reasons behind women's decisions to participate in violence and join terrorist groups. Their influences and factors behind their radicalization should not be evaluated based on traditional gender norms or constructs. Women, like men, willingly participate in terrorist groups like the Islamic State, and have similar motivations for joining. Women are present as actors in terrorism in both the private and public sphere. Although their roles and actions are sometimes outlined by male figures and other prominent women in the organization, this does not mean their agency is absent. One must not take away their responsibility for their membership and participation in inflicting violence. However, it must be recognized that in the constraints of any violent organization, certain choices and freedoms are limited, which can have a major impact on anyone's experience. Although women in the Islamic State act as perpetrators, they often experience and witness brutal types of physical and nonphysical violence which can also allow them to experience victimization at the hands of the organization. As continued research occurs in evaluating the roles of women in terrorist organizations, especially with the territorial decline of the Islamic State, gender needs to be a component of analysis while evaluating global politics. Women's agency should not be overlooked, women too can be terrorists, but we must be cautious in how we represent violent women.

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