

The Evolution of Women in the Islamic State

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Brief Analysis

September 26, 2017

A 2015 [report \(http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/middleeast/who-are-the-women-of-isis/index.html\)](http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/middleeast/who-are-the-women-of-isis/index.html) estimated that in addition to an extensive network of local women, 550 Western women left their homes to travel to Syria and Iraq in order to join the Islamic State. A separate study in 2016 revealed that an average of 17 percent of as many as 4,294 foreign fighters traveling from [eleven EU member states \(https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf\)](https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ICCT-Report_Foreign-Fighters-Phenomenon-in-the-EU_1-April-2016_including-AnnexesLinks.pdf) were female, putting the number at closer to 1,000. This does not include women traveling from Central and Southwest Asia, Africa, and the Gulf.

This percentage may seem relatively small, but it is not insignificant. As countries' nascent de-radicalization programs kick in, particular attention should be paid to women crossing back over the border. Women occupy a versatile position in the Islamic State and in many ways transcend the marginal roles for which scripture designates them. To discount their participation and agency as active members of an ever-persistent terror organization would be both dangerous and naïve. Against this backdrop, an overview of the transformation of the image women in the Islamic State have held over its past few years of media prominence is crucial to both understanding the varying threats they pose and to developing appropriate strategies in response.

The nature of female participation in Islamic State operations has evolved along with the organization's own trajectory. This evolution continues today as the group is forced to reconfigure itself following geographic defeats. Prior to 2015, the Islamic State espoused a distinct aversion to females traveling to the fledgling caliphate, stating that war was no place for women. Rather, it enjoined sympathetic women to remain in their communities to fundraise, spread propaganda, and raise [the next generation of fighters. \(https://www.isdglobal.org/346-2/\)](https://www.isdglobal.org/346-2/) Meanwhile, the Islamic State also gained notoriety as gross perpetrators of gender violence.

As the Islamic State made unprecedented territorial gains in eastern Syria and northwest Iraq, it seemed to internalize the importance of women in both maintaining a functioning state and facilitating the reproduction of its citizens. Their capture of the Syrian city of Raqqa in 2013, in particular, catalyzed a shift in their online propaganda;

not only were women actively recruited for traditional supporting roles like wife and mother (which still remains their primary function), but there was now an additional call for women to serve as doctors, nurses, teachers, and administrators. Notably, women were eventually given the responsibility to monitor compliance among other women, evident in the establishment of the all-female [al-Khansaa](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>) police brigade. This adaptation by the Islamic State to changing circumstances was later reflected in the seventh edition of the group's online propaganda magazine, Dabiq, which included a new section [directly addressing women](http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/seven-promises-of-isis-to-its-female-recruits/) (<http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/seven-promises-of-isis-to-its-female-recruits/>).

The number of women traveling alone or with female companions to Syria to join the Islamic State also increased as the group rapidly gained territory. This change indicated that ideological attachment to the Islamic State was now an important motivating force, rather than just personal or familial reasons. While women are quickly married off upon arrival in the caliphate, this should be viewed as a means of joining the Islamic State, rather than an end.

The “jihadi bride” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29507410>) aspect of women in the Islamic State is often erroneously magnified in Western media. This misconception is dangerous for many reasons, but especially because it is inherently dismissive. It misconstrues and over-simplifies women's attraction to the group as stemming not from an idea or opportunity, but from an attachment to a person or relationship. Moreover, to focus on the marriage aspect of life in the caliphate is to view enlistment through the lens of why men want women to join, instead of why women themselves choose to go (https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/female-terrorists-and-their-role-in-jihadi-groups/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Doha%20Center&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=52712968). In order to implement appropriate counterterrorism measures, Western media and government officials will need to recognize that women are often active participants in Islamic State operations rather than just vulnerable, young girls lured with the promise of romance.

As the caliphate continues to crumble, most recently with the recapture of Mosul, continued study of the social media accounts of women in the Islamic State is critical, considering they are a primary lens into the often obscure reality of the group. For one, it is likely that popular accounts such as Bird of Jannah (http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf) and Umm Muawiyah (<http://theweek.com/articles/442680/how-brides-isis-are-attracting-western-women>), who gained prominence via their tips and tales for women interested in undergoing the Hijrah, or the journey to the caliphate, will shift their discourse from anecdotal to instructive. Due to dwindling opportunities for migration, it is possible that these actors will more heavily advocate for terror attacks in their followers' home countries. Already on record are women such as Khadijah Dare (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11049663/James-Foley-murder-British-woman-vows-to-become-first-female-to-behead-western-prisoner-in-Syria.html>) who trumpeted her desire to partake in murderous activities like the beheading of journalist James Foley; the notorious Islamic State blogger Umm Layth (https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf), who implored young Muslims via Twitter, Tumblr, and Ask.fm who “cannot make it to the battlefield” to “then bring the battlefield to yourself”; and Tashfeen Malik (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/06/us/san-bernardino-shooter-tashfeen-malik/index.html>), who went so far as to actualize Islamic State objectives with the 2015 San Bernardino attack.

Beyond the Islamic State's view of the role of women, it is also important to understand how these women view themselves (http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf). This understanding is critical to developing a comprehensive approach to countering violent extremism, and particularly in combating lone

wolf attacks. Women are an integral part of the Islamic State apparatus, despite the group's anachronistic dispositions towards them. A better grasp of the Islamic State's appeal to women is vital, particularly since the recriminations that drove them to the group in the first place will likely continue once they return home.



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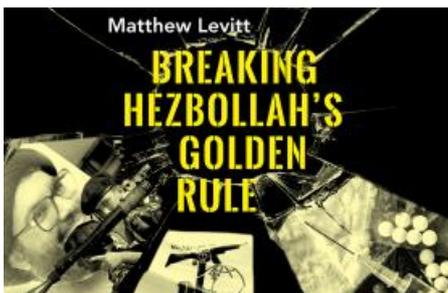
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