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The Agency and Roles of Foreign Women in ISIS

DEVORAH MARGOLIN AND JOANA COOK

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Introduction

The foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon discussed today began with the flow of an estimated 53,000 individuals from 80 countries who traveled to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, including the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (known as Daesh, the Islamic State, or simply ISIS).¹ These individuals left their home countries to travel to support jihad for a variety of reasons, and often with varying levels of agency and roles in relation to ISIS.

While much of the research on the FTF phenomenon has focused on adult men, a 2019 report estimated that women and minors made up 36 to 42 percent of those who traveled to join ISIS from Western Europe, 46 to 54 percent of travelers from Eastern Europe, and an estimated 27 to 39 percent of U.S. travelers.² This project highlighted that foreign travelers to Syria and Iraq were men, women, and minors, illuminating an often under-examined aspect of the FTF phenomenon – the diversity of roles and actors that joined and how these contributed to the goals and aims of ISIS. Moreover, this research accounted for an increasing number of minors who were born in the conflict zone or in detention to at least one foreign parent. For ISIS, the group that the majority of these individuals traveled to be a part of, the creation of its so-called caliphate was a vital part in its recruitment strategies aimed at families, and the central role they saw men, women, and minors play in their state building ambitions.

The language used to discuss this flow of individuals also has had gendered policy implications. In fact, the term FTF insinuates that all of these individuals were not only associated with a designated foreign terrorist organization, but were also engaged in fighting.³ For those who study jihadist groups and their ideology, it is clear that this in turn emphasizes adult men, and their contributions to these violent extremist groups. To solely focus on men and men's contributions, however, would be a misunderstanding of what these jihadist groups are seeking to achieve, and an underrepresentation of women's (and children's) contributions to these movements. Moreover, once in-theater, the agency that was once present for many adults in the decision to travel was sometimes removed or limited due to a number of circumstances. This was often further compounded by age and gender-based factors.

Gender-based biases have led to the difficulty in understanding women's experiences under ISIS and in prosecuting women for their roles associated with the atrocities of the group.⁴ While countries like the U.S. have advocated for the repatriation of foreign ISIS-affiliated women, European governments have often been reluctant and highlighted the difficulties

- 1 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019): 30-45, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>.
- 2 Regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) had significant data gaps. Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," 30-45.
- 3 Austin Doctor, Haroro Ingram, Devorah Margolin, Andrew Mines, and Lorenzo Vidino, "A Framework of Best Practices for the Reintegration of Foreign Fighter Families to the U.S.," *National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center* (2023): 1-32, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/6338>.
- 4 Cook and Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," 30-45; Devorah Margolin, Joana Cook, and Charlie Winter, "In Syria, the Women and Children of ISIS Have Been Forgotten," *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/26/in-syria-the-women-and-children-of-isis-have-been-forgotten/>; Devorah Margolin and Austin C. Doctor, "Thousands of Men, Women and Children Remain in Detention Because of Their Former Ties to ISIS," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/02/thousands-men-women-children-remain-detention-because-their-former-ties-isis/>; Haroro J. Ingram, Julie Coleman, Austin C. Doctor, and Devorah Margolin, "The Repatriation & Reintegration Dilemma: How States Manage the Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters & Their Families," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 31, (2022): 119-163.

related to women's prosecutions.⁵ Despite these limitations, 2022 saw an increase in repatriations from countries long resistant to doing so (including France and Australia) and also saw several successful cases prosecuted. For example, a Swedish court sentenced Lina Ishaq to six years for crimes associated with ISIS, a move applauded by UNITAD.⁶ Moreover, high-profile U.S. cases including that of Allison Fluke-Ekren also set important precedents.⁷ Canada also saw two women return in 2022, one of whom faced four criminal charges, including participating in a terrorist group, leaving Canada to do so, and making property or services available for terrorist purposes.⁸ When looking at the repatriation of adults, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of the cases being repatriated – and thus prosecuted – are adult women.⁹ This imbalance in accountability stands out when exploring ISIS's gendered system of control, which often relegate women to auxiliary roles.

While every country is bound by their own legal system and definitions of terrorism, terrorist organization, and terrorism-related offenses, primary source documents coupled with personal testimonies and international investigations have been a vital part of these efforts to ensure that the inner workings of ISIS are known and ISIS-associated individuals are held accountable. Moreover, recent efforts have turned to the use of international law to aid in the prosecution of these individuals. German courts have now convicted three ISIS members of genocide for their crimes against the Yazidis, the second two of which have been brought against women.¹⁰ In 2022, German courts convicted a woman, only identified as Jalda A., of aiding and abetting genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes for her role in the Islamic State, and enslavement and abuse of a young Yazidi woman.¹¹ Germany delivered its third genocide conviction against an ISIS member to Nadine K. in June 2023.¹² To date, German courts have also convicted five ISIS-affiliated individuals, all women, of crimes against humanity and war crimes.¹³

5 Margolin and Doctor, "Thousands of Men, Women and Children Remain in Detention Because of Their Former Ties to ISIS."

6 "UNITAD Welcomes Swedish Court Ruling of ISIL Woman Committing Grave Violations of International Law," United Nations, Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD), March 7, 2022, <https://www.unitad.un.org/Swedish%20Conviction%20Press%20Release>.

7 "American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Charged with Providing Material Support to a Terrorist Organization," United States Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, January 29, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-charged-providing-material-support-terrorist>.

8 Ashley Burkey, "2 Women Arrested in Canada After Coming Home from Syrian Camp for ISIS fighters' Families," CBC, October 26, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/two-women-two-children-repatriated-syrian-detention-camps-1.6629838>.

9 For examples, see: "Foreign Terrorist Fighters Knowledge Hub," International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT), <https://www.icct.nl/project/foreign-terrorist-fighters-knowledge-hub>.

10 "German court hands down first genocide conviction against ISIS member," Doughty Street Chambers, November 30, 2021, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-hands-down-first-genocide-conviction-against-isis-member>.

11 Ewelina U. Ochab, "How One Yazidi Woman Helped To Secure The Second Genocide Conviction Of A Daesh Member," Forbes, August 2, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2022/08/02/how-one-yazidi-woman-helped-to-secure-the-second-genocide-conviction-of-a-daesh-member/?sh=455465785d5d>; "German Court Hands Down Second Genocide Conviction Against ISIS Member Following Enslavement and Abuse of Yazidi Woman in Syria," Doughty Street Chambers, July 28, 2022, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-hands-down-second-genocide-conviction-against-isis-member-following-enslavement>; Gina Vale, "Case Note-Justice Served?: Ashwaq Haji Hamid Talo's Confrontation and Conviction of Her Islamic State Captor," *Journal of Human Trafficking, Enslavement and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*, 1.2 (2020): 189-198.

12 "German court delivers third genocide verdict against ISIS member for the enslavement and abuse of Yazidi woman in Syria and Iraq," Doughty Street Chambers, June 21, 2023, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-delivers-third-genocide-verdict-against-isis-member-enslavement-and-abuse-yazidi>.

13 Ochab, "How One Yazidi Woman Helped To Secure The Second Genocide Conviction Of A Daesh Member."



To aid in these pursuits of accountability, this paper responds to the question, “What was the agency and roles of foreign women in ISIS?” In doing so, we hope to better define the diverse roles foreign women held in different parts of ISIS’s so-called caliphate.¹⁴ This will be done in a methodical manner that reflects both ISIS’s ideology and its day-to-day governance. To answer this question, we examine foreign women who ISIS considered to be part of the “in-group,” i.e., women who actively joined the group traveling from their countries of origin to Syria and Iraq. This paper will also discuss the experiences of local Syrian and Iraqi women in cases where they interacted with foreign ISIS-affiliated women. This will be done in order to highlight the overarching day-to-day life of in-group foreign women under ISIS. In doing so, we hope to present a nuanced understanding of foreign ISIS-affiliated women’s experiences, better shaping prosecutions and reintegration policy aimed at these individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted by the authors since 2013 in relation to this topic. This research is drawn from academic, open-source reports, primary source documents, interviews, and five trips to Iraq between 2018 and 2022 – one specifically focused on this report. The following has provided extensive examples and sources to support the statements made and opinion provided. All views are our own and do not represent the views of our past or current employers. It is written in our personal capacity alone.

This paper will triangulate the information around the roles and agency of foreign ISIS-affiliated women from multiple sources. After addressing the academic and gray literature from rebel governance and terrorism studies, this will include:

- ISIS primary source documents, including files held by George Washington University, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and private collections, including jihadism archivist Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi.
- Court cases of female ISIS members in select countries, including the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany.
- Fieldwork and interviews in Iraq with two main groups. First, men and women from ISIS-affiliated families and second, with practitioners who work on the issue of ISIS’s role in Iraq, rehabilitation, and reintegration.¹⁵

This project draws these sources together and provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the implications and considerations from these findings. This paper is a starting point for those engaging on the topic. This paper seeks to present information vital to a nuanced understanding of women’s roles and agency under ISIS and the diversity of their experiences.

This paper is made up of five sections. Following the introduction, Section I considers key information to better understand women’s roles, who joined the group from abroad, and their motivations to do so, and why looking at this issue via a gender lens is important. Section II addresses the background on women in jihad, and ISIS’s ideological conceptualization of women’s roles. Section III looks at the various roles women played under ISIS between 2013 and 2019. This explores the different institutions women contributed to, as well as women’s

14 For the sake of this research, foreign ISIS-affiliated women refer to women from outside of Syria and Iraq.

15 These included 16 interviews in Iraq in fall 2022. All interviews are fully anonymized and referenced by interview number only in this report.



roles in both public and private life. This utilizes internal ISIS documents, interviews and field work carried out by the authors, academic and gray literature, as well as court cases documenting women's cases. This focuses on an examination of what other external factors may have impacted women's agency – specifically the ability to make a decision and transform that choice into an action. Section IV addresses detention and life for women after the fall of the Islamic State's caliphate. Finally, Section V presents the conclusion.

Section I: Understanding women's roles and why they joined ISIS

It is important to first highlight several caveats to be clear about what ISIS is and how it has evolved. ISIS has been a terrorist organization which engaged in guerilla tactics, a political and state-building project,¹⁶ and even a social movement.¹⁷ At times it even reflected a conventional army,¹⁸ though since its territorial defeat in January 2019, it has reverted to an insurgency within Iraq and Syria.¹⁹ ISIS has been a constantly evolving, multi-faceted entity.

Under its so-called 'caliphate' ISIS held and administered territory in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2019. Based on the pronouncement of ISIS as a group in 2013 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the declaration of the 'caliphate' in 2014, this report largely focuses on the period between 2013 and 2019 when those who traveled to Iraq and Syria were more likely to have gone with an intent to join this specific group.

ISIS and its 'caliphate' evolved significantly throughout this time and as such the shape and scope of it as an organization, the activities it and its individual members engaged in, and the persons drawn to it, have also evolved along the way.²⁰ For example, in 2014 al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, announced it was establishing a caliphate; in ISIS propaganda the 'caliphate' was presented as an obligation for Muslims to travel to, and as an ideal Islamic state to live in.²¹ In this period, there was a sharp increase in foreigners, including women and whole families, who traveled to Syria and Iraq for the purpose of living in and supporting this 'caliphate', even as news reports increasingly reported on the atrocities being committed by ISIS and its members.

- 16 At its peak it ruled over a population of approximately 8 million people and controlled an area the size of the UK. It set up an institutionalized means of governing, collecting taxes, administering public services, and even providing marriage and birth certificates.
- 17 Mario Diani, "The concept of social movement," *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 1-25. Social movements are defined as "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities." As such, this description as a social movement would apply to the broad network of people within Iraq and Syria and around the world who felt some sense of shared identity with ISIS.
- 18 Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's men help ISIS rule," *Reuters*, December 11, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/>. Many of the members of ISIS were ex-Baathists, formerly officers in Saddam Hussein's military and thus provided military expertise and training to the organization which became particularly visible as it moved into cities and engaged in combat with international and local forces trying to defeat the organization.
- 19 Lead Inspector General, Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019, August 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/06/20021671671-1-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF; Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 2010, https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp1_02.pdf; Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency, April 25, 2018, II-I, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf. Discussion of evolution to insurgency: An insurgency is defined as, "The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself." As described by the U.S. military, "Two common objectives of insurgent movements are legitimacy according to public opinion and political control of a population in a particular geographic area."
- 20 For further background, please see Jessica Stern and JM Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015).
- 21 This propaganda often focused on state-building and governance.

Those who traveled later, particularly after the atrocities were well documented, and ISIS had conducted several international terror attacks, may have been more likely to join with the intent to take up violent or defensive roles within the organization.²² This suggests that those drawn to the organization in different periods were highly diverse, had distinct motivations, and may have also held different roles in relation to the organization at different points in time.

It is further important to note the distinctions between foreign women and local Syrian and Iraqi women when discussing roles within the organization, particularly in terms of motivations and intent. Foreign women were more likely to travel to Syria and Iraq with the aim to take up (at least) one of the roles described below. For local women, this is more complex with a higher likelihood that they may have been coerced or otherwise forced to take up some role within the group, or simply to live as ‘citizens’ under the governance implemented by ISIS as it took over increasing amounts of territory (otherwise referenced as ‘coerced civilians’).²³ Some local women may have also joined the group as a survival or protection mechanism in this period, or to attain power or influence. While local Syrian and Iraqi women are not the focus of this paper, it is a vital distinction that must be made.

WOMEN AND AGENCY

Conversations on women’s participation in ISIS often center on women’s agency. Agency in this paper is understood as a “thing or person that acts to produce a particular result.”²⁴ Specifically, women and their ability to make a decision and transform that choice into a desired outcome. For the women who joined ISIS from abroad, the question of agency is rarely black or white. Women’s agency in the public sphere is bound to the situation and state in which she lives, often under the umbrella of patriarchal governments and organizations. In the private sphere, women’s agency can be affected by the men in her family and home. Thus, women’s agency to travel and join ISIS was often tied to their age, family status, and country of origin. For example, a single adult woman from the U.S. would have a different level of agency in her decision to travel compared to a teenage girl from Russia or even a married woman from Morocco.

Moreover, once in-theater, the agency that was once in place to make the decision to travel could be removed or tied to the new social structure women were now in – specifically ISIS’s gendered system of control that severely limited women’s freedom of movement. This will be explored further below.

Thus, it is important that the case of each woman be fully assessed on an individual basis. Thousands of foreign women from around the world traveled to join ISIS.²⁵ This is still believed to be a significant underestimation of the number of women who traveled and is due to

22 Lorne L. Dawson, “A Comparative Analysis of the Data on Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Who Went and Why?” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) - The Hague, February 2021; Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), pp. 88-89; Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” The Program on Extremism at the George Washington University, December 2015.

23 In her research on state-building terrorist groups, Mara Revkin explores the discrepancies and necessary considerations for classification of civilians living under ISIS rule. See, Mara R. Revkin, “When Terrorists Govern: Protecting Civilians in Conflicts with State-Building Armed Groups,” *Harvard National Security Journal*, no. 9 (2018): 138, http://harvardnsj.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/3_Revkin_WhenTerroristsGovern-2.pdf.

24 Oxford Dictionary of English online. Accessed July 18, 2023.

25 Cook and Vale, “From ISIS to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate,” 30-45.



the lack of data available from many countries around the world. More recent evidence has highlighted that many youths, particularly young teenage girls, were also trafficked by ISIS into, or within, Syria.²⁶

Women were also less likely to return to their home countries on their own volition in the 2013-2019 period, due to the numerous restraints limiting their freedom of movement under ISIS. As the remaining population of women currently detained in Iraq and Syria (under Syrian Democratic Forces – SDF – custody) demonstrate, a notable number of those who traveled to Iraq and Syria remained there until the end of ISIS as an entity which held territory. For some women, this was a choice as they were highly invested in the group and its ideology. For others, they were unable to leave, often due to reasons such as the difficulty of traveling as a woman without a male guardian, traveling with children in a conflict zone, or coercive partners. Some women have now spent several years in the region (if they departed in 2014 after ISIS declared its ‘caliphate’, though many arrived prior to this) and have since had multiple children and spouses in this period.²⁷ Furthermore, their status within the organization or the roles they may have taken have also evolved over this period.

WHO JOINED, AND WHY?

Women from around the world joined ISIS and local interviews with women in Iraq who lived near Mosul during ISIS reign confirmed knowledge of travelers from France, the U.S., Britain, the MENA region, Turkey, Japan, China, and others.²⁸ Some of these individuals were born to Muslim families, while others were converts.²⁹ Some of these women traveled alone, while others traveled with foreign family members. ISIS ideology prioritized marriage and motherhood, so once in-theater, those who arrived without husbands were often quickly married off. Moreover, over time if a woman’s husband were killed in battle, they were required or pressured by the group to remarry. Marriage of unwed women served a dual purpose for the group, as they wanted supporters to quickly marry and procreate – creating more future members, as well as to remove the burden of responsibility for these women from the group and onto supporters.³⁰ One interviewee discussed an American woman she knew whose American husband died, and she went on to marry an Iraqi national.³¹ Interviewees noted that in some cases foreign women were married to foreign men, and in some cases were married to local men. This is a crucial point where complexities around nationalities of children became significantly impacted, specifically the issuance of legally recognized documentation.

Often, women each had a unique motivation and pathway to join the group, intent on arriving in Iraq and Syria, and experience over the period of time they were in the conflict zone, and may have held multiple roles throughout the duration of their time there. For example, they may have been taken as a young female child, and subsequently become a bride, mother, and even a widow before their 18th birthday. Some women were ideologically committed to the

26 All Party Parliamentary Group, Report of the Inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Trafficked Britons in Syria, 2022, <https://appgtraffickedbritons.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Report-of-the-Inquiry-by-the-APPG-on-Trafficked-Britons-in-Syria.pdf>.

27 During the conflict with ISIS, thousands of ISIS fighters were killed, and women would frequently become widowed, often remarrying other ISIS-affiliated males, under pressure from the group.

28 Fieldwork, “Interview 11,” 2022.; Fieldwork, “Interview 12,” 2022.; Fieldwork, “Interview 15,” 2022.

29 Fieldwork, “Interview 15,” 2022.

30 See: Al-Hayat Media Center, “To Our Sisters: Advice on Ihdād,” Dabiq 13, 2016; Al-Hayat Media Center, “Marrying the Widows Is an Established Sunnah,” Rumiya 4, 2016.

31 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.



organization and intended to (and did) support ISIS with whatever means were available to them, while others appeared to be more passive, coerced, or simply appeared to follow their families (largely male heads of household) to Iraq and Syria. Some understood the brutality and violence carried out by the group and sought to join and support ISIS regardless, even participating in the violence. Others may have perceived a religiously correct 'ISIS' where they could fulfill what they perceived to be their religious obligations to live under the 'purest' form of sharia law (Islamic jurisprudence). They may have thus sought a shared community, or to practice their faith free from restraint as some had felt they experienced in their home nations.

Others may have observed the violence and hypocrisy of the group upon arrival and immediately regretted their decision to travel and attempted to avoid any participation in, or relationship with, the group. Some initially arrived not as highly radicalized individuals, though the experience of living in a conflict zone, being exposed to ISIS violence, and the loss of loved ones including spouses and children may have changed their perception and participation in diverse ways over time. Cook and Vale generally identified several push and pull factors to describe women's motivations to travel which additionally included "feelings of discrimination, persecution or those of not belonging to their society, seeking independence, and grievances related to foreign policy." Pull factors included "efforts by IS to portray women's empowerment in IS, fulfillment of a perceived 'obligation' to make hijra (migration) and live under strict Islamic jurisprudence and governance, supporting IS' state-building project, seeking adventure, seeking a husband, or traveling to join one already in theater, traveling with family (whether willingly or not), and even seeking free healthcare or education."³²

Each woman must therefore be assessed on their individual experiences and trajectory to determine the level of agency and involvement they had in their potentially diverse roles related to the organization over this extended period of time. The possibility of mental, sexual, or physical abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and diverse coercive means such as threats and intimidation of some women who became affiliated with ISIS should also be assessed. As such, when discussing the roles of women, this report references roles that very different women were recorded to take throughout this period. However, at no time should it be assumed that all women took on all of these roles. The diverse roles held by each woman, and the level of agency and involvement of each, must be assessed on an individual basis.

32 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State" International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, Department of War Studies, King's College London, (2019): 26, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>.

WHY GENDER MATTERS IN ASSESSING WOMEN'S ROLES

Misconceptions surrounding gender continue to plague our understanding of women's participation in violent extremism and terrorism. These may include ideas that women were coerced or forced into a movement, that they play minimal or no roles within these groups, or indeed that they were largely fighters, or conversely largely victims. While these points may be true to differing extents in each case, women's roles and agency in relation to these groups should be understood as occurring on a spectrum (from no/limited role to active role; or from no/low agency to high agency), where many of these features may exist and overlap. For example, a woman may be coerced into a movement and a victim, while also a perpetrator in her household if detaining a slave. A woman may not have picked up a gun but may have encouraged her male family members to fight, helped them prepare for conflict, or even trafficked weapons or goods to assist them. A woman may have also followed a husband and her children for fear that she may never see them again, or even willingly traveled to join the group, bringing along her own children, and then done her utmost to protect these children and exit the conflict zone. In some cases, women who took their children to the caliphate have seen convictions of charges such as neglecting her duties as a parent.³³

These misconceptions surrounding women's participation in violent extremism are often rooted in long-standing narratives around the absence of female agency in the political sphere and the idea that women are 'pulled into' extremism because of their relationship with men, including boyfriends, husbands, sons, fathers, or brothers.³⁴ Academics Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry neatly summarized this as women being viewed largely as mothers (of terrorist actors), monsters (deviant characters), or whores (girlfriend or wife of terrorist actors).³⁵ This belief stems from deeply held cultural norms that assert that women are naturally more 'compassionate and loving' and less interested in politics and nation-building than men.³⁶ However, over two decades of research on gender and extremism has shown this line of thinking to be stereotype-laden, problematic, and dangerous.³⁷

33 "Germany: Woman sentenced for 'IS' membership, breach of care," DW, July 17, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-woman-sentenced-for-is-membership-breach-of-care/a-66251883>; "Sweden convicts woman for recruiting son to fight in Syria," AP, March 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-travel-religion-war-crimes-europe-0d8bad-b600eaf53a628fd6120642c2e7>; "ISIS Member Convicted of Crimes Against Humanity for Aiding and Abetting Enslavement of a Yazidi Woman," Doughty Street Chambers, April 23, 2021, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/isis-member-convicted-crimes-against-humanity-aiding-and-abetting-enslavement-yazidi-woman>.

34 For examples of the discussion around the issue of ignoring women's participation in extremism, please see: Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Elizabeth Pearson, "Shamima Begum: How Europe Toughened Its Stance on Women Returning from ISIS," *The Conversation*, last modified April 24, 2019, <http://www.theconversation.com/shamima-begumhow-europe-toughened-its-stance-on-women-returning-from-islamic-state-112048>.

35 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

36 This has also played out in the criminal justice system. See "chivalry theory".

37 Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women of the Hate Movement*; J.M. Berger, *Extremism*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018); Hilary Pilkington, "'EDL Angels Stand Beside Their Men... Not Behind Them': The Politics of Gender and Sexuality in an Anti-Islam(ist) Movement," *Gender and Education* 29, no. 2 (2017): 238-257; Michaela Kottig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Peto, eds., *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Orla Lehane, David Mair, Saffron Lee, and Jodie Parker, "Brides, Black Widows and Baby-Makers; or Not: an Analysis of the Portrayal of Women in English-Language Jihadi Magazine Image Content," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018) 505-520; Julia Musial, "'My Muslim Sister, Indeed You Are a Mujahidah' - Narratives in the Propaganda of ISIS to Address and Radicalize Western Women. An Exemplary Analysis of the Online Magazine Dabiq," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 9 (2016): 39-100; See also Cynthia Miller-Idris and Hillary Pilkington, "Women are Joining the Far Right - We Need to Understand Why," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/24/women-far-right-gender-roles-radical-right-migrant-muslim>; Policy Research from the Blair Institute by Katherine Brown, Rachel Bryson, Bulama Bukarti,

This discourse surrounding women's involvement in violent extremism often remains reductive and outdated, providing a false view of why women participate in movements like ISIS. This is often seen in the rhetoric around so-called 'ISIS brides' often emphasized in the media and political rhetoric. This term often refers to young women (and teenage girls) who left their countries of origin to travel to Syria and Iraq; they are often viewed as "brainwashed fools that arrogantly rejected their position as 'western women' (and, therefore, as 'equals of men') supposedly with the primary goal of marrying ISIS members and embracing a life of violence and perceived subservience."³⁸ While early rhetoric on 'ISIS brides' emphasized their naïveté, more recent rhetoric has highlighted their evil and conniving nature, even in cases referring to underage girls. In both instances, the rhetoric dehumanizes these women and ignores the nuanced aspects of their participation.³⁹

These gendered narratives can also affect the criminal justice system and the ability to hold women accountable. Gendered frames in court can result in more lenient sentences for women for terrorism-related offenses.⁴⁰ Often "a variety of practical and extralegal factors weigh upon criminal justice decision-making, creating greater leniency for female than male offenders."⁴¹ This "chivalry theory," often focuses on women as caregivers and less culpable than men. However, when women are perceived as having "committed a double offense: breaking the law and violating gender roles in society," they can be "singled out by the criminal justice system and incur stiffer sentences than men."⁴² Thus, in order to not be labeled as "evil woman," female defendants and their legal representation will often emphasize women's roles as mothers and caregivers while deflecting agency and accountability for their actions.

A better comprehension of this phenomenon and the complexities within can help prosecutors and practitioners better understand the roles and agency of women in relation to these movements. Ill-informed perceptions of women's contributions to violent extremism and terrorism can have serious ramifications, including overlooking or underplaying their roles in investigations, deferential treatment in courts, insufficient intervention or rehabilitation programming, and failure to prevent future involvement in violent extremism.

What we thus emphasize in this section is that it is crucial to move past tired stereotypes of women's involvement in violent extremism. What we outline in this paper are the myriad of complex and overlapping ways that women were involved in the group largely between 2013 and 2019, when the ISIS caliphate was a physical reality on the ground, and considerations about their agency during this period. We briefly consider women's roles in al-Hol camp since

Devorah Margolin, Elizabeth Pearson, Charlie Winter, and Emily Winterbotham: <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/debunking-myths-gender-andextremism>.

- 38 Devorah Margolin and Charlie Winter, "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence," *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University (June 2021): 1-54, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/3484zg88m?locale=en>.
- 39 Leonie B. Jackson, *The Monstrous & the Vulnerable: Framing British Jihadi Brides*. Oxford University Press, 2022. Pearson, "Shamima Begum: How Europe Toughened Its Stance on Women Returning from ISIS."
- 40 Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington, "Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?" *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 8 (2018): 24-29, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CTC-SENTINEL-092018.pdf>; Ester Strømme, "Female Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Da'esh: Victims or Perpetrators?" *PluriCourts Research Paper* 17, no. 1 (2016) 1-71, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2962231; Summer Jackson, Katie Ratcliff, and Jeff Gruenewald, "Gender and Criminal Justice Responses to Terrorism in the United States." *Crime & Delinquency* 69, no. 5 (2021): 1044-1070, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011287211047535>; Gathings and Parrotta, "The Use of Gendered Narratives in the Courtroom."
- 41 Stephanie Bontrager, Kelle Barrick, and Elizabeth Stupi, "Gender and sentencing: A metaanalysis of contemporary research," *Journal of Gender Race & Justice* 16 (2013): 352.
- 42 Bontrager, Barrick, and Stupi, "Gender and sentencing: A metaanalysis of contemporary research," 352.

2019 and outline the ongoing roles and agency they have in this closed camp environment, largely considered to be one of the most dangerous places on earth.⁴³

Section II: Women in jihad: A background on ideological justifications for women's roles and involvement

This section examines how the jihadist movement in general, and ISIS specifically, ideologically conceptualizes women's roles within its movement, and women's perceived contribution to the group's governance ambitions and whole-of-society approach.

Women's participation in – and support for – ISIS is framed in highly conservative terms, as a rejection of dominant, disempowering cultural norms that have upended the 'essential' role of women. This participation is framed around childbearing, child-rearing, and caregiving, and is positioned as an active 'choice' or fulfillment of a duty to benefit ISIS.⁴⁴ In other words, women's roles as prescribed by the group are in traditional domestic roles.⁴⁵ To structure and facilitate this 'choice' over the course of the last decade in particular, ISIS devised specific in-group (i.e., women within ISIS), and out-group (i.e., women outside of ISIS)⁴⁶ identities that sought to establish and perpetuate a good-versus-evil mentality that continually demonized those considered 'the enemy' while imbuing its political agenda with cosmic significance.⁴⁷

Women's more traditional roles in the family are generally agreed upon by jihadist movements, while their roles in combat are often more disputed. While ISIS's declaration of its so-called caliphate in 2014 appeared seemingly out of thin air, the group that emerged was built on the back of over a decade's involvement in the region, most notably its incarnation as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁴⁸ During its iteration as AQI, the group used female suicide bombers, a notable differentiation from Al-Qaeda central's relationship with women.⁴⁹ Violent Islamist leaders have all generally agreed on women's more conservative/private roles within the group, but there has been some debate as to what women's roles should be in relation to combat; in most

43 "Between two fires: Danger and desperation in Syria's Al-Hol camp," Doctors Without Borders, November 2022, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/default/files/documents/MSB141137%28High%29.pdf>.

44 Kiriloi M. Ingram, "An Analysis of ISIS's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021): 1-17; Nelly Lahoud, "Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL's Gendered Messaging," *UN Women* (June 2018): 1-26, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/Lahoud-Fin-Web-rev.pdf>; Devorah Margolin, forthcoming unpublished PhD diss., (King's College London, 2020).

45 This has parallels with women from other extremist ideologies which emphasize traditional gender roles, for example far right violent extremists who may also promote women as traditional wives ('tradwives').

46 This saw women in the out-group being deliberately and systematically victimized through its system of governance, something that most clearly manifested in its revival of slavery (specifically in relation to its enslavement of Yazidi women), as well as in the less prominent context of its collective economic, corporal, and capital punishment of Shia Muslim, Christian, and even some Sunni Muslim populations (among many others). Crucially, ISIS justified all these actions on ideological grounds even when they were clearly motivated (at least in part) by pragmatism (e.g., a desire to accrue wealth).

47 Kiriloi M. Ingram, "IS's Appeal to Western Women: Policy Implications," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) - The Hague* 8, no. 4 (2017): 1-12.; Ingram, "An Analysis of ISIS's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency," 1-17.

48 Craig Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The ISIS Movement (2002-2016)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (2016): 4-18.

49 Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and ISIS," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (2017): 23-28, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/>.



cases it has only been allowed ‘under special defensive circumstances’, for example if they were under attack.⁵⁰

For instance, in early 2004, AQI leader Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi released a message titled “Follow the Caravan,” which discussed women taking on combat roles.⁵¹ Not an unbridled call for women to participate in jihad, rather, Zarqawi was reminding his followers that defensive jihad is incumbent on all to fight. Such a reminder was especially pertinent considering the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In fact, months before AQI’s first female bomber conducted an attack, Zarqawi released another message titled, “Will the Religion Wane While I Live” (2005).⁵² He unambiguously discussed the role of women in jihad, foreshadowing AQI’s systematic use of female suicide bombers, referring to the precedent set by Umm ‘Amarah, a female companion of the Prophet Muhammad and noted that there are “many mujahidah sisters in the Land of the Two Rivers [Iraq] who are requesting to perpetrate martyrdom-seeking operations.”

Such a decision was not limited to Zarqawi alone; in April 2007, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, a successor of Zarqawi,⁵³ released a statement titled “The Harvest of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists.”⁵⁴ Abu Omar al-Baghdadi said, “[e]ven Iraqi women were pleading for martyrdom operations, but we forbade them from what men can do unless it is in special circumstances where men are unable to. Oh, what anguish, for those whom [sic] were less brave than women.”⁵⁵ This speech pinpoints the struggle faced by violent Islamist groups over the use of women in combat roles by both shaming men into action and allowing for women’s participation under ‘special circumstances.’ While peaking in 2008,⁵⁶ at the turn of the decade, the organization seemingly stopped using female suicide bombers. Without ever issuing a formal statement, it seemed as though the operational necessity that led to women’s involvement in combat began to dissipate with the slow withdrawal of U.S. military troops.

ISIS’s declaration of its so-called caliphate in 2014 was a declaration of power. In doing so, ISIS framed its jihad as offensive, not defensive, and used its magazines *Dabiq*, and later *Rumiyah*, to consistently encourage women to return to conventional roles and be wives, mothers, and educators. For example, in *Dabiq* issue 7, there was even a dedicated section in the magazine titled “to our sisters,” which encouraged women to “[b]e a base of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons.”⁵⁷ Yet, as the conflict against ISIS became more intense, this early practice evolved, and so did women’s roles.

50 Devorah Margolin, “The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups,” in *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism*, ed. Audrey Alexander (Washington, DC: The George Washington University Program on Extremism, 2019), 40–49, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Perspectives%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Women%2C%20Gender%20and%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf>.

51 “The war has broken out and the caller to Jihad has called for it, and the doors of the heavens have opened, if you don’t want to be [one] of the knights, then make room for the women to commence, and take the eyeliner O you women with turbans and beards, if not then to the horses and here are the reins and shackles.” Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, “Follow the Caravan,” 2004.

52 Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, “Will the Religion Wane While I Live,” 2005.

53 Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was leader of ISIS in Iraq, another incarnation of AQI as it transitioned into ISIS.

54 Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, “The Harvest of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists,” 2007.

55 Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, “The Harvest of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists,” 2007.

56 Jessica Davis, “Evolution of Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (2013): 279–291.

57 Al-Hayat Media Center, “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq* 7, 2015, 54–67.

August 2014 also heralded the start of the military offensive against ISIS by coalition forces. By early 2015, an organization claiming to be the media wing of ISIS's all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade released a manifesto articulating the ideal role of women in the caliphate as first and foremost wives, mothers, and homemakers. However, the manifesto also acknowledged several exceptions, including allowing women to work in medicine or education. It even stated that under very specific circumstances, there were cases where women could participate in combat, "if the enemy is attacking her country, the men are not enough to protect it, and the ulama (scholars) have given a fatwa (edict) for it."⁵⁸ The document reiterated the legal authority for women to commit violence within the framework of defensive jihad, while noting that those conditions were not yet met. As the document was not published by the group's central media outlet, it cannot be said to necessarily represent the group's primary position.

Between 2015 to 2016, ISIS released several documents which teased out women's roles in combat, while simultaneously emphasizing that women were only allowed to participate in jihad under very particular, defensive circumstances. For example, ISIS reiterated these points in official English-language magazines *Dabiq* issue 11 (2015) and *Dabiq* issue 15 (2016),⁵⁹ in its official Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Naba* in December 2016,⁶⁰ as well as by the *Zawra'* Foundation, a female-focused pro-IS media agency, in 2015.⁶¹

While not actively encouraging women to participate in combat, ISIS has praised or spoken ambivalently about women who carried out operations.⁶² Specifically, this trend speaks mostly to women who operated beyond the organization's territory and control. In February 2015, ISIS demanded the release of Sajida al-Rishawi, a failed AQI suicide bomber who was arrested in Jordan in 2005, from a Jordanian prison in exchange for the lives of two hostages.⁶³ In another case, after the 2015 San Bernardino attack, ISIS, while praising the attack and actions of Tashfeen Malik to join her husband and leave behind a child for the sake of jihad, refrained from referring to her as one of its "soldiers."⁶⁴ And finally, in 2016 when three young women attacked a police station in Kenya, its celebration was only tentative, noting these women "shoulder[ed] a duty that Allah had placed on the shoulders of the men of the Ummah."⁶⁵ Despite not wanting women to actively take up arms, ISIS did not condemn these women for their actions. This contradiction highlights ISIS's uneasy relationship with women and combat.

As the group began to incur significant territorial losses in 2017, including losing Mosul in July 2017, ISIS seemingly lifted its moratorium on female combatants. In an article in its *Rumiyah* magazine, ISIS encouraged women to "rise with courage and sacrifice in this war" and follow in the footsteps of Umm 'Amarah, a female companion of the Prophet Muhammad, taking to the battlefield "not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah."⁶⁶ With this, came a return

58 Charlie Winter, "Women of ISIS: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khansaa' Brigade," *Quilliam*, February 5, 2015, 22.

59 Al-Hayat Media Center, "From the Battles of Al-Ahzāb to the War of Coalitions," *Dabiq* 11, 2015, 46-56; Al-Hayat Media Center, "Break the Cross," *Dabiq* 15, July 2016, 46-63.

60 Islamic State Central Media Diwan, "I Will Die While Islam Is Glorious," *Al-Naba* 59, 2016, 15.

61 "Valuable Advice and Important Analysis on the Rules for Women's Participation in Jihad," translated by Charlie Winter, 2015.

62 Devorah Margolin, "The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups," 40-49.

63 Jason Hanna, "New Apparent ISIS Post Threatens Japanese Hostage, Jordanian Pilot," *CNN*, last updated January 27, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/27/world/isis-japan-jordan-hostages/index.html>.

64 Al-Hayat Media Center, "The Rāfidah from Ibn Saba' to the Dajjāl," *Dabiq* 13, 2016, 32-45.

65 Al-Hayat Media Center, "A Message from East Africa," *Rumiyah* 2, 2016, 2-3.

66 Al-Hayat Media Center, "Our Journey to Allah," *Rumiyah* 11, 2017, 12-15.

to AQI's call for women to take up arms and carry out suicide attacks from 2005.⁶⁷ For example, an aptly named Al-Naba (2017) article titled "The obligation on women to engage in jihad against the enemies."⁶⁸ This was supported by further articles in the publication encouraging women to follow in the footsteps of those before them who took up arms.⁶⁹

In February 2018, ISIS released an English-language video titled "Inside the Caliphate 7," purportedly showing women, covered from head to toe, shooting guns and preparing for battle.⁷⁰ Although interpretations vary, including discussions about whether the figures in the video are actually women, this footage seemingly legitimizes women's ability to take up arms in the conflict while maintaining their modesty under the pretext of defensive jihad. This section has outlined the ideological justification for women's roles as affiliated with ISIS, which are expanded on with practical examples later on.

GENDERED SYSTEM OF CONTROL

The section above has highlighted the ideological background of women and ISIS, and its evolution as an organization. This section focuses on how the ISIS governance project saw many more roles for women emerge that mirrored those of a contemporary state.

ISIS's elaborate theological-legislative gendered system of control implemented in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019 sought "to penetrate almost every aspect of society, regulating social relationships, extracting resources from local communities, and justifying the appropriation of material wealth and property for its own gain."⁷¹ Through this system of control, ISIS sought to balance ideology and pragmatism, simultaneously working to both perpetuate its doctrine and entrench its rule.

Essentially, the system was predicated on the idea that both public and private life should be governed in totality by ISIS's version of Islam.⁷² ISIS believes that deviation from this system in recent centuries, has led to the decline of the Sunni Muslim umma (global community), something that can only be rectified through the violent restoration of 'Islam' and implementation of 'Islamic rule' as it once was.⁷³ With this world view, ISIS created an in-group and an out-group. While the in-group according to ISIS is the Sunni Muslim community that adheres to its ideology, the out-group was everyone else. In the specific context of ISIS's governance efforts in its territories in Syria and Iraq, the out-group comprised Christian, Druze, Kakai, Yazidi, Shia Muslim, and other minority communities. Furthermore, the out-group comprised Sunni Muslims that were deemed 'apostates' for not adhering to ISIS's version of Islam.⁷⁴

67 Al-Hayat Media Center, "Our Journey to Allah," Rumiya 11, 2017, 12-15.

68 Islamic State Central Media Diwan, "The Obligation on Women in Jihad against the Enemies," Al-Naba 100, October 2017, 11.

69 Islamic State Central Media Diwan, "Stories from the Jihad of Women I," Al-Naba 102, October 2017, 9.

70 Al-Hayat Media Center, "Inside the Caliphate 7," February 2018.

71 Devorah Margolin and Charlie Winter, "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence," 15.

72 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "This Is Our Aqeeda and This Is Our Manhaj," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog (blog), 2015, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/10/this-is-our-aeqeeda-and-this-is-our-manhaj-islam>. ISIS claimed this 'law' was derived through an absolute reliance on the 'principles of proof' found in the Quran, Sunna, and the chronicles of the first three generations of Muslims from the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

73 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207-39.

74 ISIS's creation of an in-group and out-group identity created a good versus evil mentality, seeking to demonize the out-group. As research has demonstrated, after creating an 'us' versus 'them' typology, extremists ascribe negative attributes to the out-group, even classifying them as 'sub-human.' This dehumanization rationalizes violence against its perceived enemies. See: Ingram, "IS's Appeal to Western Women: Policy Implications," 1-12; Kurt Braddock, *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).



For ISIS, this violent, totalizing ideology played out ‘domestically’ within Syria and Iraq, wherein it defined and imposed the movement’s conceptualization of ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviors for both men and women. Among other things, this manifested in hyper-gender-segregated practices including, where possible, the total relegation of women to the private sphere, unless it served the pragmatic interests of the group’s governance strategy.⁷⁵ It also manifested in stringent policies regarding how women, both those in the in-group and those in the out-group, could live, including regulations on anything from polygamy and underage marriage to the revival of sex slavery.⁷⁶

ISIS’s harshly misogynistic approach towards governing private and public life meant that women’s ability to travel, work, or leave was severely inhibited. Their existence was regulated at almost every level, including the finest details of their marital status and relationships.⁷⁷ Women interviewed for the project highlighted how in some cases once their husband joined ISIS, he would marry multiple wives, as was allowed by the group.⁷⁸ This could include women of other nationalities.

Over the course of the last two decades, the ISIS movement has consistently held that women belong first and foremost in the private sphere.⁷⁹ Any exceptions to this rule were exactly that: exceptions that were necessitated by extenuating, and unavoidable, circumstances. These circumstances will be explored further below. This idea is prominent across both the English- and Arabic-language materials that were produced by the group over the course of the last few years. For example, all 23 of the articles specifically directed at women in English-language ISIS magazines since 2014 talk about the home as an ‘ideal’ place for women.⁸⁰

75 Margolin, forthcoming unpublished PhD.

76 Al-Hayat Media Center, “Sisters: I Will Outnumber the Other Nations Through You,” *Rumiyah* 5, January 6, 2017, 34-35. Several primary source documents dictate ISIS’s policy of underage marriage. These were excluded in order to protect the personally identifiable information of these minors. More information on the group’s policy of underage marriages can be found in its propaganda.

77 One way ISIS was able to control local populations was by controlling weddings and registering the marriages of both its supporters as well as those that lived under its control. Marriage contracts often asked women about their families, virginity, and required a ‘premarital examination’ and copies of local IDs. Marriages were witnessed by only men, and a special section on the contract asked if a woman consented or remained silent. For examples, see: Marriage Certificate, 2015, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/k643b116n?locale=en>, (Source: 36_001648_74); Questionnaire/Marriage Contract, 2015, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/rj430453j?locale=en>, (Source: 33_001520); Marriage Contract, 2015, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/r494vk17h?locale=en>, (Source: 32_001506); Contract of Nikah: Islamic Court, Euphrates Province, 2016, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/contract-nikah-islamic-court-euphrates-province/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-207234); Marriage Confirmation Document: Islamic Court, Raqqa Province, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/marriage-confirmation-document-islamic-court-raqqa-province/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-113628); Several files were also found as part of Al-Tamimi’s collection: Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” 2016, including Specimen 13H, 22M, and 22N in Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-1>; “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” 2016, including Specimen 23R, 23S, 23T, 23U, 23V, 23W, 36H, and 36I in Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont- IV),” 2016, Specimen 42G: Request to agree to a marriage, Rutba area, Anbar. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-3>.

78 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.

79 Ingram, “An Analysis of ISIS’s Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency,” 1-17; Lahoud, “Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL’s Gendered Messaging,” 1-26; Margolin, forthcoming unpublished PhD.

80 Margolin, forthcoming unpublished PhD; See also: Al-Hayat Media Center, “Abide in Your Homes,” *Rumiyah* 3, November, 11 2016; Al-Hayat Media Center, “Sisters: The woman is a shepherd in her husband’s home and responsible for her flock,” *Rumiyah* 9, May 4, 2017.

This position was not, however, restricted to propaganda. Rather, it was enshrined in both fatwas and other formalized legal frameworks whenever ISIS meaningfully established control over a territory. For example, written in both the city charter of Sirte (Libya) and the city charter of Mosul (Iraq) – which are very similar – ISIS wrote specifically “to the distinguished and noble women,” reminding them that modesty, covering, loose garment and veiling the head and face, while remaining in the house, adhering to the curtain [i.e. seclusion] and not leaving except for need: this is the guidance of the mothers of the believers and the distinguished female companions (may God be pleased with them).⁸¹

When women were allowed into public life, ISIS strictly limited the basis on which this could occur by calling for men and women to practice full gender segregation in order to protect women’s modesty. This affected nearly all aspects of women’s engagement in public life including carrying out basic daily tasks, working, or even accessing healthcare which were divided into services for women, and delivered by women.⁸²

ISIS also regulated ‘properly’ gendered behavior through the policing of women’s bodies and dress. This included restrictions on women’s clothing, including the prohibition of tight or transparent garments,⁸³ the enforcement of the hijab,⁸⁴ and even the enforcement of the niqab on both Muslim and non-Muslim women.⁸⁵

This also meant ISIS sought to regulate women’s movement, issuing numerous fatwas on the matter. As part of this, women required male escorts to carry out even the most menial of everyday activities. For example, male shopkeepers were forbidden from selling products to women who did not have an appropriate escort, and taxi drivers transporting female workers had to sign pledges to abide by ISIS rules regarding women’s dress.⁸⁶ These restrictions also extended to travel within ISIS’s broader territories.⁸⁷ Travel outside of ISIS-held territory

- 81 Aaron Zelin, “New statement from ISIS of Iraq and al-Sham: ‘Charter of the City,’” *Jihadology*, June 12, 2014, <https://jihadology.net/2014/06/12/new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-charter-of-the-city>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents: Specimen 11L: City charter, Sirte,” 2015.
- 82 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 7Y: Prohibition on gender mixing, Manbij, Aleppo Province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1G: Warning against certain customs on Eid al-Adha: Hasakah Province (October 2014), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 12T: Statement on imposing Shari’a regulations in Aden University, Aden Province, Yemen [c. October 2015], 2016.
- 83 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1F: Diwan al-Hisbah (Derna: Cyrenaica Province, Libya) on women’s clothing (October 2014), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1I: Restrictions on women’s clothing, Tel Abyad, Raqqa province (December 2013), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 10R: Regulations for shops in Raqqa province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 2Z: On selling prohibited garments, Ninawa province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 13V: Statement from ISIS in AdenAbyan (Yemen), 2016.
- 84 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 5P: Imposition of Hijab Shari’i on Women, Jarabulus, November 2013, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents.” Specimen 6J: Prohibition on shaving beards, 2015.
- 85 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 10M: Early rulings imposed in Mosul (June 2014), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 12V: Imposition of the niqab in Raqqa (January 2014), 2016.
- 86 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 8F: Regulations for clothes shop owners imposed by Diwan al-Hisba (Albukamal area): September 2015, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 10R: Regulations for shops in Raqqa province, 2015; Written Pledge, Raqqa Province, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/written-pledge-raqqa-province/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-110372).
- 87 One fatwa stipulates that women could not travel without a male escort because the Prophet Muhammad said, “[t]he woman is not to travel without the mahram.” Fatwa 45 – Question: What is the ruling when a woman travels without her mahram (if she has a mahram and does not go out with him)?, 2014, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/fatwa-45-question-ruling-woman-travels-without-mahram-mahram-not-go/>, (Reference Number:

was generally prohibited except for highly limited, and temporary, purposes such as access to medical treatment that could not be accessed inside ISIS territory, or some business and financial transactions.⁸⁸ The rules were strict for men but even stricter for women.⁸⁹ This severe travel on limitations was also confirmed in field interviews, who also spoke of the strictly imposed dress requirements, and punishments for infractions.⁹⁰ As such, even when women may have wanted to leave ISIS-held territory, this was often incredibly difficult.

PENALIZING INFRACTIONS

For those who did not comply with this system—whether it was in the context of segregation, dress, or movement—ISIS instituted an array of public and private punishments, with verbal warnings and fines at one end of the spectrum and executions at the other. This could include public whippings for things as menial as selling cigarettes.⁹¹ The harshness with which ISIS enforced its laws also had the effect, for some, of making life under ISIS feel safer as crime was heavily reduced.⁹²

Its fundamental objective in doling out punishment was to deter any resistance to segregation, something towards which its legislators were extremely sensitive, including when men were seen to have broken the rules.⁹³

Other women noted female hisba – morality police – would often publicly police them and enforce dress codes.⁹⁴

In another document released by the Diwan of Hisba, or department of moral policing, the punishments for crimes more explicitly related to female ‘infractions’ were set out.⁹⁵ For example, a woman who did not dress properly could be taken into custody, her male custodian flogged in front of her and forced to buy her an abaya. Local residents noted that women accused of sex outside of marriage were seen to be publicly flogged by female police.⁹⁶

NMEC-2015-125621_FATWA45); Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1Y: Fatwa on Women’s Travel: AlBuhuth wa al-Eftaa’ Committee”, 2015.

- 88 Fatwa 37 – Question: What is the ruling on travel to areas controlled by the regime out of necessity?, 2014, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/fatwa-37-question-ruling-travel-areas-controlled-regime-necessity/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2015-203984_FATWA37); Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 6G: Conditions for travel outside Mosul, 2015. For further reading, see: Gina Vale, “Piety is in the eye of the bureaucrat: The Islamic State’s strategy of civilian control.” CTC Sentinel 13, no. 1 (2020): 34-40.
- 89 For example, permission forms and other regulations imposed by ISIS for women’s travel, requesting anything from reasons for travel to the destination location and biometric information about male escorts. See: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 14N: Travel slip from ‘Euphrates Province’ to Damascus, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen M: On Movement of Women and the Garages: Raqqa Province, 2015.
- 90 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.
- 91 Fieldwork, “Interview 12,” 2022.
- 92 Fieldwork, “Interview 1,” 2022.
- 93 For example, one prisoner handover document details arrestable offenses such as ‘mixing with women not permitted to [the arrested individual],’ ‘being in seclusion against the sharia with women not permitted to [the arrested individual],’ ‘sitting near a woman not permitted to [the arrested individual],’ and ‘suspicion of adultery with a married woman.’ Prisoner Handover Documents, 2015, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/hx11xf263?locale=en>, (Source: 25_001347).
- 94 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.
- 95 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 13S: Reprimand penalties for various offences, Mosul (2014), 2016.
- 96 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.



Dabiq 7 includes the only images of an adult woman published in an ISIS English-language magazine.⁹⁷ Titled “Stoning a zaniyah in Ar-Raqqah,” the woman was fully dressed in head-to-toe black and is being stoned by a mob of men for being an adulterer, with the accompanying text noting “in Wilāyat Ar-Raqqah, a woman was stoned after being found guilty of zinā.”⁹⁸

It is worth noting that, in 2015, the General Governing Committee of ISIS issued a blanket instruction to all provinces of the caliphate to forward on a copy of the case file of any woman that was detained for security reasons to its central bureaucracy.⁹⁹ This announcement implies that women’s arrests for security reasons were relatively rare—if this was not the case, forwarding files like this would be a huge administrative burden for its justice system, not to mention a security risk.

Through its gendered system of control, and resulting penalization of infractions, ISIS sought to gain control over both men and women. Understanding this system and its consequences is vital for discussions surrounding women’s agency and women’s contributions to ISIS.

Section III: What are the various roles of women within ISIS: 2013 to 2019?

This section looks at the distinct roles that women within ISIS played in Iraq and Syria from 2013 to 2019. A disparity has arisen between what non-extremists consider to be ‘active participation’ in the in-group and what extremist women consider to be ‘active participation’ in the in-group.¹⁰⁰ The reality is that, even if women’s involvement in or acquiescence to the rule of ISIS looked inactive from the outside, it was considered active from within the movement, a choice to adopt the ‘fundamental role’ of the female Muslim,¹⁰¹ which actively contributed to ISIS’s vision of the caliphate. As women were required to cover their faces in public, it would also be difficult to personally identify these individuals in contrast to male foreigners who were able to dress themselves more freely. This in turn has made it so male supporters of ISIS are more easily recognizable than their female counterparts.

PRIVATE ROLES

It is in private roles that women in the family unit, particularly as wives and mothers, were most active in ISIS. ISIS also promoted and emphasized these roles as the most appropriate for women and encouraged women to focus their efforts in the private sphere, particularly in supporting their husbands and family members, and correctly raising their children in line with ISIS ideology and aims. Women were framed as integral to producing the next generation of fighters, and ISIS focused significant emphasis on ‘califah cubs’ or children. Mothers were also highlighted in some cases as educating their children at home in preparation for more

97 In addition to the one image of an adult woman, there are four images of prepubescent girls, all of whom were dressed modestly. Margolin, forthcoming unpublished PhD.

98 Al-Hayat Media Center, “Stoning a zaniyah in Ar-Raqqah,” Dabiq 7, 2015.

99 Guidance: Commanding General Committee, 2015, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/guidance-commanding-general-committee/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-111961).

100 Ingram, “An Analysis of ISIS’s Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency,” 1-17; Elizabeth Pearson, “Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, ISIS, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber,” in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines*, ed. Jacob Zenn, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2018): 33-52.

101 For more on this, see: Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, “Women in the Islamic State (2015),” in *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of ISIS Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 199-214.

active participation in the group and encouraged to keep up their male children's physical fitness in preparation for such roles.¹⁰²

Women were continually emphasized by the organization as mothers, where their roles in security and defense-related operations or other roles were of a lesser importance to those elevated in the domestic sphere. In their publication *Dabiq*, ISIS noted in a 2015 edition, "the absence of an obligation of jihād and war upon the Muslim woman – except in defense against someone attacking her – does not overturn her role in building the Ummah, producing men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle."¹⁰³ The *Dabiq* article then offers five pages outlining the importance of this "jihad without fighting" and the value of "the wife of the mujahdid and the mothers of lion cubs."¹⁰⁴ Another issue of the magazine featured an extensive article titled "two, three or four wives?" and also emphasized if a husband did not feel they could fulfill the full rights of their wives they should not seek more, which was meant to offer women some guidance in the private sphere.¹⁰⁵ Al-Khansaa Media also noted, "Bring up the sons of the caliphate to know true tawheed [oneness with God]. Bring up its daughters such that they know chastity and decency. Know that you are the hope of the ummah. The guardians of the faith and protectors of the land will emerge from you. God bless you and your patience, you are of us and we of you."¹⁰⁶

This emphasis on motherhood and as wives was constantly reinforced throughout its various media, and idealized and praised as women's primary role in ISIS. As a wife or female family member, women may support, in various capacities, their husbands or other male relatives who would partake in criminal activities or combat operations, or care for those injured. As seen in al-Hol camp today, women's roles in maintaining children and carrying forward the ideology and mission of ISIS has occurred in some cases (see Section IV).

Owning slaves and running guest houses

In managing the home, ISIS-affiliated women may also have access to, or control over slaves obtained and held by the group. This could include female children and youth under the age of 18, adult women, or boys which had not yet attained puberty. There are numerous documented cases of enslaved persons being abused in domestic contexts. The activities of ISIS-affiliated women in this context may have been directly abusive towards enslaved persons, or they may have facilitated abuse of such persons in their household. Such recorded abuse has included sexual violence (where women may have facilitated the rape or sexual assault of women for their husbands), and other physical, mental, and verbal abuse committed towards these enslaved persons.¹⁰⁷ In some cases, enslaved persons held in such contexts have been killed, as a court case in Germany highlighted when 'Jennifer W.' was convicted of crimes against

102 For more discussion see: Gina Vale "Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory," International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, Department of War Studies, King's College London (2018) 1-35, https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/472209/1/ICSR_Report_Cubs_in_the_Lions_Den_Indoctrination_and_Recruitment_of_Children_Within_Islamic_State_Territory.pdf.

103 Al-Hayat Media Center, "To Our Sisters: A Jihad without Fighting by Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhājirah," *Dabiq* 11, 2015.

104 Al-Hayat Media Center, "To Our Sisters: A Jihad without Fighting by Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhājirah," *Dabiq* 11, 2015.

105 Al-Hayat Media Center, "Sisters: Two, Three or Four By Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhājirah," *Dabiq* 12, 2015.

106 Charlie Winter, "Women of ISIS: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khansa' Brigade," 22.

107 "German court delivers third genocide verdict against ISIS member for the enslavement and abuse of Yazidi woman in Syria and Iraq," Doughty Street Chambers, June 21, 2023, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-delivers-third-genocide-verdict-against-isis-member-enslavement-and-abuse-yazidi>.

humanity in the death of a 5-year-old Yazidi girl.¹⁰⁸ Several court cases have now been opened under similar charges, including in the Netherlands.¹⁰⁹

This ownership of slaves was also an important aspect for some women. Males would purchase or be gifted slaves, often Yazidis, and keep them in their home where they would often face physical and sexual abuse and would be unable to leave. In total, ISIS kidnapped 6,417 Yazidis from Sinjar and sold 3,548 women and girls to individual ISIS members.¹¹⁰ Such abuse could also be facilitated or inflicted by ISIS-affiliated women in the home. There have also been cases where women have claimed they tried to protect enslaved persons in their households, or help them escape.¹¹¹

Beyond personal homes, in a small number of cases, women would also maintain, run, and administer 'guest houses,' though these are largely recognized to be administered by ISIS.¹¹² Such homes were used as a base for foreign women who would arrive in ISIS territory until they were married and moved to another location. These houses could also be used for widows until their next marriage. They were also noted as a location for detaining Yazidis.¹¹³ One interviewee in Iraq suggested that foreign women would bring Yazidi women to their guest house, teach them how to pray, and read the Qur'an (against their religion).¹¹⁴ This has also been corroborated by other testimonies of Yazidis.¹¹⁵ Women would act as guards in the building, and women who tried to escape – both Sunnis and minorities – would be punished.¹¹⁶

Women as 'beneficiaries' of ISIS's system

As noted above, the vast majority of in-group women living under the rule of ISIS were not in gainful employment outside of the home. However, they still came into contact with its administrative practices on a day-to-day basis, its influence continually permeating both private and public life. Therefore, by virtue of living under the caliphate, in-group women benefited from ISIS's system including public services, payments, and other forms of financial or physical assistance.

108 Melissa Eddy, "German Woman Convicted of a Crime Against Humanity in Death of Yazidi Child," *New York Times*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/25/world/europe/germany-isis-yazidi-child.html>.

109 Ewelina U. Ochab, "Dutch Court Prosecuting First-Ever Case For Enslaving Yazidis In Syria," *Forbes*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2023/02/22/dutch-court-prosecuting-first-ever-case-for-enslaving-yazidis-in-syria/?sh=5637230e2c7a>.

110 Jennifer Venis, "Justice for the Yazidis," *International Bar Association*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.ibanet.org/Justice-for-the-Yazidis>.

111 Joshua Baker, "I'm not a monster," *BBC*, November 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/ggkz0ug4ff/im-not-a-monster>.

112 Daniel Milton and Brian Dodwell, "Jihadi Brides? Examining a Female Guesthouse Registry from the Islamic State's Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 5 (2018): 16-22.

113 Such guesthouses are discussed in Azadeh Moaveni, *Guest house for young widows: Among the women of ISIS* (New York: Random House, 2019).

114 Fieldwork, "Interview 14," 2022.

115 "Iraq: Forced Marriage, Conversion for Yazidis," *Human Rights Watch*, October 11, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/11/iraq-forced-marriage-conversion-yezidis>.

116 Fieldwork, "Interview 14," 2022. The kidnapping and detention of Yazidis has been viewed as genocide and recent convictions of persons involved in such cases have been convicted of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide, aiding and abetting crimes against humanity (enslavement), serious deprivation of liberty, war crimes against property, membership in a foreign terrorist organization, and violations of the German War Weapons Control Act. See: Venis, "Justice for the Yazidis"; "ISIS Member Convicted of Crimes Against Humanity for Aiding and Abetting Enslavement of a Yazidi Woman," *Doughty Street Chambers*. See also: "German court delivers third genocide verdict against ISIS member for the enslavement and abuse of Yazidi woman in Syria and Iraq," *Doughty Street Chambers*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/german-court-delivers-third-genocide-verdict-against-isis-member-enslavement-and-abuse-yazidi>.

This influence manifested in both positive and negative ways. Women, for example, were often expressly granted resources or other forms of material support. Sometimes this came indirectly in the form of material assistance provided to husbands and fathers, who were instructed to list family members in military expense and salary forms,¹¹⁷ on real estate forms,¹¹⁸ gas distribution forms,¹¹⁹ and on wills and last testaments¹²⁰ (often these same forms would also request details about sex slaves.) In the domestic sphere, women as part of families may have taken over and occupied stolen property, or property owned by citizens who had fled ISIS. An example of a French family occupying a local house was noted in interviews, “the people who are in the house left for another location because of the bombing. They wanted to protect their family. These people [the French family of immigrants under ISIS] came to live in it.”¹²¹

In other cases, women received support directly from ISIS. For example, numerous documents show that women could be active recipients of monetary and nutritional support if they had been widowed or divorced,¹²² or had lost their husbands on account of other reasons like enemy imprisonment.¹²³ Female orphans were also demarcated as specific recipients of zakat-derived aid.¹²⁴

Besides material assistance, female members of the in-group were also ‘beneficiaries’ of ISIS-provided education. The ISIS Files repository is replete with examples of references, direct and indirect, to what the education of girls and female adolescents looked like. They indicate that the caliphate invested a significant amount of time and energy in cultivating its youth support base—what it called the ‘generation of the caliphate.’ Generally speaking, female children were allowed to go to school which would largely focus their education on fulfilling their roles in the domestic sphere within ISIS. In some cases, girls and young women were allowed to receive further education to support ISIS’s governance project, such as attending medical school. Male children and youth living under ISIS were meant to attend both military training academies as well as more conventional ‘schools’ wherein a curriculum (of sorts) was the basis of learning. At these institutes, lessons in anything from history and geography to Arabic and English were delivered, imbued with jihadist readings of the world, and religious science was enforced at

117 The ISIS Files Document 34_001556, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; See also: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 14U, 15M, 19N, 19S, 21S, 21X, 21Y, 22A, 22B, and 22D, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 36L, 33P, 33K, 33L, and 36L, 2016.

118 Home Request Form, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/nk322d32h?locale=en>, (Source: 36_001651_02); Will Form and Personal Identification Form for a Brother, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/concern/artifacts/xw42n789?locale=en>, (Source: 37_001655).

119 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 4R: Gas Distributions in Deir az-Zor Province, 2015, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>.

120 The ISIS Files Document 16_001043, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence.”; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.- IV),” Specimen 40Q: Records of slain personnel in Kobani area, al-Qadisiya Battalion, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.- IV),” Specimen 42K: List of slain fighters, Wilayat al-Baraka 2016.

121 Fieldwork, “Interview 1,” 2022.

122 The ISIS Files Document 30_001483, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence.”

123 Untitled [Memorandum from the Office of the Wali, Raqqa Province], 2015, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/untitled-memorandum-office-wali-raqqa-province/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-115525).

124 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 13I: Opening of office for the share of the orphans in spoils and booty, Raqqa, 2016.

every level.¹²⁵ Children received an ‘Islamic education’ based on a curriculum designed by ISIS, where school books included learning math with images of weapons, and boys could be trained in combat. While some mothers would actively send their children to such schools, others chose to keep them at home to avoid this.¹²⁶

Female children were precluded from attending training camps but encouraged to attend school up to at least the primary level, but in some cases girls were sent home from school.¹²⁷ A number of documents announce new school terms and give stipulations around what girls’ attendance (and/or lack thereof) would result in.¹²⁸ Some track how women and their idealized roles in society are conceptualized in the pages of school textbooks.¹²⁹ Others provide logistical information about how girls’ schools were actually run— anything from printing costs to the distribution of sports equipment¹³⁰ — with yet more describing the processes by which ISIS officials regulated them.¹³¹ One document, written from the perspective of a school inspector, notes that there was a significant need for female teachers.¹³²

At the level of higher education, information is harder to come by, although we do know that at least some women attended universities in Mosul and Sirte.¹³³ This is because, with the

- 125 For a more in-depth discussion into ISIS’s education system, please read: Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova, Lilah Elsayed, and Muna Chung, “Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education,” *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University (February 2021): 1-117, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/report/j3860694x>.
- 126 Fieldwork, “Interview 2,” 2022.; Fieldwork, “Interview 9,” 2022.; Fieldwork, “Interview 11,” 2022.; Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.
- 127 Fieldwork, “Interview 12,” 2022.
- 128 Subject: Circulars on Sixth Grade Reforms, 2015, *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/vq27zn41g>, (Source: 35_001584); Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen H: Announcement of Beginning of School Term with List of Schools (Raqqa Province), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 3G: Registration Form at Shari’a Institute for Girls in al-Bab, Aleppo Province [c. May 2014], 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 8V: Opening of schools for registration for the new school year, Raqqa, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued... again),” Specimen 28V: Certificate to female student for passing Shari’i session, A’isha institute, Saluk, Raqqa province, 2016.
- 129 Islamic State, Arabic Grammar: 4th Primary Grade, textbook, *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/vt150j25g>, (Source: 19_001087); *The ISIS Files Document 19_001088*, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; *The ISIS Files Document 27_001373*, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; *The ISIS Files Document 37_001654*, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; See also: Zeiger, Atamuradova, Elsayed, and Chung, “Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education,” 1-117.
- 130 Subject: Circular Letter to Schools, 2015, *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/wh246s13j>, (Source: 30_001480); Letter To-From, *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/hq37vn57m>, (Source: 30_001482); *The ISIS Files Document 31_001487*, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; *The ISIS Files Document 35_001586*, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 10E: Prices for printing ISIS 1st grade secondary school textbooks (Mosul area), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 30T: Distribution of balls for schools, Ninawa centre (school), 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 39S: Request for books from Diwan al-Ta’aleem, Ninawa, 2016.
- 131 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 3F: Educational Regulations Notification Distributed in Aleppo Province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 15A: Education regulations, Salah al-Din province, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 27K: Report on a student for local education administration, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 27L: Report on a student for local education administration, 2016.
- 132 Subject: Assignment Request to Supervise Girl’s School, 2015, *The ISIS Files*, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/f7623c57r>, (Source: 35_001583).
- 133 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 9G: Admission statistics for Mosul University: 2015-2016, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 12C: Announcement for the colleges of Sirte University, 2015.

notable exception of medical students, in-group females were discouraged from continuing their studies at university. This saw some subjects, like engineering, being restricted to male students only, even when the prior experiences and background of female students made them good candidates for the material sciences.¹³⁴

From the perspective of religious education, in-group women were also perpetually exposed to theological and ideological training at the hands of ISIS's Center for Da'wa and Mosques.¹³⁵ Such activities were at the heart of its community outreach efforts; after all, they enabled it to work to entrench the ideological basis for its system of control. This took the form of anything from women-only seminaries on creed and methodology to Qur'an memorization competitions for young girls.¹³⁶

Besides material assistance and education, in-group women would also be afforded 'protection' by ISIS's police and judiciary. This saw them raising agriculture disputes, and a large number of family cases where ISIS mediation or rulings were sought to resolve disputes. These could include making claims against male family members in accessing monies owed to them, or taken by, husbands, fathers, and brothers-in-law, as well as requesting legal interventions in the context of incidents of physical and mental abuse.¹³⁷ While these interventions were invariably grounded in misogyny—for example, men were reprimanded only if they beat their wives 'without good reason'¹³⁸—they indicated that ISIS's ideological positioning did not preclude it from taking the side of women, provided of course that they were part of its in-group.¹³⁹ In this regard, some in-group women could attempt to seek 'justice' through ISIS judicial systems.

134 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents," Specimen 8X: Structure of ISIS-controlled Mosul University, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents," Specimen 9M: Timetable of classes, Mosul Medical College, 2015.

135 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Stories of the Mujahideen: Unseen ISIS Biographies of Outstanding Members," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog (blog), 2016, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/19132/the-archivist-stories-of-the-mujahideen-unseen>; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "ISIS Internal Files on Dr. Imaan Mustafa al-Bagha," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog (blog), 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/05/islamic-state-internal-files-on-dr-imaan-mustafa>.

136 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents," Specimen 6Z: Teaching and Memorization of Qur'an, Deir az-Zor Province (Dept of Dawa), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents," Specimen 7Q: Session in 'Ilm, Manbij, Aleppo Province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents," Specimen 10H: Prohibition on music, song and displaying photos on shops (Raqqa: January 2014), 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Women's Dawa in ISIS: Internal Files," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog (blog), 2020, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/04/women-dawa-in-the-islamic-state-internal-files>.

137 The ISIS Files Document 01_000052, cited in Margolin and Winter, "Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence"; See the following images of Complaint Forms filed with Islamic State Police in Wilayat Nineveh (All are found on The ISIS Files, The George Washington University): <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/wm117n98w>, (Source: 01_000056, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/1j92g749n>, (Source: 01_000067, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/bv73c046q>, (Source: 01_000076, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/0c483j399>, (Source: 01_000081, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/t148fh15c>, (Source: 01_000126, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/dr26xx384>, (Source: 01_000128, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/hx11xf28n>, (Source: 01_000129, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/dr26xx39d>, (Source: 01_000154, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/sx61dm30x>, (Source: 01_000157, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/m613mx59x>, (Source: 01_000182, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/ht24wj43h>, (Source: 01_000186, 2016); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/mc87pq30p>, (Source: 02_000260); <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/j38606981>, (Source: 02_000277, 2016); Claimant (Plaintiff) Personal Information Form, 2016, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/v405s9361>, (Source: 25_001343).

138 Complaint Form, 2016, The ISIS Files, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/cv43nw88q> (Source: 02_000263); Also see: Formal Written Complaint, 2015, The ISIS Files, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/5m60qr90,c> (Source: 02_000297).

139 Complaint Form, 2016, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/2r36tx54r>, (Source: 01_000051); Complaint Form, 2016, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/cj82k729x>, (Source: 01_000074); Formal Written Complaint, The ISIS Files, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/8w32r5659>, (Source: 01_000155); Formal Written Complaint, The ISIS Files, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/th83kz37g>, (Source: 01_000156).

PUBLIC ROLES

The section above has highlighted the more private roles and benefits relevant to women. This section will focus on their public-facing roles under the caliphate, specifically fundraising and material support, recruiting, and roles in relation to propaganda which included online roles, and general ‘public sector’ roles. This will also address women’s participation in security and defense-related roles.

Fundraising and material support

Women have contributed wealth, goods, or otherwise fundraised or donated money and goods for ISIS at an individual level,¹⁴⁰ and through small groups or organizations.¹⁴¹ These have included women within Syria and Iraq who have fundraised via social media on Twitter and Tumblr accounts, as well as women abroad who have sought out funding locally to support ISIS. However, such fundraising has been overshadowed by ISIS’s greater wealth as acquired by its primary funding streams which include taxation of the population in territory it held, extortion, kidnapping, oil revenues, and the sales of antiquities.¹⁴² As such, female civilians and supporters within Iraq and Syria, regardless of their affiliation or level of support for the group, were required to pay taxes, thereby directly funding ISIS. However, cases such as those of paying tax should be approached with the understanding that harm or punishment could come to persons that refused to pay these taxes to ISIS, and as such those forced to pay taxes and other forms of payment to the group should also be assessed in terms of coercion.

Recruitment

Women associated with ISIS were active in recruiting other women locally in person, as well as reaching out to them online and recruiting women and men abroad.

Within Iraq and Syria, this included having women in ISIS go out and preach locally to other women, where they may particularly target what they viewed as vulnerable women, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), widows, and others facing difficult circumstances. Here, both preaching, and physical incentives could be utilized to recruit local women to comply, join, or support ISIS.¹⁴³

Women within Iraq and Syria, as well as women outside of these territories, also used the online sphere to recruit other women into ISIS, and to provide advice or materials to facilitate travel to Iraq and Syria. They would do this via social media such as Twitter or Facebook, blogs like Tumblr, and other platforms. For example, Aqsa Mahmood, a famous ISIS-affiliated woman from Glasgow, operated a blog for some time in which she attempted to dispel ‘myths’ about life in the ‘caliphate’ and attempted to portray a normalized life in the conflict zone. She would direct women to message her privately if they were interested in coming to ISIS-held territory

140 For example, UK citizen Amal El-Wahabi, a 28-year old mother of two, tried to trick a friend into carrying €20,000 euros (£15,800) to her husband Aine Davis who was involved in fighting with ISIS in Syria. Dominic Casciani, “Woman jailed for funding Syria jihad,” BBC News, November 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30041625>.

141 Faraz Khan, “Assistants of Terror: How Women Raise Funds for Da’ish in Karachi,” The Express Tribune, December 21, 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1013558/assistants-of-terror-revealed-how-women-raise-funds-for-daish-in-karachi/>.

142 For more on ISIS financing see: Stefan Heißner, Peter R. Neumann, John Holland-McCowan, and Rajan Basra, “Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State Financial Fortunes,” The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (2017): 1-16, <https://icrs.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Caliphate-in-Decline-An-Estimate-of-Islamic-States-Financial-Fortunes.pdf>.

143 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Internal Structure of ISIS’s Hisba Apparatus,” Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog (blog), 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21246/the-internal-structure-of-the-islamic-state-hisba>.

and would help facilitate their travel by providing travel tips, directions and other guidance.¹⁴⁴ In 2014, a 23-year-old Canadian woman referred to as 'Aisha' traveled to Syria after taking an online course to study the Qur'an taught by a woman based in Edmonton, who taught fifteen women in total.¹⁴⁵ Aisha's sister stated that the woman who ran the course also recruited her for ISIS and helped facilitate passage to Syria where she was said to be with a woman from Quebec.¹⁴⁶ In Ceuta, Spain, two friends led a ring that recruited other women for ISIS in Iraq and Syria before traveling themselves.¹⁴⁷ Offline women's study groups in the UK were also discovered to be promoting support for ISIS and encouraging women to go to Syria,¹⁴⁸ while one group in Pakistan arranged marriages for women to ISIS members and assisted in their recruitment.¹⁴⁹ Women also helped register and place international women who arrived, for example in local women's 'hostels' (maqqsars) or arrange local housing for them and their families (often in homes seized from displaced persons).

Foreign women who traveled to Iraq and Syria themselves also provided an incentive and draw for males to come and join the group. Men who sought a wife could have one arranged by ISIS upon arrival via their marriage bureau. This could be particularly appealing to men from countries who would be otherwise unable to marry, particularly due to high prices of dowries or weddings.¹⁵⁰ Women may also be attracted to the group through the prospects of marriage to a jihadist husband. Women's activities in the group were also used to shame men into action, highlighting how if women could make sacrifices for the group, so could they.¹⁵¹

As highlighted above, women in ISIS took a particularly active role online, which was also used in the creation and dissemination of ISIS propaganda. For example, a 2015 Brookings Institute report suggested that for every seven men who were involved in ISIS Twitter networks, there was one woman. Author J.M. Berger noted that, "male and female social networks were observed to be segregated to some extent, often at the explicit urging of both male and female [ISIS] supporters,"¹⁵² highlighting that the gender segregation promoted by the group was also enforced online. In the online sphere, women were also acting as a sub-class of key disseminators, following male or female ISIS supporters and members online, and sharing and re-tweeting their posts. One key case of this was that of Sally Jones who, after ISIS had hacked into the Department of Defense database, had personally reposted personal information of US personnel including addresses and other contact information with explicit instruction to target

144 "UN Security Council Sanctions: Aqsa Mahmood," United Nations Security Council, 2015 https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/aqsa-mahmood.

145 Aisha's real name was not disclosed for the privacy of her family.

146 Natalie Clancy, "ISIS Recruiter in Edmonton Enlists Canadian Woman to Join Fight in Syria," CBC, January 25, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/isis-recruiter-in-edmonton-enlists-canadian-woman-to-join-fight-in-syria-1.2970535>.

147 Lauren Frayer, "In a Spanish Enclave, Women Recruit Women to Join ISIS," NPR Parallels, April 12, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/12/398756119/in-a-spanish-enclave-women-recruit-women-to-join-isis>.

148 "Channel 4 Investigation Uncovers the British Women Supporting ISIS," Channel 4 Press, November 22, 2015, <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/channel-4-investigation-uncovers-british-women-supporting-isis>.

149 Benazir Shah and Rimmel Mohyidin, "Pray Your Wife and Children Die in Jihad," Newsweek, January 20, 2016, <http://newsweekpakistan.com/pray-your-wife-and-children-die-in-jihad/>; Umar Cheema, "20 Men, Women, Children from Lahore join Daesh, go to Syria," The News, December 31, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/85370-20-men-women-children-from-Lahore-join-Daesh-go-to-Syria>.

150 See also, Valerie M. Hudson and Hilary Matfess, "In plain sight: The neglected linkage between brideprice and violent conflict." *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 7-40.

151 Al-Hayat Media Center, "Inside the Caliphate 7.," Al-Hayat Media Center, "Foreword: A Message from East Africa," *Rumiyah* 2, 2016.; Al-Hayat Media Center, "How I Came to Islam by Umm Khalid Al-Finlandiyyah," *Dabiq* 15, 2016. ISIS media 2016a

152 J.M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," in *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, The Brookings Institute (March 2015): 15, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf.



these persons.¹⁵³ Others would regularly broadcast violence, death threats, condemnation, and other vitriol against their home governments or other persons, bodies or matters they viewed as un-Islamic.

Women would also feature in ISIS digital print propaganda as authors. ISIS publications such as *Dabiq* and then *Rumiyah*, would often have sections specifically for ‘the sisters’ which would feature female authors discussing topics of relevance to women.¹⁵⁴ This could include, for example, the edicts of owning female slaves, or advice for women’s roles in marriage and the home. Grievance guidelines were also offered to widows, including points on mourning period, etiquette, and remarriage, as were points on marriage, and avoiding non-Muslims. *Dabiq* featured stories like that of Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah who highlighted a Finnish convert’s experience and travel to ISIS-held territory, and who encouraged others to travel.¹⁵⁵ In 2015, the Al-Khansaa Brigade’s media wing circulated an Arabic document entitled, “Women in ISIS: Manifesto and Case Study” which was intended to recruit women specifically from the Gulf region. Women continued to carry out such roles through the duration of the period examined, though increased actions of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and others has limited the online public space that such women could access, pushing some of this online creating and dissemination of propaganda into closed, encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram.

‘Public sector’ roles

By declaring itself an Islamic ‘state’, ISIS encouraged those around the world to make hijra to this region, to live in its ‘caliphate’, and to become active members of this state-building project. They specifically noted in their first publication *Dabiq* that for all Muslims (including women), hijra (migration) to the state was obligatory if one was able to do so, “The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims, all the Muslims,” they noted.¹⁵⁶

Practical positions emerged out of this ‘state’, beyond roles of mothers and wives (those most prescribed for women), such as nurses, teachers, or policing roles, offering a more tangible role which appealed to a wider support base. In the July 2014 edition of *Dabiq*, the group specifically calls for “scholars, experts in Islamic jurisprudence (fuqaha), and callers, especially the judges as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers.”¹⁵⁷ While ISIS called for such roles broadly, women practically were limited to certain roles as discussed below.

In reality, specific roles would be more limited for women in the public space, but women were particularly emphasized and utilized in roles where interaction with women was required to maintain the strict gender segregation that ISIS enforced.¹⁵⁸ Such cases particularly included education and health/medical roles. In the context of the latter, internal administrative documents from across Syria and Iraq indicate that ISIS’s deployment of female medical

153 “ISIS-Linked Hacker and Abu Hussain Al Britani Associate Arrested for Leak of U.S. Military and Government Personnel Information,” *Flashpoint*, October 15, 2015.

<https://www.flashpoint-intel.com/blog/cybercrime/islamic-state-linked-hacker-and-abu-hussain-al-britani-associate-arrested-for-leak-of-u-s-military-and-government-personnel-information/>.

154 It should be noted that though the given author for this section was noted to be female, and these articles were targeted towards a female audience, the gender of the author was more difficult to confirm in practice and there was a chance that in some cases male authors may be posing as female.

155 Al-Hayat Media Center, “How I Came to Islam by Umm Khalid Al-Finlandiyyah,” *Dabiq* 15, 2016.

156 Al-Hayat Media Center, “A Call to Hijrah,” *Dabiq* 1, 2014.

157 Al-Hayat Media Center, “A call to all Muslim: doctors, engineers, scholars, and specialists” *Dabiq* 1, 2014.

158 This could be comparable to an extent to countries like Saudi Arabia which enforce particularly strict gender segregation in the public.

professionals was fairly sophisticated. Female nurses and doctors worked across its medical system, albeit in environments that were meticulously gender-regulated in order to keep to the strictures of its system of control.¹⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the array of ideology-born limitations that hospitals across the caliphate were technically bound by, positions for both male and female doctors and nurses were regularly advertised.¹⁶⁰ Often, these advertisements were more commands than calls for voluntary employment, meaning that many local medical professionals were coerced into service. Yet, in some cases, foreign women volunteered to join the ISIS health services as was seen when several female medical students from the UK traveled to join the organization.¹⁶¹ Foreign women were regularly observed at the dentist, or in the hospital when they were seeking medical care in cities such as Mosul.¹⁶² With both the resources and land under its control, as well as the announcement of this ‘state’, individuals from varied national, professional and educational backgrounds traveled to land held by ISIS to put their varied skill sets to use in support of this ‘state’.

When it came to schooling, several documents establish detailed employment parameters for female teachers working in ISIS administered classrooms.¹⁶³ The ISIS administration saw the basic ‘education’ of girls as a necessity, not an option—provided, that is, female teachers were available (on at least one occasion, a girls’ school was shut down due to a shortage of female staff-members).¹⁶⁴

- 159 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 2L: Fatwa on Nurses with Doctors - segregation of the sexes, 2015; Administrative Order from al-Tabqa Hospital to Female Section Nurses, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/administrative-order-al-tabqa-hospital-female-section-nurses/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-111984); Fatwa 42 - Question: What is the ruling on the presence of a nurse in the office of a doctor by themselves without the mahram present in the city and in some villages? Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/fatwa-42-question-ruling-presence-nurse-office-doctor-without-mahram-present-city-villages/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2015-125621_FATWA42). Also noted in Gina Vale. “Piety in the eye of the bureaucrat: The Islamic State’s strategy of civilian control.” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 1 (2020): 34-40.
- 160 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1S: Advertisement of Services for Umm al-Mu’mineen A’isha Hospital, Aleppo Province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 3I: Reopening of applications for medical school in Raqqa, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 6N: Opportunities in Midwifery Courses, Health Department, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 11S: Notice to doctors who leave ISIS territory, Deir az-Zor Province (2015), 2015.
- 161 Marga Zambrana, Hazar Aydemirm, and Emma Graham-Harrison, “Nine British Medics Enter ISIS Stronghold to Work in Hospitals,” *The Guardian*, March 21, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/21/british-medical-students-syria-isis>.
- 162 Fieldwork, “Interview 12,” 2022.
- 163 For example, teachers - both male and female - were required to take mandatory sharia before being cleared to teach in schools. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen L: Shari’a Session for Teachers, Raqqa Province, 2015; See also: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 1V: Call for repentance of teachers in IS-controlled parts of Syria: February 2015, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 3C: More on repentance programs in Manbij, Aleppo Province, Aleppo 2015, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 4U: Call for Repentance of Female Education Workers, Al-Basira, Deir az-Zor Province, 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 5N: Repentance for Female Employees in Schools, Raqqa, 2015.
- 164 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 26A: Closing schools for girls that do not have female staff, Dijla province, 2016; On girls education, see also: The ISIS Files Document 19_001084, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; The ISIS Files Document 37_001656, cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”; Information on Students at Bara’im (Blossoms) of Nineveh Orange, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/vh53wv72q>, (Source: 05_000450); Forms of Assignment and Variations, 2015, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/4x51hj023>, (Source: 30_001478).

Besides education and medicine, the only other sphere in which women could work appears to have been agriculture.¹⁶⁵ While the evidence for this is relatively sparse, we identified several documents that speak of women as agricultural landowners and farmers.¹⁶⁶ Women could take over fallow land or be listed on rental contracts if their husbands had died.¹⁶⁷ As with male landowners, they were obliged to pay taxes through the system of zakat that was established in 2014, ultimately generating tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for ISIS.¹⁶⁸ However, these documents mostly pertain to Syrian and Iraqi women.

Notwithstanding the fact that women could technically work under ISIS if they had the appropriate professional credentials or were faced by the ‘right’ circumstances (e.g., the death of their husbands), it is important to emphasize that their employment in these positions was an exception to the rule, not the rule itself. Indeed, rather like their involvement in policing or combat operations (explored below), it was something that ISIS only ever permitted begrudgingly as something that was necessary to uphold the undergirding principles of its system of control.

Security and defense-related roles

A proportion of foreign women who traveled to Iraq and Syria, as well as local women, who became affiliated with ISIS eventually took on security and defense-related roles in the organization. These largely comprised female ‘policing’ roles, and in limited cases included suicide attackers. However, as the group came under increasing pressure from local and international forces, the initially limited security and defense roles available to women evolved.

Women’s security and defense-related roles, and the training which accompanied this as undertaken in ISIS-held territory, is of particular significance as it remains quite rare for a jihadist group to allow women such roles in their organization.¹⁶⁹ There have been several women’s units reported to have been trained to support ISIS activities.¹⁷⁰ They have been noted to have diverse

165 For example, women working in internet halls or factories. See: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents,” Specimen 9Y: Conditions for opening a new hall [for internet], Raqqa, October 2015; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (cont.),” Specimen 18V: Further Internet restrictions in Mosul, 2016; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Archive of ISIS Administrative Documents (continued...again),” Specimen 23H: List of employees at a tailoring factory, Shirqat area, 2016; The following ISIS Files Documents cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”: The ISIS Files 35_001606; The ISIS Files 35_001614; The ISIS Files 35_001616; The ISIS Files 35_001621; The ISIS Files 35_001622; The ISIS Files 35_001615; The ISIS Files 35_001629.

166 The following ISIS Files Documents cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”: The ISIS Files 35_001606; The ISIS Files 35_001614; The ISIS Files 35_001616; The ISIS Files 35_001621; The ISIS Files 35_001622; The ISIS Files 35_001615; The ISIS Files 35_001629.

167 In one rental contract, ISIS noted, “A rental agreement cannot be made with a wife if the husband is still alive.” Lease Agreement, 2016, The ISIS Files, The George Washington University, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/artifact/0z708w41n>, (Source: 36_001651_07); Please also see the following ISIS Files Documents cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”: The ISIS Files 35_001627; The ISIS Files 10_000760.

168 For more on this, see: Deborah Margolin, Mathilde Becker Aarseth, Hans Christensen, Tati Fontana, and Mark Maffett, “You Reap What You Sow: The Importance of Agriculture to ISIS’s Governance Strategy,” The ISIS Files, The George Washington University (June 2015): 1-57, <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/report/2n49t1699>; For examples, see the following ISIS Files Documents cited in Margolin and Winter, “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence”: The ISIS Files 23_001251; The ISIS Files 06_000511; The ISIS Files 06_000489; The ISIS Files 06_000479; The ISIS Files 05_000447.

169 While al-Qaeda in Iraq utilized female suicide bombers in Iraq beginning in 2005, and Boko Haram does this frequently, this is distinct from policing and combat roles which demonstrate an expansion of institutionalized training and roles for women under ISIS. See: Margolin, “The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups,” 40–49.

170 These are outlined in greater detail in Anne Speckhard and Asaad Almoammad, “The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers,” International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (Research Reports), April 23, 2017, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>.

operational ranks and roles and were trained in activities such as enforcement of sharia laws, surveillance, combat, intelligence, assassination, and infiltration.¹⁷¹ While these women were trained in many of these ‘skills’, it is not confirmed that each of them was eventually utilized in such a role for the organization (i.e. they may have received training, but did not necessarily put it to use if not required at that time by ISIS).

WOMEN IN THE HISBA

One of women’s principal theaters of activity was in relation to religious policing, otherwise known as hisba. The hisba were tasked with tracking violations of religious laws, something that often meant enforcing ‘Islamic’ morality over women. For such duties, ISIS had no choice but to enlist women (even if the ‘ideal’ women should be sedentary) because the ideological restrictions on which its system of control was predicated—i.e., segregation and propriety—meant that men were physically unable to enforce all its rules.¹⁷² In other words, policing women in a ‘sharia-compliant’ manner meant doing things that men simply could not, like smelling women’s clothing and breath in the event that they had been accused of drinking alcohol or smoking. Importantly, and in line with ISIS’s ideology, even when women were given positions of power, it was always over other women, and never over men.

Several primary source ISIS documents shed light on what women’s hisba activities looked like in practice. One of the most detailed, which is dated November 2014, describes the internal structure of the hisba itself.¹⁷³ Among other things, it states that each hisba office had an all-female unit that operated separately from the male hisba units. Women in the hisba were tasked with policing women’s dress and behavior – when women were deemed to be contravening such morality codes in public they could be detained and punished as deemed appropriate. As morality police, they were involved in bringing these women before ISIS courts, and the fining, arrest, and punishment of women (both local and foreign). A local woman recalled seeing punishments of public flogging in cases of adultery,¹⁷⁴ and herself was approached by an armed French female member of the hisba for not wearing gloves in public.¹⁷⁵

Interestingly, these women were also charged with providing financial and material assistance to in-group women considered ‘in need,’ which included practically handing out materials to women. They would also give counseling to women who had been arrested, tour women’s schools to stop sharia violations and offer ‘advice’, and accompany male members for arrests and inspection raids when the targets were women. Moreover, in hisba roles, women were permitted to carry weapons, providing it was in a sharia-compliant manner.¹⁷⁶ This demonstrates one of the ways ISIS was willing to grant exceptions to women’s desired place in private spaces when it ensured the proper administration of its extensive bureaucracy.

171 Speckhard and Almohammad, “The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers.”

172 Kathy Gilsinan, “The ISIS Crackdown on Women, by Women,” *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/the-women-of-isis/375047/>.

173 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Internal Structure of ISIS’s Hisba Apparatus,” Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog (blog), 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21246/the-internal-structure-of-the-islamic-state-hisba>.

174 It was not clear if a woman was conducting the flogging.

175 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.

176 See for example: Fatwa 41 – Question: What is the ruling on carrying a weapon over the abaya by which a part of her body may be exposed or show its shape? Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/fatwa-41-question-ruling-carrying-weapon-abaya-part-body-may-exposed-show-shape/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2015-125621_FATWA41).



These terms of reference are corroborated by, among others, one other high-level document, which was authored by the overarching emir of the Diwan of Hisba and directed to the walis, or governors, of several ISIS provinces, including Euphrates, Khayr, Raqqa, and Aleppo.¹⁷⁷ The letter set out a directive of the General Governing Committee for the establishment of a devoted women's division of the hisba to operate in the cities of Bukamal, Mayadin, Raqqa, and Manbij, specifically 'to deal with the female violators.' In doing so, it instructed each governor to ask the emirs of the Hisba Center in the provinces in question to refer to the names of six women to work in the team. One local interview expressed the view that for women who wanted to leave the hisba may risk death, or be moved to another area, sometimes through marriage.¹⁷⁸

One of the most well-known and documented of these units was the Al-Khansaa brigade, located in Raqqa.¹⁷⁹ For some local women, joining ISIS security units provided an income, some degree of movement, protection for them and their families, as well as influence, and even power, under ISIS's harsh control and amidst the larger conflict. Some may have also joined to directly support the activities of ISIS. Yet, for some foreign women, joining Al-Khansaa could further be a way to demonstrate active involvement and commitment to the organization, and a chance for them to participate in a 'security'-related activity on behalf of ISIS. Although the brigade worked stringently within the confines of women's dictated roles within ISIS, by focusing on issues related to women and, to some degree, children, brigade members-maintained levels of power unavailable to most women in the caliphate, and some women in the brigade recalled joining for this reason.¹⁸⁰

According to an Al-Khansaa defector, women in this unit would undergo military and religious training. This reportedly consisted of training eight hours a day for a fifteen-day weapons course focused on training on and cleaning pistols, where foreigners were reported to train on Kalashnikovs highlighting distinct status and 'privileges' for foreign women. They would also assist in transporting women joining the organization to Raqqa.¹⁸¹ Beyond policing other women, they would also train other women in their ranks, including in the assembling and disassembling of weapons. One interviewee recalled an American woman who used to train other women on sniper activities.¹⁸² This echoes the case of US citizen Allison Fluke-Ekren, who was charged with training women on the use of assault rifles.¹⁸³ Other women interviewed by journalists noted they picked up women at the Turkish border as part of the Al-Khansaa Brigade in Raqqa.¹⁸⁴

177 Subject: The Reactivation (of the Female Division) in Some Cities of ISIS: Department of the Hisba, Harmony Program, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/harmony-program/subject-reactivation-female-division-cities-islamic-state-department-hisba/>, (Reference Number: NMEC-2017-406558).

178 Fieldwork, "Interview 10," 2022.

179 Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015): 495-509.

180 Azadeh Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html>.

181 Azadeh Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html>.

182 Fieldwork, "Interview 14," 2022.

183 "American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Sentenced to 20 Years," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, November 1, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-sentenced-20-years>.

184 Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape."

There are well documented cases of these Al-Khansaa members committing severe violence against other women including varied levels of harassment, detention, physical and verbal abuse and even torture.¹⁸⁵ Traveling around the city of Raqqa, these female security actors were documented to have “policed women’s dress armed with metal prongs, sometimes poking, slapping, or even biting women for dress code breaches,” and would fine or beat women, or cut their fingers for minor infractions.¹⁸⁶

The Khansa’ manifesto, which was first circulated online by ISIS supporters in early 2015, offered explicit advice regarding the role of women in ISIS.¹⁸⁷ The manifesto’s author—who claimed to be affiliated with the Al-Khansaa Brigade, stated that their “fundamental function” was “in the house, with [their] husband and children.”¹⁸⁸ There were some exceptional circumstances in which female supporters would be permitted to leave their homes—for example, to study their religion and to engage in medical work.¹⁸⁹ On the question of whether or not women could participate in combative jihad, the document was unequivocal. Women were expressly forbidden from fighting unless circumstances demanded otherwise. Indeed, the text held that women may engage in combat “if the enemy is attacking [their] country, and the men are not enough to protect it, and the imams give a fatwa for it, as the blessed women of Iraq and Chechnya did with great sadness.”¹⁹⁰ According to the Khansa’ manifesto, then, women could theoretically participate in combative jihad, but only in highly specific circumstances, which female ISIS supporters in Iraq and Syria were not facing at the time that this document was published.

WOMEN IN COMBAT

As noted above, ISIS’s position on the active military deployment of women was often ambiguous, for strategic reasons. Women were not obliged to fight, but they would be obliged to do so if circumstances required—i.e. if the jihad became overwhelmingly a war of defense.¹⁹¹ Women’s roles in combat were tied to strategic necessity; specifically this meant women’s roles in combat evolved over time as the needs of ISIS evolved. This idea was specifically reiterated in several fatwas aimed at women. In Fatwa no. 397, for example, women are reminded,

As for jihad in the meaning of ‘fighting and clashing,’ it is not obligatory on her but it is permitted when there is need for her and when there is no risk of becoming a captive and sabi [sex slave], and the assessment of [when that need is present] goes back to the [caliph]. But if the enemy come and surprise the people and they cannot repel them without the participation of the women, then it is obligatory on the women. This is so and God knows best.¹⁹²

This was also noted in Fatwa no. 418, which stated that military jihad was not obligatory for women, although “it is permitted in her right in terms of the principle, and it has been established that a number of women of the companions went out for jihad.”¹⁹³

185 “Iraq: Women Suffer under ISIS. For Sunnis, Lives Curtailed; for Yezidis, New Accounts of Brutal Rapes,” Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/06/iraq-women-suffer-under-isis>.

186 Ibid.

187 Charlie Winter, “Women of ISIS: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khansa’ Brigade,” 22.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.

191 Winter and Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and ISIS,” 23–28.

192 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “ISIS Fatwas on Women and Jihad,” Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi’s Blog (blog), 2021, <http://www.aymenn-jawad.org/2021/03/islamicstate-fatwas-on-women-and-jihad>.

193 Ibid.

By mid-2017, after more than a year of territorial losses, ISIS all but abandoned its offensive campaigns across Iraq and Syria. It was at this point that it signaled it was going to start following through on its provisions regarding female combatants.¹⁹⁴ In the same month, an article hinting at women's roles in combat was released in Rumiya, ¹⁹⁵ reports emerged of female suicide bombers in Mosul.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, in October of 2017, ISIS released further clarification on the matter, this time in its newspaper, Al-Naba. In the essay, the author stated that women were now obliged to engage in jihad on behalf of the caliphate¹⁹⁷

In early 2018, the first official footage appeared showing women seemingly engaging in combat against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alongside men in eastern Syria.¹⁹⁸ In the months that followed,¹⁹⁹ other visual accounts emerged, including in the first three months of 2019, when ISIS's last holdout in Baghouz was on the brink of collapse, a period in which numerous video clips emerged—some official, others not—showing women fighting to defend what they considered to be the last true territory of their caliphate.²⁰⁰ One interviewee in Iraq recalled hearing directly of armed foreign women being taken to the frontline with their husbands, and in one case deploying their child as a suicide bomber, though it was not clear what role foreign women would take on the frontlines.²⁰¹

The more recent case of American Allison Fluke-Ekren has also highlighted a unit called Khatiba Nusaybah – named after the infamous Umm 'Amarah – in which Fluke-Ekren led and organized this battalion of women on behalf of ISIS. Findings in her recent court case note that Fluke-Ekren “trained women on the use of automatic firing AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and suicide belts. Over 100 women and young girls, including as young as 10 or 11-years-old, received military training from Fluke-Ekren in Syria on behalf of ISIS.”²⁰² Fluke-Ekren had also set up a women's center in Raqqa in 2016 where she provided medical services, educational services about ISIS, childcare, and various training to women and young girls. Documents from the court case note, “As the center's leader, Fluke-Ekren also provided and assisted other

194 Margolin, “The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups,” 40–49; Winter and Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and ISIS,” 23–28; Charlie Winter, “ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 13, 2018, <https://institute.global/policy/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>.

195 Al-Hayat Media Center, “Our Journey to Allah,” Rumiya 11, 2017, 12-15.

196 Jack Moore, “ISIS Unleashes Dozens of Female Suicide Bombers in Battle for Mosul,” Newsweek, July 5, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-female-suicidebombers-battle-mosul-631846>.

197 See: “And as we are today in the context of this war on ISIS and its intensity and tribulation, it is becoming obligatory on the Muslim women to undertake their obligation at all levels in supporting the mujahideen in this battle, in that they should reckon themselves female mujahideen in the path of God, and they should prepare to defend their religion with their lives in sacrifice for the religion of God the Blessed and Almighty, and they should incite their husbands and sons, so they should be like the mujahid women of the first group.” Islamic State Central Media Diwan, “The Obligation on Women to Engage in Jihad against the Enemies,” Al-Naba 100, 2017, 11.

198 Al-Hayat Media Center, “Inside the Caliphate 7”; Lizzie Dearden, “ISIS Propaganda Video Shows Women Fighting for First Time Amid ‘Desperation’ to Bolster Ranks,” The Independent, February 8, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-video-women-jihadis-female-fighters-recruitment-syria-iraq-islamic-state-propaganda-a8200621.html>.

199 Vera Mironova, “Is the future of ISIS female?” The New York Times, February 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/opinion/islamic-state-female-fighters.html>; Additional reports: Dearden, “ISIS Propaganda Video Shows Women Fighting for First Time Amid ‘Desperation’ to Bolster Ranks;” Bethan McKernan, “Syrian Army Breaks ISIS’ Three-Year-Long Siege of Deir Ezzor,” The Independent, September 5, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-army-isis-deir-ezzor-siege-three-years-assad-regime-town-loyal-a7930276.html>.

200 For example, “Footage from the ongoing battles between the fighters of ISIS and the PKK in the village of Baghuz in the Susa district of Deir Ezzor,” A’maq News Agency, 18 March 2019.

201 Fieldwork, “Interview 14,” 2022.

202 “American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Pleads Guilty,” United States Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, June 7, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-pleads-guilty>.

female ISIS members in providing training to numerous women and young girls on the use of automatic firing AK-47 assault rifles, grenades and explosive suicide belts.”²⁰³ This training was conducted and continued into 2017 to facilitate the expansion and ongoing status of the group.

Women have also conducted suicide attacks as they are able to do so alone, and thus do not contravene the group’s strict gender segregation norms.²⁰⁴ These attacks appeared to largely occur in defense operations where, as Iraqi forces reclaimed Mosul between June and early July 2017 for example, at least 38 female suicide bombers (some carrying infants) carried out attacks.²⁰⁵ Attacks by female suicide bombers in Deir Ezzor were also reported in September 2017.²⁰⁶ However, earlier examples outside of Iraq and Syria included a suicide attack plot by Dian Yukua Novi in Indonesia (2016),²⁰⁷ and a successful attack by Diana Ramazova in Turkey on a police station (2015),²⁰⁸ highlighting the risk from some women that extends beyond the ‘caliphate’. However, the majority of cases of female suicide bombers have been recorded within Iraq and Syria. Of note in these two cases, both examples were linked to militants inside Syria highlighting that persons from within Iraq and Syria could also guide or direct women in attacks abroad.²⁰⁹ In the final battle before ISIS was defeated in Baghouz, Syria in early 2019, at least three women also conducted suicide attacks, and some women appeared to take up arms on behalf of the group in combat operations as seen in video released by the group.²¹⁰

Section IV: Detention after the caliphate

Since the territorial defeat of the organization in Baghouz in 2019, foreign women who remained with ISIS forces until the end have now largely been detained in a separate annex in al-Hol camp in northeast Syria. This includes 7,800 foreigners, the majority of whom are children. The Annex is considered the most dangerous area of the camp, and women’s potential roles in criminal activity or even war crimes continue here today. A smaller camp, Roj camp, holds approximately 2,000 foreigners.²¹¹

203 Ibid.

204 This stands in contrast to women in front line combat where they would be thus mixed with males that they are unrelated to, something the group is vehemently opposed to and an important reason women have largely been restricted from such roles.

205 Bel Trew, “ISIS Turns to Jihadist Brides in Last-Ditch Attempt to Hold off Iraqi Forces in Mosul”, *The Times*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-turns-to-jihadist-brides-in-last-ditch-attempt-to-hold-off-iraqi-forces-in-mosul-v9gzndb6l>;

Josie Ensor, “Chilling Picture Shows Female ISIL Fighter Holding Child Moments before Detonating Suicide Vest”, *Telegraph*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/08/chilling-picture-shows-female-isil-fighter-holding-child-moments/>.

206 McKernan, “Syrian Army Breaks ISIS’ Three-Year-Long Siege of Deir Ezzor.”

207 David H. Wells, “ISIS Unveiled: The Story Behind Indonesia’s First Female Suicide Bomber,” *Time*, March 3, 2017, <http://time.com/4689714/indonesia-isis-terrorism-jihad-extremism-dian-yulia-novi-fpi/>.

208 Constanze Letsch, “Pregnant Istanbul suicide bomber was Russian citizen” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/16/pregnant-istanbul-suicide-bomber-russian-citizen>.

209 Toygun Atilla, “Suicide Bomber who Attacked Istanbul Police was Married to Norwegian ISIL Jihadist,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 18, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/suicide-bomber-who-attacked-istanbul-police-was-married-to-norwegian-isil-jihadist-77070>.

210 Women are rarely featured in ISIS propaganda, and if so, are without exception (as observed by the authors) featured in niqabs which fully veil the face and body. As such, unless they are speaking, it is often difficult to ascertain with full certainty that they are women, and could in fact be men in disguise. Julie Esnor, “Women Take to the Front Line as Desperate ISIL Fights to the End,” *The Telegraph*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/22/isil-relaxes-rules-let-women-take-arms-jihadists-final-stand/>.

211 Devorah Margolin, “The Problem with al-Hol: The Future for ISIS-Affiliated Families,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/problem-al-hol-future-isis-affiliated-families>.

Since 2019, in al-Hol, there have been cases of women carrying out ‘hisba patrols’ similar to that of Al-Khansaa in Raqqa; burning down other women’s tents; harassing, abusing and even murdering girls and women who contravene ISIS moral codes; and attacking SDF forces currently administering the camp with weapons including knives.²¹² Between April 2019 and April 2022, Save the Children recorded 130 murders in al-Hol camp.²¹³ It has been reported that the victims are being identified and targeted by other women, though a lack of investigations and prosecutions have not clarified these details.²¹⁴ It has proved particularly difficult to determine what proportion of women continue to hold violent extremist beliefs, and across a broader spectrum of beliefs, what proportion may have disengaged from the group ideologically and physically. Investigations are also difficult to conduct in al-Hol camp, due to not only the significant fear of residents, but the strict enforcement of dress means that for many women who wear niqabs (which cover the face) they are not easily identified by guards or other personnel working in the camp.

Today, some of these ISIS-affiliated women are still ardent supporters of the group, remaining steadfast in their ideological commitment to its teachings and conducting violence against other residents in the camp.²¹⁵ They could potentially rejoin the group and help ensure its ideology is passed to future generations or contribute to its ongoing activities, including conducting various forms of violence themselves. Some women in al-Hol have launched online crowdfunding campaigns to try and secure funding for human smugglers to help them escape.²¹⁶ Crucially, not all the foreign women detained in al-Hol are still supporters of ISIS, let alone its operatives. Hence, the potential risk they would present on repatriation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Section V: Conclusion

This paper set out to answer the question: what was the agency and roles of foreign women in ISIS? It offered the reader key information to better understand women’s roles, who joined the group from abroad, and their motivations to do so, and why looking at this issue with a gender lens is important. Secondly, it discussed ISIS’s ideological conceptualization of women’s roles to lay out how ISIS envisioned the roles of women within the organization. Thirdly, the various

- 212 Azsadeh Moaveni, “I’m Going to Be Honest, This Baby Is Going to Die,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/opinion/isis-children.html>; Louisa Loveluck and Souad Mekhennet, “At a Sprawling Tent Camp in Syria, ISIS Women Impose a Brutal Rule” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcd14-c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html; Erin Cunningham, “True ISIS Believers Regroup Inside Refugee Camp, Terrorize the ‘Impious,’” *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/true-isis-believers-regroup-inside-refugee-camp-terrorize-the-impious/2019/04/19/a30d4986-556c-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6_story.html; Quentin Sommerville, “ISIS: The Women and Children No-One Wants,” *BBC News*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47867673>.
- 213 “Remember the Armed Men who Wanted to Kill Mum”: The hidden toll of violence in Al Hol on Syrian and Iraqi Children,” *Save the Children*, 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/remember-the-armed-men-who-wanted-to-kill-mum-the-hidden-toll-of-violence-in-al-hol-on-syrian-and-iraqi-children/>.
- 214 Christina Lamb, “Is it Time to Bring Home Britain’s ISIS Brides and Their Children?” *The Times*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.the-times.co.uk/article/is-it-time-to-bring-home-britains-isis-brides-and-their-children-gw678jg8c>.
- 215 Gina Vale, “Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.icct.nl/index.php/publication/women-islamic-state-caliphate-camps>; John Saleh, “The Women of ISIS and the Al-Hol Camp,” *Fikra Forum (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy)*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/women-isis-and-al-hol-camp>.
- 216 Richard Hall, “ISIS Suspects in Syrian Camp Raise Thousands Through Online Crowdfunding Campaign,” *The Independent*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-camp-al-hol-paypal-telegram-online-crowdfunding-a9021006.html>.



roles women played under ISIS were outlined, specifically the different institutions women contributed to, as well as women's roles in both public and private life under ISIS. Finally, the paper highlighted women's ongoing roles in detention in camps in northeast Syria today.

Women's roles must be assessed on an individual basis and considered throughout the duration of their involvement with ISIS. Their agency too must be considered throughout the duration of this involvement, allowing for considerations of how this may have been either more or less constrained in different environments and periods of time. Finally, accounting for the duration of time many have now spent in Syria/Iraq – which in some cases is around a decade – girls who may have been taken or traveled when they were children may have since become adults, and even mothers and in some cases widows, and principles of child welfare and in some cases juvenile justice should be considered appropriately.

For women who have had roles within ISIS who may face prosecution, justice for victims of ISIS should be relentlessly pursued, while also accounting for rehabilitative and reintegration considerations, balancing both the needs of victims and aims to redirect women away from ISIS ideological and physical support in the future.

Author profiles

Dr. Devorah Margolin is the Blumenstein-Rosenbloom Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University. She earned her PhD in International Relations and Security Studies from the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Dr. Margolin previously served as Director of Strategic Initiatives and a Senior Research Fellow at the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, where she served as principal investigator (PI) on a National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center grant, and was co-PI on a grant examining best practices for reintegration programming for returning spouses and minors. She was also the Project Manager for the ISIS Files Digital Repository, a collection of over 15,000 pages of original ISIS materials found in Nineveh Province in Iraq by the New York Times. Her co-edited volume *Jihadist Terror: New Threats, New Responses*, was published with I.B. Tauris (Bloomsbury Press) in Spring 2019.

Dr. Joana Cook is a Senior Project Manager at ICCT and Editor-in-Chief of the ICCT journal. She is also an Assistant Professor of Terrorism and Political Violence in the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University. Dr. Cook is also a Research Affiliate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London and an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization; an adjunct lecturer at Johns Hopkins University; a non-resident Fellow at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University; a Research Affiliate with the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS); and a Digital Fellow at the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS), Concordia University.



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