

Jihadi Brides: Why do Western Muslim Girls Join ISIS?

Maren Hald Bjørgum

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the issue of why young Western women from stable families and egalitarian, female-friendly states, are choosing to leave their family and country behind to join IS' misogynistic society. Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in early 2011, and increasingly with the growth of IS in the region, European men and women have travelled to the area to join the fighting. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence almost 4000 Western European citizens had joined Sunni militant organizations fighting in Syria or Iraq as of January 2015. A surprisingly large number of these migrants are women. This paper examines the reasons for how these women get radicalized and why. Whether warrior or victim, or neither, the women who migrate to the Islamic State are searching for a meaning in their lives that did not exist in the Western world.

Keywords: jihadi brides, ISIS, Middle East, Europe, foreign fighters, gender identity.

Introduction

It was 10 o'clock on a Friday night in spring 2014 and I was sitting on the sofa in my one-bed Paris apartment when I received a message from a French terrorist based in Syria: "Salaam alaikum, sister. I see you watched my video. It's gone viral – crazy! Are you Muslim? What do you think about mujahideen?"¹

In May 2015, French journalist Anna Erelle published an article based on her two-year-long work to uncover why young French women were increasingly leaving a stable life in the suburbs to join IS as so-called "Jihadi brides." Posing as a young woman named Mélodie, she was exploring how the terrorist group known as the Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL or Daesh, was recruiting young Muslim Europeans through social media.

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in early 2011, and increasingly with the growth of IS in the region, Western men and women have traveled to the area to join the fighting. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence almost 4000 Western European citizens had joined Sunni militant

¹ Anna Erelle. "Skyping with the enemy: I went undercover as a jihadi girlfriend," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/26/french-journalist-poses-muslim-convert-isis-anna-erelle>

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organizations fighting in Syria or Iraq as of January 2015, making up approximately one-fifth of the total number of foreign fighters.² While we traditionally view these as men, lone wolves joining jihadist groups in the search of an adventure, respect or the promise of martyrdom and its rewards, a surprisingly large number of these migrants are women.

They call themselves muhajirin, female migrants, and speak of the need for completing Hijrah, or migration in Arabic, to join the land of Islam.³ They are active on social media and blog about their life in the Islamic State as a utopian dream in contrast to the narrative served by Western media. The last couple of years, journalists, government agencies and researchers have been trying to document who these women, or in some cases girls, are, and how they are persuaded into going. And more recently, some journalists and researchers are trying to figure out why. This article addresses the two last questions: the how and the why. Why are young Western women from stable families and egalitarian, female-friendly states choosing to leave their family and country behind to join IS' misogynistic society?

Before exploring the historical background of the topic at hand, I would like to clarify my definition of a couple of key concepts that will be tackled in this paper. When talking about jihadist groups I am referring to fundamentalist and extremist groups preaching militaristic jihad, and not groups using peaceful means to promote the Islamic struggle (jihad). Furthermore, while the Islamic State is a group known by many names, it will be referred to as IS for the remainder of this paper for reasons of simplicity.

Race, Gender and the Islamic State (IS)

In June 2014, the IS proclaimed itself a “worldwide caliphate” controlling a vast area of Syria and North-west Iraq. Originally formed in 1999 under the name Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad with a pledged allegiance to the terrorist group Al Qaeda, the group has grown into what many consider the most prominent threat to international security today, controlling a territory that contains a population of 8 million people.⁴ Using social media to scare as well as recruit, IS has successfully managed to draw more than 50,000 foreign fighters to their cause as of January 2015.⁵ One of the things that make the Western world terrified and also vilified by the growing popularity of IS, is a reaction to what Mino Moallem calls “modernity’s claim of being a post-religious and post-traditional world.”⁶

2 Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s”, ICSR, Department of War Studies, King’s College London, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>.

3 Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah, “The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin,” *Dabiq*, March 1, 2015.

4 Mah-Rukh Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS exploits women,” *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper*, 2015.

5 Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s.”

6 Mino Moallem. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

In the secular society the Western world has been building, there is no room for archaic traditions and faiths, and the fact that well-educated people born and raised in this society willingly surrender to something as barbaric as religion is incomprehensible. The irony of the Western world being based on Christian fundamentals is lost on many, but can be said to be a contributing factor in why some young people of non-Christian faith feel ostracized in Europe and North America. Moallem proposes a valid narrative when he states that fundamentalism, like the one IS represents, is not the final, erratic breath of a dying tradition. Rather, it is a response to the rise of secularization, a counter-attack to the ideals of modernity.

While converts and many of the younger recruits are drawn to IS for reasons like adventure and a sense of self-aggrandizement, a lot of IS' fighters and growing migrant population travel to the Islamic State for two reasons: 1) the perceived persecution of Muslims worldwide, and 2) the duty of Hijrah. The former is a very prominent topic in interviews, articles and videos written by the IS propaganda machinery. In this narrative, the Western world is involved in a long-running war of oppression against Muslims, with conflicts in the Middle East and Africa over the last two centuries (Ottoman Empire versus the Habsburg, Israel versus Palestine, the Bosnian genocide, etc.) being used as proof. The anger and frustration at the apparent inaction of the Western world in the conflict in Syria have also been an important factor in this. Conspiracy theories on the Western complicity in the conflicts, on both sides, are spread to create anger and sympathy. One such tweet states, "The killings of innocent muslims [sic] is not just collateral damage tolerated by the leaders of the west, but also directed by them"⁷ Using photos of children, who have been injured or killed in attacks from "non-believers", IS is building up a narrative that pits Muslims against everyone else. It also speaks to a unity through race, not in the classical sense, but as a social construct of the Muslim "race" united by their commonalities in faith. The latter reason, the duty of Hijrah, is explained at length in the 8th issue of the IS magazine *Dabiq*: "Hijrah, as it was defined by Ibn Qudamah is 'to leave darul-kufr for Dār al-Islām' [Al-Mughni]. Sa'd Ibn 'Atiq (rahimahullah) said, 'It is migrating from the places of shirk and sin to the land of Islam and obedience' [Ad-Durar as-Saniyyah]."⁸ Hijrah, migration, most commonly refers to the prophet Muhammad and his followers' move from Mecca to Medina in the sixth century to avoid assassination. In *Dabiq*, the Dār al-Islām that is referred to is a region ruled by Muslims, where Islamic laws are executed and where the authority is Muslim even if the majority of the population might be kuffar (non-believers). The article goes on to explain that according to teachings of Allah, the world is spacious enough for Muslims to create their own state, and if such

7 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, May 1, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/publications/>.

8 Al-Muhajirah, "The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin," 32.

a state exists, believers should migrate there instantly instead of living in a state where Islamic law is not the law of the land. With the creation of the Islamic State ruled by Islamic law, some see it as their religious duty to migrate to follow Allah's commands.⁹

While Muslims do not share a common ethnicity or race, and even the ranks of IS are filled with soldiers of many colors and languages, IS does have a racial scheme that pits "true believers" against what is often referred to as "laymen Muslims," and Muslims against non-believers.¹⁰ In August 2014, IS began a campaign to cleanse Iraq and its neighboring countries of the influence of other religions, and the Yazidis of northern Iraq fell victim to this campaign. Writing in the 9th issue of *Dabiq*, *Al-Muhajirah* justifies and glorifies the sexual slavery of Yazidi women in the article "Slave-girls or prostitutes?" According to the Islamic State, as non-believers, the Yazidis should be subjected to total humiliation: their fighters should be killed, their women captured and their children enslaved. This includes the women being sold as slaves and taken as concubines. In December 2014, infamous Australian migrant Elomar Sharrouf posted a photo on his Twitter account asking for any buyers for "1 out of 7 Yazidi slave girls", for "\$2500 each."¹¹

Female Foreign Fighters of Islam

Both in scholarly articles and news journalism women are usually assumed to be passive, nonviolent or peripheral agents, being used, abused or conned into joining a cause by their dominant partner, father or other male authority figure. However, female terrorists, female foreign fighters and female terror brides are not a new concept. Throughout history women have joined fundamental battles alongside their husbands and sons, picking up weapons to fight for their beliefs. Sometimes women can even be more radicalized than their men. In their article "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic", ICCT Research Fellows Edwin Bakker and Seran de Leede state that while there is a lot existing scholarship on the role of women in terrorism and women in jihadist movements, little research has been done on the female foreign fighters joining these movements.¹² They also point out the fact that historically involvement on this scale is unprecedented, thus increasing the demand of research on the field to explain the how, why and what of the issue in order to manage or prevent further recruitment by IS. Ali

9 *Al-Muhajirah*, "The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin," 33.

10 *Ibid.*, 34.

11 Saltman and Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," 28.

12 Edwin Bakker and Seran De Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic," *ICCT - International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 1, 2015, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://icct.nl/publication/european-female-jihadists-in-syria-exploring-an-under-researched-topic/>.

summarizes the main view of most of the scholarship when she writes that there seems to be one universal factor that influences the decision of both men and women to join IS: the promise of an adventurous life while at the same time offering meaning to their lives.¹³

IS as an organization brandishes its creed to bring forth the return of the Khilafah through bloodshed and violence. As Al-Muhajirah writes in *Dabiq*: “By Allah, we brought it back by the edge of the sword, and we did not do so through pacifism, negotiations, democracy, or elections. We established it according to the prophetic way, with blood-red swords, not with fingers for voting or tweeting.”¹⁴ While IS has not yet allowed women to fight, there are two special forces in the Islamic State’s military system that consist of women only. In the Jordanian hostage crisis of January 2015, IS demanded the return of would-be suicide bomber Sajida al-Rishawi in exchange for the Jordanian pilot they had in their possession. Al-Rishawi participated in a suicide attack in Amman in 2005, together with her husband, but while his bomb vest detonated, hers did not. The demand for a female hostage, rather than any of the male hostages held by Jordan shows that IS is increasingly appreciative of female participation in the jihad.¹⁵

Jihadi Chic: the Lure of ISIS

As Mah-Rukh Ali notes in her article “Isis and Propaganda – How Isis Exploits Women,” it is a paradox that despite the perceived brutality of the organization, IS recruitment continues to escalate. Equally paradoxical is the fact that women are increasingly joining the group in stark contrast to its promotion of violence, both physical and sexual, against women and children. As discussed in the previous section, female terrorists are hardly a new concept in the world of security studies. However, the aggressive tactics IS is employing specifically towards women is unique. It is important to note that evidence has shown that these girls and women are very diverse, both in their background, reasons for radicalization and migration, and actions once part of IS.¹⁶ So, while the push and pull factors presented in this section are true for some migrants, they cannot be used to generalize on the motivations for all of these girls and women.

In an interview with CNN Inside, Michael Steinbach, current head of the FBI’s counterterrorist division, said, “[the] recruitment of women by ISIS is much more than we’ve ever seen by a terrorist organization.”¹⁷ As many as 550 or more girls and women have migrated to Syria and Iraq to join IS since it set up shop, and it does not look like

13 Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS exploits women,” 15.

14 Al-Muhajirah, “The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin,” 47.

15 Saltman and Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” 18.

16 Ibid.

17 By Pamela Brown and Wesley Bruer, “FBI official: ISIS is recruiting U.S. teens,” *CNN*, February 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/03/politics/fbi-isis-counterterrorism-michael-steinbach/>

the flow will slow down anytime soon.¹⁸ In the IS magazine *Dabiq*, regular contributor Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah, writes about the Hijrah (migration for the cause of Allah) of herself and many others like her:

[Now] every day there are not only muhājirīn to the land of Islam but also muhājirāt who were sick of living amongst kufr and its people. As soon as the sun of their awaited state rose, they rushed to it alone and in groups from the eastern and western extents of the Earth. Their colors and tongues are different, but their hearts are united upon “there is no god but Allah.” I remember the day I performed hijrah, I was the only Arab woman amongst the muhājirah sisters during that trip.¹⁹

It is important to note here that Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah is in all likelihood a fabricated name, “Umm” meaning mother and “Muhajirah” meaning female migrant. The romantic vision of an Islamic utopia, combined with the promise of a romantic partner at the end of the road is strong in these narratives. As Saltman and Smith note, the prize of a meaningful romance, unlike the childish high school flirting of their everyday lives, appeal to the younger segment of potential Jihadi brides.²⁰ On Tumblr, one user named *diary-of-a-muhajirah* tells her followers of how she met her husband after arriving in Shaam (the Islamic State): “After we finished the salah, he turned back and smiled at me. And I can feel something. Yes, I guess I just fell in love with someone - my husband! Allāh has answered my prayer. Al Hamdulillah.” This romantic narrative, perpetuated by countless social media accounts on Tumblr, Twitter, Ask.fm and Instagram glorify the life in the Islamic State and accentuate the romantic and picture perfect-worthy. In another example of these romantic notions you have the case of Zahra and Salma Halane, twin sisters from Manchester who traveled to Syria in 2014. Both were married to IS fighters, and then widowed less than 6 months later. Instead of mourning the deaths of their husbands, the girls expressed pride in the martyrdom that took their husbands’ lives, Zarah posting that she was now the “wife of a green bird.” According to Saltman, this term is a common reference expressed by Western female migrants, explaining that: “This aspiration is bound to notions of honor and a strong belief in the possibility for reunion with spouses, family members and friends in jannah or ‘paradise.’”²¹ Combined with the glorification of their husbands’ deaths, this narrative serves to romanticize the act of being a widow and quells potential fears of would-be Jihadi widows.

The propaganda brought forth by Jihadi brides themselves is coupled with the active recruitment of IS men. Men like the one Anna Erelle communicated with under the disguise of being a Muslim teenager in France. As more information is gathered on how

18 Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s.”

19 Al-Muhajirah, “The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin,” 33.

20 Saltman and Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” 20-23.

21 *Ibid.*, 24.

this communication happens, there is a growing consensus that the strategies employed by IS are the same that pedophiles and other sexual predators use when recruiting young victims online.²² By forming secret relationships, providing emotional support, establishing trust and then setting up a formal meeting offline, is very true to the norm of the expert pedophile.

In addition to actively pursuing female recruits, IS has also published a “Manifesto for Women,” a guideline put together by educated Western women from the IS ranks, of both Anglo-Saxon and Arab ethnicity, formulating how women should behave in the Islamic State.²³ The document states that women and men are not equal, stipulates rules for how and what jobs women in the Islamic State can employ, and how they should dress. It also states that the way women in the west work has made them accept corrupt ideas, and that “the model preferred by infidels in the West failed the minute that women were ‘liberated’ from their cell in the house.” The manifesto includes a year-to-year guide on how a woman should lead her life, including statements on how a girl can be married at nine, and should be married by age 16 or 17.²⁴ All of these measures suggest a long-term design that diverges from other, more traditional terrorist organizations. As Sara Mahmood writes in her paper on the female IS fighters “Marrying women to the jihadists will ensure that the lineage of the Muslims fighting to create the ultimate caliphate persists.”²⁵ Ironically, considering the manifest’s focus on the woman being subservient to her husband, many young girls who join IS are looking for respect, according to Mahmood. In a Europe plagued by Islamophobia, many girls and women long for a society where their use of the hijab will not alienate them or make them a target for racism.

Agency and Jihadi Feminism

Through globalization, national and personal identities have met with a new crisis, as the nation-state and dominant narratives that used to shape them are corroding. The outcome has been, in the words of Moallem, a war “between the dominant and the dominated ethnicities, as well as hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities.”²⁶ In this crisis of cognition, as the cookie-cutter shape is no longer available to present people with a recipe for who they are and what their role in society is, a “desire for lost unity” emerges. Gender identity is one of the key issues in this crisis, pushed to the center stage when the side effect of modernity and globalization turned out to be the introduction of women into industries and arenas previously dominated by men. The outcome, feminism,

22 Tami Amanda Jacoby, “Jihadi Brides at the Intersection of Contemporary Feminism,” *New Political Science* 37, no. 4 (2015): 537.

23 Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS exploits women,” 13.

24 Ibid.

25 Sara Mahmood, “Female fighters of Islamic state: why more from the West?” RSIS Commentaries, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2015: 1.

26 Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, 155.

is the radical opposition to fundamentalism. They are both a product of modernization, born out of the “crisis of masculinity” and the conflict between the public and private, and represent two opposing poles through Islamic fundamentalism and Western egalitarian feminism.

Enacting the word feminism on behalf of the Islamic State might seem, from a Western perspective, paradoxical. However, female and male converters are doing exactly that. Jihadi Brides represent a new aspect of feminism, aligned with Islamic fundamentalism, and in its very essence anti-Western egalitarian feminism. As Jacoby notes in her article on contemporary feminism, Jihadi feminism unsettles two key assumptions made by contemporary feminists: “That all women *want* gender equality, and that all women *want* to be heard.”²⁷

Jacoby presents three different perspectives on how to understand Jihadi brides in a feminist perspective: 1) the victim, 2) the warrior, and 3) the Feminist.²⁸ The first aspect, viewing the girls as victims whose “political motives are generated from a position of powerlessness or depravity at the hands of men” is a somewhat unpopular view in gender studies because it takes away the possibility of agency. However, as Jacoby points out, oppression of women does exist in some political contexts, and from what we know of IS’ society it is a severely oppressive one given the fact of its patriarchal readings of scripture and the absence of a rights-based culture.²⁹ Furthermore, many of the girls who migrate to Iraq and Syria to join up with IS are by all probabilities not aware of what their situation will be like in the Islamic State, and thus are goaded in much the same way as victims of human sex trafficking.

The warrior-aspect employs many of the same criteria used to define male recruits to IS, the most vital one being that of a political motive. One important factor in this is the idea that the women involved usually identify more with their husband and his compatriots than they do with other women.³⁰ Women like the legendary Khawlah bint al-Azwar, a Muslim warrior from the seventh century and one of Muhammad’s first followers, represent the dream scenario for these women, fighting and killing for a cause that they themselves believe in as much as their husbands. It should come as no surprise that women would want to pick up arms and fight; from Jean D’Arc to Hua Mulan, history is filled with women wanting to take part in the fighting and claim their agency in a war they truly believe in. Being able to fight is its own kind of feminism.

Closely related to the view of the warrior, but with some variation is the third scenario: Jihadi brides as feminists. This is by far the most optimistic of the perspectives Jacoby presents, where the Jihadi brides are working to break down the constraints of the gender

27 Jacoby, “Jihadi Brides at the Intersection of Contemporary Feminism,” 537.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 538.

hierarchy in both their country of origin and in the Islamic State.³¹ In times of war or serious crisis, women often see their position in society change as the need for manpower or support necessitates the active participation of women. IS has opened up for more active participation of women in warfare in the future, and for the Jihadi brides that can be seen as a real feminist victory in their right to defend their beliefs and their right to take action on the same grounds as men.

IS is also taking into account the idea of feminism when recruiting young women. As mentioned in the previous section, the manifesto specifically concerned with women is one of many strategic moves to build up the agency of potential recruiters. Starting with the 7th issue IS-magazine *Dabiq*, published in February 2015, there is a column specifically targeted at jihadi brides and potential female recruits called “To Our Sisters.” It is signed Umm Sumayah Al-Muhajirah, mentioned in earlier sections in this essay, and frequently references the hijrah, religious duty and the important roles women play in building what is essentially the Islamic State’s utopia. In the 8th issue of the magazine, Al-Mahajirah preaches to her fellow sisters, telling them to be strong and patient, and to await their reward:

Be firm, my dear sister, be patient, and await your reward. Be wary, be wary of thinking of going back to the lands of the tawāghīt. Know that you have sisters who have been afflicted with great afflictions. Some of their husbands were killed, some were amputated, some were paralyzed, and some were imprisoned, but their wives were firm like the firmest of mountains. The tribulations did not increase them in anything but firmness and patience. Do not forget that reward is in accordance with the degree of hardship and ‘The matter of the believer is amazing.’³²

Feminism for the sisters of the Islamic State, in their own words, is the strong belief in the fact that women are the rocks and mortar of the family. Women are there to support their husbands and family, to uphold the traditions, and to keep the ideology alive through themselves as well as their offspring. As Saltman and Smith notes, “females joining the ISIS movement are not only rejecting the culture and foreign policy of the West they leave behind; they are also embracing a new worldview, cultivated by ISIS, based on building what they are told will become a utopian society.”³³ The women who join IS celebrate every victory as another step in the fight for utopia, and every new recruit as another subject saved for the khilafah (the region controlled by IS). Within the radicalization process, the women share a strong belief in their fulfilling religious duty and as nurses, teachers, wives and mothers they contribute and are assured their due reward in the afterlife.³⁴

31 *Ibid.*, 540.

32 Al-Muhajirah, “The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin,” 37.

33 Saltman and Smith, “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” 14.

34 *Ibid.*, 15.

Conclusion

As Syrian and Iraqi refugees are filling up newspaper articles and academic journals, and European countries, the trickle of Western migrants moving from Europe to the war-torn regions of Iraq and Syria remain a mystery to many. As this paper has shown, there are many different kinds of motivation that drive these women to migrate from the West to the Islamic State, some similar to the male recruits, while others are more related to female tropes. Whether warrior or victim, or neither, the women who migrate to the Islamic State are searching for a meaning in their lives that did not exist in the Western world. The promise of traditional gender identities, respect and agency in a world that assumes Muslim girls have none are issues that the Western world needs to address if they want to stop this growing migration. Whether a less polarized political climate would de-radicalize these girls and women is uncertain, and so far IS propaganda techniques seem too efficient. More research is needed in this field, not just to fully understand what drives this migration, but also to uncover if there might be any preventive measures available to stop more girls from leaving their family in search for a reality that by all accounts does not exist.

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