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Alienation, Attraction and Agency: A Study of the Western Muhajirat in ISIL

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ALIENATION, ATTRACTION AND AGENCY: A STUDY OF THE WESTERN MUHAJIRAT IN ISIL

By

Sally Somoza

A THESIS

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ALIENATION, ATTRACTION AND AGENCY: A STUDY OF THE WESTERN
MUHAJIRAT IN ISIL

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The number of women perpetrating acts of terrorism as well as joining terrorists groups has risen sharply. Women have participated and participate in armed, Islamist struggle. In recent years, foreign women have travelled from the West to join ISIL. The participation of these *muhajirat* (pl. female migrants) perplexes policymakers, government officials, and researchers who call attention to a group’s gendered regulation, violence and widespread use of rape. Observers often argue that women are deceived by the organization or seduced by the promise of romance. Given that in the West, women have equal rights as men and have free liberties, these observers suggest that women would not, under rational circumstances, choose to join ISIL. This thesis will address a central research question: why do Western women join ISIL? There are three primary sections to this thesis. The first section focuses on the theoretical framework and concept of gender Orientalism. The second maps the motifs which prime women down a path of violent radicalization to the point at which they decide they must make *hijra* (migrate) to join ISIL. The final section of this report uses a dataset from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) on social media activity for 17 Western female recruits between 2011-2015 who have been identified as having successfully made the journey to join ISIL. They are residents in the
so-called Islamic State and share their experiences and emotions through narratives on their social media accounts. This thesis suggests that female foreign recruits are not unique in their motivation and share many similarities with male fighters and women in other Islamist organizations. Female recruits, through the dynamics of alienation, attraction, and agency should be taken as seriously as male insurgents intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate and a possible fighting threat. Given that ISIL is losing territory in Iraq and Syria, it is very likely they could employ women as suicide bombers (like its predecessor group, Al-Qaeda) within those countries and may also try to do so in Western countries.

*Keywords*: gender; western women; ISIS; ISIL; Daesh; terrorism; orientalism; social media.
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-Sally Somoza
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Even in the twenty-first century, many retain the sense that women tend still to be portrayed as nurturers and protectors, not as destroyers. A sharp rise in the number of women perpetrating acts of terrorism as well as joining terrorist groups suggests that women may choose the path of destroyers.¹ Some of these women have participated in acts of terrorism with terrorist groups that do not support an equal role for women. There is certainly some irony to this. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) requires women to be subservient to men. Despite the group’s oppression of women, some also flock to its ranks. Women have begun to join the group in significant numbers; never before in the modern history of terrorism has a group attracted so many women.² Some of ISIL’s most vocal supporters, particularly on social media, are women. They serve to the organization’s message and act as recruiters, and in many instances, they are the face and voice of the Islamic State.³ In late 2016, women had also planned ISIL-inspired or -affiliated attacks in Paris and arrests of female ISIL cells have been made in Morocco, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.⁴

1.1 Defining Terrorism

In order to engage the subject of terrorism, it is first important have both a general and critical understanding of the word “terrorism.” There are a multitude of definitions

¹ Jessica Davis. Women in Modern Terrorism. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 123
² Ibid., 123.
⁴ Davis, Women... 123.
for terrorism, and often these definitions are in conflict with one another. The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has defined terrorism as:

the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.  

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) defines it as:

the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.

These definitions are not in complete agreement (and indeed the FBI acknowledges that there is no single definition). To come to a working definition of terrorism this thesis, will examine several definitions of terrorism from prominent scholars.

Bruce Hoffman explains that terrorism is, at its core, a political concept. He points out that terrorism involves the pursuit of power, or acquisition of power, to achieve a political aim. It involves violence, or the threat of violence, and is a planned, calculated and systematic act. Terrorism is designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target. Hoffman argues further that acts of terrorism can be conducted either by organizations with an identifiable chain of command or a conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia). It can also entail the actions of individuals or a small collection of people directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by ideological aims or the example of some

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existent terrorist movement and/or its leaders. Subnational groups or non-state entities tend to be the perpetrators of terrorism.8

Walter Laqueur’s definition of terrorism emphasizes the violent tactics used by non-state actors in furtherance of political objectives.9 His definition omits the idea of trying to instill “terror” in the subject, or the psychological aspect outlined in the above definition.10 Although he omits the psychological aspect, he is sensitive to the psychological dimension of terrorism as well.11 Lacquer’s definition is more inclusive because it emphasizes the idea of terrorism as a tactic without the psychological element and can be therefore applied more broadly. Most contemporary authors, however, describe the psychological component as critical to modern definitions of terrorism.12

Martha Crenshaw’s definition of terrorism includes the psychological component. She also describes terrorism as an act of violence designed to influence an audience. She goes further, however, and indicates that the act of terrorism serves to communicate a future threat to people who identify with the victims.13 While many authors try to limit the application of the term terrorism to acts perpetrated against noncombatants, Crenshaw points out that civilians or civilian targets can have a military value, thereby expanding the definition to include all types of targets, including military.14

For the purpose of this thesis, terrorism will be defined based on the traditionally understood definitions coming from the Department of State (hereafter State

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8 Ibid., 40.
12 For example see Kim, R. Cragin and Sara A. Daly. Women as Terrorists (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security, 2009), 7.
14 Ibid., 2.
Department), Department of Defense (hereafter DoD), and prominent scholars. These definitions combine objective criteria with the generalized feeling caused by attacks, tactical in nature, on states by non-state actors, acts that target civilians, infrastructure, and sometimes military forces with the aim of causing fear in furtherance of some religious or political cause. This definition of terrorism is important because it defines ISIL, which is a non-state actor\textsuperscript{15} with a particularly violent ideology that claims religious authority over all Muslims.\textsuperscript{16} This group has had a high number of Western women recruits.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In recent years, Western women have actively travelled to join the insurgency in Iraq and Syria in support of ISIL. In December 2015, the Soufan Group reported that up to 31,000 people from over 86 countries had travelled to join ISIL.\textsuperscript{17} Over 5,000 of these recruits were from Western states, and more than 600 of them were women.\textsuperscript{18} Women appear in unprecedented numbers. Another report showed a dataset by New America stating that one in seven of the recruits were women with an average age of 21.\textsuperscript{19} French intelligence services reported, according to Loken and Zelenz, that in 2014 only 10 percent of all French recruits were female,\textsuperscript{20} but in 2016 women comprised an estimated

\textsuperscript{15} Some scholars could argue that ISIL is a pseudo-state. In this paper, ISIL will be considered a non-state actor. See: Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS is Not a Terrorist Group.” *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 5, 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-not-terrorist-group.


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.


40 percent of all French migrants into ISIL controlled territory.\textsuperscript{21} According to research compiled by the \textit{BBC}, 31 percent of the fully identified individuals who have traveled to Iraq or Syria from the United Kingdom have been women.\textsuperscript{22} Further, 59 individuals have been convicted of terrorist offenses in the United Kingdom. Of those 59 individuals, seven have been women (12 percent).\textsuperscript{23} Their charges range from child abduction to preparing for acts of terrorism to financing terrorism.\textsuperscript{24} The United States government estimates that roughly 250 Americans have attempted to join ISIL in Syria.\textsuperscript{25} One in six were women.\textsuperscript{26}

Despite the empirical record of female participation in armed Islamist struggle, ISIL’s Western female membership perplexes policymakers, government officials, and casual observers. They express difficulty reconciling the organization’s successful foreign recruitment with its harsh treatment and conservative expectations of women and girls. Loken and Zelenz state that the Institute for Strategic Dialogue concludes that ISIL has declared a ‘war on women and girls’ while international human rights monitors documented and condemn an extensive ‘sex slave’ industry carried out by male fighters buying and selling Yazidi women.\textsuperscript{27} As one Syrian activist notes, under ISIL, “The life of a girl [is] itself a violation.”\textsuperscript{28} As a result, much of the research on ISIL foreign recruitment argues that women are deceived by the organization, brainwashed by radicals

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} “Who are Britain’s jihadists?” \textit{BBC News}, October 12, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-32026985
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Loken & Zelenz, 46.
\end{itemize}
online, or seduced by the promise of romance.29 These explanations suggest that women
would not, under rational circumstances, choose to join the group. Most of the research
conducted by these terrorist experts has been done with an Orientalist approach.

Orientalism is a term that is used to refer to a general patronizing of Western
attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies.30 Since the
publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, much academic discourse has begun
to use the term Orientalism as such. In Said’s analysis, the West essentializes these
societies as static and undeveloped – thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that
can be studied, depicted, and reproduced.31 Therefore the West is superior to the East.
Said writes that this implicit fabrication is the idea that Western society is developed,
reasonable, flexible, and superior.32 With this approach the West has had a condescending
“deterministic way or lens” that makes us generalize about a group of people as
dangerous or undeveloped. More on this approach will be presented in Chapter 3.

The increase of western women recruits has confounded many people other than
policy makers. Given the harsh treatment that ISIL reportedly inflicts on women and its
lack of support for an equal role for women, why do we see Western women join their
group and becoming *muhajirat* (female migrants)? Are their motivations distinct from
men or from other Islamist recruits?

To address these questions, this thesis will begin with brief background
information on ISIL as well as the role women have played while in the group and the
meaning of the word *muhajir*. Chapter 3 will explain the theoretical framework and

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29 Loken and Zelenz, 47.
31 Ibid.
32 Mahmoos Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism*
concept of Orientalism. Based on the literature review of this subject, this thesis will present four motifs that could explain the migration to Syria and join ISIL by these women. A content analysis of narratives posted by Western women on social media accounts will follow to characterize the various ways that women justify themselves and explain the momentous decision to leave their home countries and travel to an insurgent-held conflict zone. The thesis will end with the conclusion and provide recommendations for future policy implications of this study.
Chapter 2

Background

This chapter will provide brief background information regarding ISIL as well as the role women have played while in the group and the meaning of the word *muhajir* and why Western women have extensively used it to identify themselves on social media.

2.1 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was also known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and participated in the Iraqi insurgency following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western forces. The group proclaimed itself a caliphate, an Islamic state led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader – the caliph – who is believed to be the successor to Prophet Muhammad and began referring to itself as the Islamic State or IS with the taking of Mosul in June 2014. As a caliphate, it claims religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims worldwide. For the purpose of this chapter, the group will be referred to as AQI to differentiate from ISIL when referring to them and the roles women have played while in the group since women have had different roles while in AQI and ISIL.

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ISIL, who is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State (IS) and by its Arabic language acronym Daesh,\(^\text{36}\) is a Salafi\(^\text{37}\)-jihadist terrorist organization and former unrecognized proto-state that follows a fundamentalist, Wahhabi (an Islamic doctrine and religious movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab that has been described as “ultraconservative”),\(^\text{38}\) and heterodox doctrine of Sunni Islam. ISIL gained global prominence in early 2014 when it drove Iraqi government forces out of key cities in Western Iraq, followed by its capture of Mosul and the Sinjar massacre.\(^\text{39}\) They enforce its literalist interpretation of Sharia law (the word Sharia means “the path,” or “a road that leads one to water.” It refers to a set of principles that govern the moral and religious lives of Muslims).\(^\text{40}\)


\(^\text{37}\) During the 19th century, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), and Rashid Rida (d. 1935) founded and spearheaded a movement of reform called salafiyya. Their Salafism sought to reconcile Islam with the social, political, and intellectual ideals of the Enlightenment. The usage of the term Salafi today refers to those who embrace Salafism (Arabic: Salafiyyah). Salafiyyah is known to be way of the Salafis. The Salafis are Muslims who advocate literal and to some degree binary interpretation of Islamic teachings as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad and subsequently practiced by the early pious predecessors known as the salaf al-salih; often equated with the first three generations of Muslims. Following the salaf is the reason for their self-designation as Salafis. Today, Salafis tend to claim a monopoly on religious truth and freely confront other Muslims on theological and legal issues. (See: Henri Lauziere, The Making of Salafism. (Columbia University Press: 2015); Ni Ha Mim Keller, “Who or What Is a Salafi? Is Their Approach Valid?” Who or What is a Salafi and Is Their Approach Valid?, http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/muh/salafi.htm; Mohamed Bin Ali and Muhammad Saiful Alam, “Salfis and Wahhabis: Two Sides of the Same Coin?” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Oct.11, 2016, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16254-salafis-and-wahhabis-two-sides-of-the-same-coin/#.Wv1Kiy_Mx-U)


This group has been designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations (UN) and many individual countries.\textsuperscript{41} ISIL is widely known for its videos of beheadings and other types of executions of both Soldiers and civilians, including journalists and aid workers, and its destruction of cultural heritage sites.\textsuperscript{42} The UN has also held ISIL responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes.\textsuperscript{43}

In Syria, the group conducted ground attacks on both government forces and opposition factions and by December 2015 it held a large area in western Iraq and eastern Syria, containing an estimated 2.8 to 8 million people.\textsuperscript{44} ISIL is believed to be operational in 18 countries across the world, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, which “aspiring branches” in Mali, Egypt, Somalia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines.\textsuperscript{45}

In July 2017, the group lost control of its largest city, Mosul, to the Iraq army and in October 2017, American-backed forces seized the city of Raqqa from ISIL, which was a major blow to the group since it had used the city as their “capital” of its self-declared caliphate.\textsuperscript{46}

2.2 Women’s Role in AQI and ISIL

AQI is the terrorist group that has likely conducted the most female suicide bomb attacks and used the most women as tactical operatives in modern history. The group is responsible for upward 64 successful suicide attacks using over 70 women.\footnote{47 Davis, Women... 120-121.} In Iraq in the 2000s, there were many terrorist groups competing within the same space, creating recruiting challenges but also requiring that groups differentiate themselves. As a result, AQI began employing female suicide bombers.\footnote{48 Ibid., 122.} The group was also one of the first to use suicide terrorism in the conflict in Iraq. At the same time, the group needed to hit targets in an increasingly hostile environment, so it resorted to using women to conduct those attacks.\footnote{49 Jessica Davis. “Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq.” Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, (2013), 287.} U.S. and Iraq security forces eventually realized that women would be used in this manner, but not before a large number of successful suicide attacks were perpetrated.\footnote{50 Davis, Women... 120-121.} Women were also likely viewed as good candidates for this type of work. Once they deployed, there would be no requirement to integrate them into the leadership structures of the group.\footnote{51 Ibid.} The relatively progressive nature of Iraqi society also made recruiting women to fight against the United States relatively easy, since they were already political actors.

Nevertheless, since AQI transformed into ISIL during the conflict in Syria, the group has not used women in this manner, with one exception.\footnote{52 Constance Letsch, “Pregnant Istanbul Suicide Bomber was Russian Citizen,” The Guardian, Jan 30, 2015 as cited by Davis, Women in Modern Terrorism.} Instead, women in ISIL are recruiters who act as social media experts for the group. They are wives and mothers who are to bear or are bearing children and are training them to become the “next
generation” of terrorist.\textsuperscript{53} There are limited reports of women being active as operatives within ISIL, but as of yet the group has not deployed many in tactical operations.\textsuperscript{54} Instead, ISIL appears to value women as part of its overall strategy of populating the caliphate and like-minded individuals, as wives for its fighters, mothers for its children, and outspoken advocates for the organization.

Whether this limited role for women will persist, particularly in the face of increasing counterterrorism pressures, remains to be seen. Given the history of female suicide bombing in the region, a relatively permissive culture/society for women as political actors, and the multiplicity of groups active in the region competing for recruits, it seems unlikely that women will remain relegated to support roles for ISIL. Instead, as the group loses territory and needs to achieve strategic surprise and media attention for its attacks, it is very likely to employ women as suicide bombers within Iraq and Syria, and it may also try to do so in Western countries.

2.3 Muhajir

The Arabic word Muhajir\textsuperscript{55} (feminine: Muhajirah [sg.], Muhajirat [pl.]), also used as a first name, is a direct Quranic name and has the original meaning of “one who avoids or abandons bad things,” later extended to “migrant.”\textsuperscript{56} Muhajir has the same root of Hijra, the name of the transfer of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions from the hostile Mecca to the promising Medina in 622 CE, and it consequently identifies

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{55} Author is aware that the word Muhajir also comes from the Muhajir culture, which was the culture of Urdu Muslim refugees that migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947.
\textsuperscript{56} Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, “The Western muhajirat of ISIS”, \textit{Studies in Conflict and Terrorism}, 38:7, April 7, 2015, 495.
migrants from a problematic place to a better one, for the sake of Allah.\textsuperscript{57} Hijra\textsuperscript{58}, intended as migration from the lands inhabited by infidels to Muslim lands or to contribute to jihad, is the 36th of the 44 famous “Ways to support Jihad” preached by Anwar Al Awlaki and published on his blog in February 2009.\textsuperscript{59} The self-proclaimed Caliph and leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also called on all Muslims to move to the new territorial entity that he founded, pointing out that “migration to the house of Islam is a duty.”\textsuperscript{60} Western women who have joined ISIL have used the term muhajirah extensively to identify themselves on social media, clearly indicating in this way a discontent with their previous living environment (the West), an impellent drive to move to a place of ideal perfection (the caliphate) and the religious motivation for seeking the change.\textsuperscript{61}

This dynamic of becoming alienated from the place in which you live and being attracted to a polar opposite is not a new phenomenon. People in the Marxist period, undertook somewhat similar “pilgrimages” for ideological reasons. In his book, Political Pilgrims, sociologist Paul Hollander talks about the Western intellectuals who traveled to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, and how these political travelers were about to find in

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 495.
\textsuperscript{58} The Egyptian militant group, Takfir wal-Hijra (“excommunication and exile”) referred to Muslims who judge a society to be infidel (excommunicated: Takfir), and see it as their duty to separate from it (exile: Hijra) until such a time as they can return in strength to conquer and Islamize it, as Mohammed did to Mecca. It has been said that the group inspired some of the tactics and methods used by AQI. During the time of the prophet, hijra was the Prophet Mohammed’s migration from Mecca to Medina in order to escape persecution. (See: Mark Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p. 28; Mili, Hayder, “Jihad Without Rules: The Evolution of Al-Takfir Wa Al-Hijra,” Jamestown, June 29, 2006. https://jamestown.org/program/jihad-without-rules-the-evolution-of-al-takfir-wa-al-hijra/#.VnQ8MNKrTq4.
\textsuperscript{61} Peresin & Cervone, 495.
such repressive countries a model of “good society” in which they could invest their brightest hopes. Hollander documents how this utopian impulse, driven by a deep discontent with their own societies, led them to deny excusing the myriad moral defects of the places they visited. Women are similar as these “political pilgrims.”

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63 Ibid.
Chapter 3
Theoretical Framework

Terrorism studies is a methodologically diverse field of research and draws on many disciplines. The disciplines of psychology, criminology, sociology, political science, economics, feminist studies, and many others have produced important works in the field of terrorism studies. The best and most convincing elements of these approaches will combine to yield comprehensive understanding of terrorism.

Literature on women in violent political organizations often focuses on why women join domestic groups. Existing explanations emphasize fear, need for protection, political ideology, the feminist or emancipatory platforms of leftist groups, family ties, poverty, a lack of political and economic opportunity, and the opportunity to escape the private sphere. These studies suggest that women’s motivations are largely similar to men’s – they participate to protect themselves, to fight for their communities, to defend an ideological cause, and to support organizations they believe will improve their lives.

Western *muhajirat* seemingly complicate this framework. Many recruits are middle class, pursuing higher education, engaged in civil society, and voluntarily leaving

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behind comparatively comfortable lives in liberal states. Their pre-existing ties to ISIL members appear tenuous at best, and most are radicalized individually and online. Most do not come from Islamist families or communities. Moreover, women in ISIL actively seek out restrictive gender roles that most observers view as detrimental to their interests. The international community’s intense focus on the *muhajirat* – which is particularly fervent around white women and recent Muslim converts – illustrates the collective Western disbelief that women would willingly forgo social and political equity. Because these recruits seem to fall beyond the scope of existing theory, policymakers and government officials tend to portray them as irrational, deluded, and naïve.

The theory forwarded in this paper holds that this disbelief stems primarily from the articulation of gender with Orientalism and how the perception of the West about Muslim Oriental women is produced, reproduced and was influenced by the grand discourse of Orientalism. It is suggested here that many of the dominant interpretations are deterministic in their nature and minimize the told played by agency. The orientalist “lens” tends to “essentialize” the depiction of women in the Middle East, reducing them to ‘cartoon images.’

With regard to gender and orientalism, Parvin Paidar states that feminist Orientalism has three characteristics. First the assumption of an oppositional binary between West and the East in which Muslim women are oppressed while their Western counterparts enjoy full freedom in their society. The second characteristic is the conception that the Oriental women are only victims of a male chauvinistic society and have no agency or resistant role in their social transformations. This approach tends to

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67 Loken & Zelenz, 48.
68 Ibid.
marginalize the so-called Oriental women, and therefore, Muslim women need saviors, ie., the Westerners, to emancipate them from Muslim men. The third aspect of feminist Orientalism is the construction of a monolithic entity of Muslims and therefore the belief that all Muslim women are living under the same condition and have no unique aspect or identity for themselves. 69 There is an extensive amount of literature that has influence on orientalism or the secular bias on western feminism. This matters because it inclines all of us to gravitate towards more deterministic theories. If we look through this “deterministic” lens, then we are saying that these women have no agency.

Many of the narratives that are presented by scholars have this feminist orientalist perspective. A narrative is generally understood as “the stories people tell ... how people make sense of their lives ... [and] how they construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality.” 70 Patterson and Monroe continue by explaining “as narratives affect our perceptions of political reality, which in turn affect our actions in response to or in anticipation of political events, narrative plays a critical role in the construction of political behavior. In this sense, we create and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around us.” 71

Scholars note that some Western Orientalist narratives emphasize “saving” as justification for why Western forces must act abroad. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, “white men are saving brown women from brown men.” 72 She offers this as part of the “imperialist subject-production” process wherein Western states and their agents

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71 Ibid.
legitimize their interventions by emphasizing the oppression of brown women (the subjects). Lila Abu-Lughod argues that part of the US’s justification for the War on Terror interventions in Afghanistan was the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban.\(^3\) She concludes, “It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving” because “projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged.”\(^4\) Marnia Lazreg similarly calls attention to forced Christianization and unveiling practices during French colonialism in Algeria, noting that the French “obsession with women” was “the one constant feature of the Algerian occupation by France.”\(^5\) In nineteen century Europe, sex had been institutionalized with strict rules which were the result of Christian church religious teachings about the issue. Therefore, the Orient was viewed as a place where “one could go for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe.”\(^6\)

Western engagement with ISIL focuses heavily on the group’s treatment of women and girls, in particular sexual violence perpetrated against Yazidis. Kerry F. Crawford and colleagues contended, “these stories are horrifying, but they also serve a political narrative: Forces of evil in the Middle East are using rape as a weapon in terror campaigns against natural allies of ‘the West’.”\(^7\) The authors argue that this narrative obscures complex processes, draws attention away from ISIL’s other abuses, and is

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\(^4\) Ibid., 789.


selectively invoked to justify intervention based on “the impulse to “save” Syrian and Iraqi women.”

Foreign female recruits destabilize this story, which erroneously conflates the protection of females dicta of Islam with the aggressive subjugation of infidels. Both groups are women, but each has very different status in the eyes of fundamentalist Islam.

It is difficult to reconcile the West’s role in Syria and Iraq as one of emancipation when Western women willingly join the organizations that their home countries deem oppressive. For this reason, policymakers, government officials, media commentators, and some researchers paint Western muhajirat as coerced, tricked, and driven to irrationality by sexual and romantic desire. In one extreme illustration, a report from the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security argues that many female ISIL recruits are legally human trafficking victims because of the insurgency’s deceptive recruiting.

The policies that many Western governments and judicial institutions follow impress upon the public that migration is not a choice Western women would voluntarily make. Differential legal treatment of female recruits and sympathizers illustrates the strength of this gendered narrative. Judges and legislators in the United States and United Kingdom often take an overtly sympathetic approach when dealing with Western female recruits. When Shannon Conley, a white 19-year-old from Colorado, was convicted for conspiracy to support ISIL, her attorneys stressed that she was misled by

78 Ibid.
79 Important to this argument is that the perception of ISIL – and other Islamist organizations – as violently oppressive underlies much of the justification for Western militarization in the Middle East.
falsities about the organization. During trial, the prosecutor labeled her “pathologically naïve”. The judge called her a “bit of a mess”, and a “look-at-me girl” who just “doesn’t get it.”\textsuperscript{82} In a recent parliament meeting, the Anti-Terror Chief of London’s Metropolitan Police offered immunity to three middle-class women who left for Syria in February 2015. He noted that the police have no evidence that these women are responsible for terrorist offences despite joining the organization.\textsuperscript{83} This marks the first time the police offered immunity from prosecution to an ISIL returnee and is a stark divergence from harsh punishments leveled at male recruits from Western countries. An immunity deal suggests that \textit{muhajirat} are not real extremists. This framework advocates treating female recruits as peripheral actors, as wives-of-terrorists who uniquely warrant saving. It helps explain the West’s perplexed reaction to the \textit{muhajirat} despite the empirical history of women’s participation in Islamist insurgencies.


\textsuperscript{83} Strommen, “Jihadi Brides…”
Chapter 4
Interpretive Motifs

This study proposes four interpretive motives for why Western women join ISIL in Syria and Iraq. The first two set of explanations are driven from the gendered narrative that assumes the muhajirat are acting irrationally or have little decision-making autonomy: (1) women are motivated by romance or sex; (2) women are tricked by recruiters who present an unrealistic portrayal of life in ISIL-controlled territory. These explanations consider ISIL muhajirat a unique phenomenon, different from foreign male recruits or women who join Islamists groups in their own countries.

The second set of explanations draws from the literature on foreign fighters and domestic recruits in other Islamist organizations: (3) women are pushed into ISIL by feelings of isolation and alienation in their home societies; (4) religious and ideological commitment draws women to the so-called Islamic caliphate. These motifs suggest that women’s motivations are alike to those driving male recruits and fighters in other insurgencies.

4.1 Romance or Sex

Romantic and sexual explanations assume that women join violent groups because either they are seeking romantic relationships or are simply looking for sex. For example, Robin Morgan concludes that women are coerced into terror through “recruitment by romance.”84 She warns, “terrorists use sex and ‘love’ to enmesh women – and, in turn, to use women’s sexuality to further the cause.” Women literally reproduce

violent groups, and in many cases avenge the deaths of their husbands through violence. A clear example of this is the intense academic and media focus on Chechen ‘Black Widows.’ This name, applied externally to female suicide attackers, implies that women’s violence is motivated by their romantic relationships with men. Similarly, in 2015 New Zealand’s prime minister concluded that women leaving the country to join ISIL were presumably “jihadi brides.” The media, frequently painting the *muhajirat* as “jihadi brides”, encourages this narrative. One Quilliam Foundation researcher notes that some women may view joining ISIL as a “romantic adventure” where they have more options in choosing a like-minded partner than if they remained at home.

Sexual explanations for women’s participation de-emphasize romance and focus instead on sexual desire or defect. Lindsey O’Rourke, for example, notes that high values placed on women’s fidelity and chastity in many societies may encourage women to perpetrate violence – especially suicide attacks – to compensate for a loss of family honor caused by “defects” like extra-marital sexual activity or rape. Other explanations center on sexual desire or compulsion. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry suggest the perception that female Islamist terrorists are acutely sexually desperate. Popular representations depict them as “particularly weak and dependent on men’s praise and

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85 This is an example of deterministic theory. The women in this culture were put in a situation (the Chechen war where they lost not only husbands but sons and brothers as well) and used suicide bombing against men to avenge their deaths. The term ‘Black Widow’ is meant to describe the sorrow and grief these women experienced. This label stresses the emotional component these women and adds the stigma that these Chechen female terrorists are crazed, desperate widows. (See: Caitin Toto, “Behind the Veil: A Study of Chechen Black Widows,” *Elements*, vol. 11, no 1, Jan 2015, doi:10.6017/eurj.v.11i1.8817.)

86 Loken and Zelenz, 50.


Western governments paint female terrorists as obsessed with men: intelligence officials in Australia, Britain, Malaysia, and Tunisia accuse women of performing a ‘sexual jihad’, migrating to perform sexual favors for ISIL fighters. In New York, the FBI foiled two female terrorists’ plot to detonate explosives. Shane Harris describes them sexually as “jihadist groupies” who “worshiped domestic terrorists.”

A *New York Times* article described a soon-to-be *muhajira* “gyrating” to music in her childhood bedroom before turning to a discussion of how Muslim girls find observant Muslim men sexually attractive as a form of girlhood rebellion. The author writes that for these girls, “beards are sexy.”

For this interpretive motif, it is reasonable to expect three observable implications. Women will be focused on romance and pursuit of love. Marriage would be a central concern. Third, women should be preoccupied with sex, lust, and men in ISIL.

### 4.2 Deception in Recruitment

Linked with romantic and sexual arguments is the claim that ISIL deceives women as a recruitment strategy. One report concludes that social media propaganda targeting English and French-speaking women differs from that targeting Arab women, and that recruiters present a rosier image to Westerners. In a U.S. House Oversight

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90 Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry. “Reduced to bad sex: Narratives of violent women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *International Relations*, vol. 22, issue 5, (2008), 16.
94 Dearden, “How ISIS Attracts…”
Committee on ISIL recruitment, Congressman Ed Royce argued that female members are “brainwashed”, and that with each new female recruit, “ISIL has a new poster child for its jihadi girl-power propaganda.”96 Ashley Binetti contends that when women join ISIL, “they might be forced into a marriage and/or find themselves in situations where an originally agreed-to marriage takes on a nature of domestic servitude or sexual slavery ... [ISIL] also does not mention its systematic campaign of sexual slavery and mass rape of enemy women, which it frequently employs as a tool of torture.”97 The expectation is that the *muhajirat* are not fully aware of what life is like under ISIL and that once they arrive, women disappear into a void of danger, discomfort, and regret.

From the deception motif, the expectation emerges that social media posts may articulate over-glamorized versions of life for women in ISIL territory. At the same time, complaints of unexpected hardships, references to or shock regarding danger/violence or expressions of regret may be observed. The first expectation assumes that *muhajirat* social media accounts are, at least in part, recruitment tools. The second expectation carries the assumption that the *muhajirat* have some freedom in posting.

4.3 Isolation and Alienation

An alternative framework suggests that women make independent decisions to join ISIL. These explanations assume that *muhajirat* motivations are like those of other foreign recruits and domestic female insurgents. Research on male foreign fighters emphasizes the role of perceived isolation and exclusion in driving their participation in

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97 Binetti, “A New Frontier.”
violent groups.¹⁸ ISIL and other organizations that mobilize foreign support do so by targeting those who are loosely tied to their communities or who cannot identify extremism beliefs among their peers.⁹⁹ David Malet notes that foreign fighters “are often persuadable because of their weak affiliations with their own country and national identity.”¹⁰⁰ These feelings of “otherness”, coupled with technological advances, allow isolated individuals to connect virtually with radical, Islamist communities abroad. In Jerrold M. Post’s exploration of al-Qaeda, he notes that the group was successful in attracting “alienated Muslim youth”, particularly because these individuals felt they had nowhere to turn. He notes that young Muslim men “felt welcomed as [members] of the umma [Muslim community]” in Islamist groups after facing hostility towards their religion.¹⁰¹ Olivier Roy suggests that recent ISIL terrorist attacks in Europe are frequently perpetrated by second-generation immigrants who have “lost their connection with their country of origin and have failed to integrate into Western societies.”¹⁰² Importantly, Loken and Zelenz note that one does not need to have personally hostile experiences to be affected by these narratives.¹⁰³ Still, research by Voas and Fleischman suggests that many Western Muslims do feel oppressed and marginalized in their daily lives.¹⁰⁴

Many radicalization scholars also specifically cite the role of the Internet in this mobilization process, with Post concluding that “isolated individuals consumed by hatred

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¹⁸ Loken and Zelenz, 52.
¹⁹ Ibid., 52.
¹⁰³ Loken and Zelenz, 52.
can find common cause in these [Islamist] websites, feel they are not alone, and be moved along the pathway from thought to action.”\footnote{Post, 251.} They observe that individuals may develop or deepen anti-Western grievances because of the narratives of Muslim oppression that ISIL circulates online. Indeed, recent studies of ISIL recruitment emphasize the group’s interest in bringing individuals who feel religiously and socially isolated together on social media. Samantha Mahmood and Halim Rane conclude that feelings of disaffection in Western countries can make individuals more susceptible to extremist ideas.\footnote{Samantha Mahmood and Halim Rane. “Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda,” \textit{The Journal of International Communication}, vol. 1, issue 23, (2017).} While it cannot be determined whether such feelings radicalize the \textit{muhajirat}, it can evaluate the role they play in women’s rationalizations for travelling to join ISIL.

From this interpretive motif, anti-Western hostility and rejection of Western lifestyles will appear reflected in the recruits’ social media activity, as well as observing discrimination faced by these women or other Muslims in the West.

\textbf{4.4 Religious Ideology}

A final explanation is that the group’s religious ideology motivates women to participate. Women recruited domestically into Islamist groups report ideological salience as a primary motivator.\footnote{Swati Parashar. “Gender, jihad, and jingoism: Women as perpetrators, planners, and patrons of militancy in Kashmir,” \textit{Studies in Conflict & Terrorism}, vol. 34, issue 4 (2011), pp. 295–317.} Scholars have laid rich theoretical ground for understanding women in these movements. For example, Ben Shitrit concludes that women are important to conservative religious movements “not only as targets of
restrictive politics, but as participating activists.\textsuperscript{108} Writing on conservative Islamic movements in Egypt, Mahmood concludes that women devotedly “pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, and seek to cultivate virtues that are associated with feminine passivity and submissiveness.”\textsuperscript{109} In these groups, this particular kind of devout, moral woman is the backbone of the community.\textsuperscript{110} Consequently, women may enthusiastically adopt restrictive roles because they view their participation as appropriate for their gender and foundational to the movement’s survival.\textsuperscript{111}

*Muhajirat* may also be drawn by ISIL’s fundamentalist interpretation of Islam which, as discussed in Chapter 2, calls for believers to make *hijra* to an Islamic caliphate. ISIL’s ideological ideas are rooted in the mid-twentieth-century development of political Islamic fundamentalism. This ideology leads many to believe that they are “in a state of war against the apostates” and that this necessitates separation and struggle from the non-Muslim world.\textsuperscript{112} This ideology requires believers to make *hijra* to Islamic societies. As previously mentioned in above text, ISIL has declared itself as a caliphate. *Hijra* to ISIL-controlled territory is not simply migration. It is a religious obligation. In recent research, Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam interviewed twenty male foreign fighters in ISIL and assessed several motivations for *hijra*, including isolation and lack of opportunity. Recruits reported religion, morality, and “the personal nature of the journey”

\textsuperscript{110} Ben Shirit, 3.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
as the primary rationale for participation. As the authors write, “the stress falls on engaging in actions mandated by God, and ones that could easily demand [recruits] make the ultimate sacrifice.”

From this interpretive motif, women can be expected to cite *hijra* as a religious duty. Likewise, other key fundamentalists ideas, such as *jihad, da’wa* (the call to spread Islam), rule by God’s law, and other religious invocations reflected in their posts. Because ISIL calls for the building of an immediate religious caliphate, this female ISIL recruits will explicitly refer to this objective. Finally, female recruits can be expected to be well-versed in Islamic theology and religious text, citing the Qur’an or religious authorities.

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Chapter 5

Data Collection and Methodology

This thesis uses mixed methods, in that it will be a combination of both quantitative (a compilation of social media messages by Western *muhajirat*) and qualitative methods (publications and reports). It will analyze the narratives posted on social media accounts by *Muhajirat*.

The research data used for this analysis come largely from an extensive female migrant joint database between the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR). This database has been expanding in breadth and depth since May 2014 and is considered the largest database on Western females joining ISIL.\(^{114}\) The database tracks and archives social media material on over 100 female profiles across online platforms including Twitter, Tumblr, and Kik accounts. Out of the 100 females profiles in the dataset, this thesis will use a sample of 17 of the available social media accounts which were operated between 2011-2015 and had a social media activity of about 571 posts. The sample of 17 was determined by using a ‘snowball’ technique, exploring their online relationships with known ISIL members, other female recruits, and other Western sympathizers. This is an established method used regularly by terrorism researchers for identifying and assessing ISIL fighters.\(^{115}\) This method only examined those posts that were in English.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics: *muhajirat* characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Dates (M/Y)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Umm Layth</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4/14 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Bilal</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Aleppo, Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3/15 – 5/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakina Muhajira</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8/15 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oum Fudayl Muhajirah</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Shaam (Syria)</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11/14 – 2/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Adam Britaniyah</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>Caliphate</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2/15 – 4/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Abbas</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>Raqqa, Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>9/15 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Umar</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oumu’ AbbasAl-Britani</td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>7/11 – 6/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Towbah</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sham</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5/15 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bint Muhajid</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Caliphate</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1/15 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoda Muthana</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Twitter, Kik</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Aminah</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4/15 – 7/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lioness</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Islamic State</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>4/13 – 2/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Nosaybah Kalashn</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Raqqa, Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5/14 – 6/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Usamah</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Mosul, Iraq</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10/14 – 1/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GreenBirdofDabiq</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Raqqa, Syria</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4/15 – 11/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Muhajirat</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Caliphate</td>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4/15 – 9/15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The women in this database identified their countries of origin as Scotland, France, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Sweden, Canada, and the United States (Table 1). Also included in the data are cases where the specific country of origin cannot be verified but evidence suggests that it is in Europe (excluding Russia and Turkey), the United States, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. Each account included in this dataset is single-authored. The data provided by each account varies. Some accounts were active for years, while others went silent or shut down after a month. The regularity of posts varies across accounts with some providing far more regular updates than others. Finally, because these data were collected across different platforms, the posts differ in the length according to platform, with Twitter posts being limited to 140 characters and Tumblr posts sometimes consisting of many paragraphs.

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116 As can be determined all the accounts in this data have now been suspended by the social media platform or deleted by the author.
The limitations in collecting social media data on women in ISIL primarily include inaccurate self-identification, the production and destruction of data in real time, the inability to access the entire universe of possible accounts, the suspension or deletion of accounts by their platforms, and the overlap between personal data and propaganda. To ensure the integrity of this sample, this research relies on the ISD-ICSR database, which ensures that the accounts meet the requirement of differentiating female recruits who have physically joined the group from those who are female sympathizers.

The content analysis leads this researcher to believe there is significant freedom and no restrictions in the publication of this social media activity. This freedom of expression suggests that the women’s postings are used for both personal and recruitment propaganda. This is not an impediment. It provides examples of the narratives women use about their *hijra* to recruit other women into ISIL. This data offers insights both into why women join and how they convince others to follow. Because 17 is a small sample of women, this study does not claim to be representative of all Western women in ISIL. These data provide understanding of recruits’ decision making rather than to profile what a typical recruit “looks like.”

Because many of these accounts include a high volume of posts, this researcher allowed the research question to provide focus for the data collection. The dataset was limited to every post concerning gender, ISIL, migration, and life in ISIL-controlled territory from each of the 17 cases. Key words were established to link social media posts with the pre-determined motifs that were identified in the previous chapter (Table 2).
Participants in ongoing conflicts are difficult to study. This sample offers a look at actors in a violent group that is nearly impossible to access and provides data suited for this research question. For these reasons, neither Western male recruits nor comparing women who join ISIL to those who do not were looked at. As Mario Luis Small concludes, selecting respondents at random or aiming to identify “representative” cases for the sake of generalizability may be counterproductive and compromise the integrity of small-n, contextual research. If, for example, cases were selected at random from a sample of all known ISIL sympathetic accounts, the data could greatly oversample men and those who have not physically joined the organization. Neither of these populations provide data as useful as that from Western female migrants and would leave no space to examine the research question. This researcher is confident that this data offers insight

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into Western women’s motivations for migrating to Iraq and Syria and are appropriate
given the limitations of the data collection.

To supplement these data, this researcher utilized other key primary and secondary sources. One of the sources was The Dabiq (now Rumiyah). This magazine is ISIL’s official propaganda magazine and most issues include an article allegedly written by a female recruit. The unofficial manifesto written by the group’s female police force, the Al-Khansaa Brigade provided other narratives. Other sources include existing reports concerning women in ISIL, female migrants, and foreign fighters, as well as published interviews conducted by Western journalists with muhajirat over Twitter and the social messaging application Kik. In the next chapter, this researcher will evaluate the evidence explaining Western women’s participation in ISIL, relying primarily on the rationales and opinions that the muhajirat present in their own words.
Chapter 6

Analysis

After evaluating all the posts, the following table (Table 3) provides the percentages of the key words/phrases within each interpretive motif for each *muhajirat*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Regarding Key Words/Phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romance or Sex</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Layth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Bilal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakina Muhajira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oum Fudayl Muhajirah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Adam Britaniyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Abbas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Umar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ummu’ AbbasAl-Britani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Towbah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bint Muhajid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoda Muthana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Aminah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lioness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Nosaybah Kalashn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umm Usamah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GreenBirdofDabiq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Muhajirat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(571)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data suggest that the motifs concluding women are lured by sex or tricked into joining ISIL hold little weight in explaining Western female recruitment (23.82%). While women, like all recruits, may feel that they have made a mistake in joining the organization, there is little evidence that ISIL hides or downplays its violence, expectations, and living conditions online. Instead, there is evidence that these women, like male foreign fighters, were primarily pulled into ISIL by religious commitment and pushed by alienation and violence in their home societies (75.14%). However, the *muhajirat* do articulate a uniquely gendered form of discrimination leveled against them.
and draw on it as an explanation for their migration. They similarly perceive state and social hostility against Muslim women more generally and use this as evidence that Western states oppress Islam.

6.1 Romance or Sex

There was little evidence that sex motivates these women (8.93%). When lust is mentioned, women explicitly chastise those who submit to such urges. Female recruits acknowledge and reject Western governments’ and the media’s feminist orientalist portrayal of them. They firmly deny a “sexual jihad” and rebuke Western commentators for accusing them of extramarital sex. Umm Adam Britaniyah, from Great Britain, argues, “#jihadibrides is the age-old attack against Islam being ‘misogynistic’…Foolish those that accuse our sisters in IS [of] Zina [extramarital sex].” Umm Layth agrees, suggesting that people make sexual accusations because they do not understand why Western women would join ISIL. She concludes,

Many people in present day do not understand and cannot comprehend at all why a female would choose to make this decision. They will point fingers and say behind your back and to your family’s faces that you are taking part in ‘Jihadul nikaah’ or ‘sexual jihad’ and many many more vile terms. It hurts because these words will come from perhaps some of your closest relatives.

As another muhajirat explains, “I genuinely thought [that term] was for jokes… There is no such rubbish in Islam nor the Islamic State such as Sexual Jihad.”

The data indicates a preoccupation with husbands and married life. Nevertheless, this motivation does not fit the romantic explanations as expected. There is no evidence

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118 Al Muhajirat, Tumblr (Aug 1, 2015).
119 Umm Adam Britaniyah, Twitter (Apr 9, 2015, March 23, 2015).
120 Umm Layth, Tumblr (June 3, 2014).
121 Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Sep 18, 2015).
of romantic adventure-seeking or a desire for a wider array of potential partners. Instead, this devotion appears ultimately geared toward a religious and political ideology and not the want for romantic affection. These women are embracing what they view as central roles of women’s jihad: marrying and supporting fighters, mourning and celebrating martyrs, and bearing the future children of the caliphate. Again, only 8.93% of the narratives spoke about finding romance.

As one muhajira notes, “Your first priority shouldn’t be how to find a husband once in the khilafah (caliphate) but actually getting to the khilafah. Continue to renew your intentions and make your hijrah for the sake of Allah.”¹²² Women’s participation in ISIL as wives and mothers is complex¹²³ and cannot be captured by the reductive feminist orientalist “jihadi bride” narrative. Nor can it be simplified into a story about women seeking romantic partners.

6.2 Deception in Recruitment

There was also little evidence to suggest that recruiters deceive female participants with an unrealistic portrayal of life in ISIL-controlled territory (14.89%). While some researchers contend that social media activity targeted towards Western women presents a more luxurious and exciting image of ISIL, the data depicts a life of discomfort, violence, and separation from family and friends. Muhajirat directly reference giving up of modern luxuries as part of hijrah. They admit missing Western comforts, but believe that they are making a worthy sacrifice. Even if foreign recruits

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¹²² Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (May 1, 2015).
¹²³ Some of these women became wives and mothers due to different circumstances. These are there same factors as to why they decide to join ISIL in the first place, which is the topic of this paper. According to ISIL, a woman’s preeminent role is the divine duty of motherhood. Women are to be a shepherd in their house and are responsible for their herd.
may not contemplate the finality of their decision to leave home, women are
straightforward about some of the realities of life in ISIL-controlled territory. Some
muhajirat note that new recruits expect the caliphate to function economically and
politically more than it does. They write,

> Coming from the land of kuffr, the land of injustice, to the land of Islam is
> indeed an upscale no matter how big the sacrifices, but at the same time
> we must come to understand that this is a new born state with problems
> here and there but that doesn’t mean we should sacrifice any less for it.

Umm A similarly notes, “Making Hijrah isn’t a ticket to a comfortable life.” When
asked about how her life changed since moving to Syria, Umm M writes,

> I’ve learned to cope with certain life style changes that I would have never
> imagined myself being able to withstand – such as living in +45 degree
> weather without air conditioning, sometimes having to take cold showers
> in the winter and not having the luxury of a variety of food. Alhamdulillah
> [Thanks be to Allah] all this has humbled me.

In a post advising would-be immigrants on what to bring with them, muhajirat
suggest bringing thick winter clothes to wear indoors because of the lack of heating,
toiletries, and personal items scarce in Syria and Iraq. Some women also complained
about in-fighting between Western recruits and Arab women. They make it clear that
life under ISIL is less comfortable than at home, but believe, “You are leaving the land of
kufir for the land of Islam so much so much sacrifice is to be made.” Umm Layth insists
that most Western recruits understand what they are giving up and when they leave

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124 There was one evidence of a woman who did not fully understand the role she was to play in ISIL. Umm Nosaybah Kalashn notes her disappointment in not being allowed to fight and mentions that she had been in her national army at home. Umm Nosaybah Kalashn, Twitter (May 22, 2014).
125 Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Apr 1, 2015).
126 Umm A, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Sep 1, 2015).
127 Umm M, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Sep 1, 2015).
128 GreenBirdofDabiq, Twitter (Oct 18, 2015).
129 Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Sep 1, 2014).
home. She notes that staying in the West means a comfortable life, but that the reward for making *hijra* to ISIL will be much greater in the afterlife.\footnote{130}{Umm Layth, Tumblr (Sep 11, 2014).}

Beyond the lack of material comforts, women are also straightforward about the violence they experience. Several *muhajirat* recall airstrikes, and they often post graphic images of these attacks. Umm Usamah, a *muhajira* in Mosul, Iraq, writes, “Witnessed my first airstrike last night as the disbelievers attacked Raqqa. *Alhamdulillah*, zero casualties and more money wasted by the *Kuffar.*”\footnote{131}{Umm Usamah, Twitter (Oct 12, 2014).} The *muhajirat* run from aerial attacks and witness children killed by the bombs.\footnote{132}{Umm Abbas, Twitter (Sep 18, 2015); Ummu’AbbasAl’Britani, Twitter (Oct 29, 2014).} Bint Mujahid, a Canadian, remembers seeing people burned alive and crushed by bombs.\footnote{133}{Bint Mujahid, Twitter (Feb 3, 2015).} She notes that this seems inevitable given the necessity of war.\footnote{134}{Ibid.} One recruit noted that she was moving to Iraq because Raqqa had become too dangerous.\footnote{135}{Umm Nosaybah, Twitter (Sep 18, 2014).}

In addition to clear warning of discomfort, lack of resources, and coalition attacks, the *muhajirat* discuss ISIL’s widespread use of violence against women. A 2015 *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion or ruling) issued by ISIL’s Committee of Research and Fatwas sanctions the taking, buying, selling, and rape of non-Muslim female slaves.\footnote{136}{ISIL Committee on Research and Fatwas, “Fatwa Number 64”, (Jan 29, 2015) cited by Loken and Zelenz, 60.} The *fatwa* dictates the circumstances in which men can rape women held as slaves and includes provisions including menstruation, pregnancy, lineage, and release. There was no evidence that ISIL women keep this secret in their social media activity or recruitment propaganda. Instead not only are female recruits aware of this violence when joining the organization, but the *muhajirat* openly admit and accept ISIL’s rape of women and girls.
held as slaves. They explicitly note that rape is a punishable offense when the victim is a Muslim, but encourage the enslavement and rape of Yazidis.

ISIL is a Salafi-jihadist organization. In Salafi tradition, non-Muslim religious groups whose theology is rooted in the Bible or Torah are also known as ahl al-kitab, or people of The Book. The Prophet Mohammed dictated that these groups be specifically protected from conversion and allowed to practice their religions with little interference. Yazidis, a religious community across Iraq and Syria, are not ahl al-kitab, and according to ISIL’s interpretation of the group, are seen as heathens with no religious protection. Women in the data trust that this combination of Salafi theology and national hierarchy protects them from sexual violence, and they also feel that Yazidi women deserve mistreatment. In the ninth issue of Dabiq, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah argues that slavery and rape are punishment for abandoning God’s favor. She affirms, “We have indeed raided and captured the [non-Muslim] women, and drove them like sheep by the edge of the sword…I and those with me at home prostrated to Allah in gratitude on the day the first slaved-girl entered our home.”

Umm Abbas even jokes about this practice: “

The Jazrawis [fighters from the Gulf region] here are the ones who have the most sabiyas [female slaves]. They love their women…He purchased one for $1000 loool [laughing out loud]…Then another for $10000.”

In one post, a muhajira responds to an anonymous commenter asking her to clarify “misconceptions” about ISIL’s use of rape. The commenter notes that rumors of this practice turn women away from making hijra. The muhajira replies,

137 Loken and Zelenz, 60.
138 Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, “Slave-girls or prostitutes?”, Dabiq, vol. 11 (2015), 46-8; the author’s name suggests that she is also a migrant.
139 Umm Abbas, Twitter (Sep 23, 2015).
…we as Muslims should be happy that the khilafah is back with all its glories including the sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) [verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deed and sayings, permissions and dissapprovals of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, (peace be unto him)] of taking kuffar women as sabayyah [slaves] to humiliate kuffr and what it stand for…I must say what you may have heard about brothers taking the yazidi women as sabayyah is in fact true wa Alhamdu lillah [and praise belongs to Allah].

While well aware of ISIL’s violence, the muhajirat feel that the group protects them from rape. For example, Bint Muhajid recalls feeling unsafe walking home in Canada, but says, “Now I walk home…Surrounded by Mujahideen [fighters], knowing no one can harm me. What a difference.” Umm Abbas notes similarly, “Dawla [the State, ISIL] has the best types of men, and the shariah [Islamic] court protects you from all the types of violence.”

The “deception” explanation is uniquely difficult to evaluate through social media. It may be unreasonable to expect female recruits to comment about deception or their regrets on a public forum like Twitter. Doing so may risk their personal safety in an already violent and highly regulated environment. Furthermore, because the conditions of life under ISIL are not completely transparent, it is difficult to evaluate how realistically these accounts portray daily life. Still, while women may not directly mention social media deception or divulge the extent of the difficulties they face, the existing literature suggests that social media activity targeted at Westerners will present a rosy image of ISIL.

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140 Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Jun 1, 2015).
141 Bint Muhajid, Twitter (Jul 17, 2015).
142 Umm Abbas, personal interview conducted by Nabeelah Jaffer over Twitter. Note: there is no way of measuring the actual incidence of rape and violence that these women face.
6.3 Isolation and Alienation

For this motif, the data suggest that like other foreign fighters, Western women in ISIL do feel isolated and threatened in their home states and this mobilizes them towards extremism. This isolation is both political and religious. Although many claims about Muslim radicalization highlight the ease of finding like minded communities, the data show that women have difficulty identifying with sympathizers in Western states. Hoda Muthana remembers, “I literally isolated myself from all my friends and community members the last year I was in America… I grew closer to my *deen* [religion], I lost all my friends, I found none in my community that desired to tread the path I was striving for.” Sakina, a French *muhajira*, notes that when she converted to Islam her mother told her that she wished she were a lesbian instead.

The women in the dataset believe Muslims in the West are oppressed in particularly gendered ways. They frequently discuss the discrimination experienced by those who wear *hijah* and *niqab* [female head and face coverings]. Existing scholarship and hate crime statistics support the belief that Muslim women are frequent targets. Barbara Perry suggests that Muslim women are targeted in part because they are perceived as “exotic Others who do not fit the Western ideal of womanhood.” In Australia, 50 percent of post-9/11 attacks on Muslims are perpetrated against women. Comparatively, 44 percent of victims are male and six percent are buildings or

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144 Hoda Muthana, personal interview conducted by Ellie Hall over Kik.
145 Sakina, Twitter (Sep 26, 2015).
146 Saltman and Smith, 10.
147 Barbara Perry. “Gendered Islamophobia: Hate crime against Muslim Women,” *Social Identities*, vol. 20, issue 1, (2014), pp. 74-89. Note: how Perry is using the Orientalism approach here with how the West describes the Orient as “Others.”
148 Ibid.
property.\textsuperscript{149} Because veiling is an inherently visible practice in the Islamic faith, veiled girls and women are common targets of anti-Muslim attacks.\textsuperscript{150} In the United States, numerous reports detailed veiled Muslim women being physically assaulted.\textsuperscript{151} In response, some activist groups have begun teaching Muslim women self-defense and how to escape an attacker who grabs their head scarves.\textsuperscript{152} A popular website catered to English-speaking Muslim women, MuslimGirl.com, posted an article on December 5, 2015, titled “Crisis Safety Manual for Muslim Women.” The site listed ways to disguise the veil, such as “try the hood or beanie-on-top option to attract less attention.”\textsuperscript{153} Quraishi-Landes, an Islamic law specialist, writes that if women wearing the veil felt their “life or safety is threatened in any way… [they] have an Islamic allowance (durura) to adjust [their] clothing accordingly.”\textsuperscript{154}

The women in the data reported feeling isolated and discriminated against in their home countries because of their public displays of Islamic devotion. Safety and belonging in ISIL-controlled territory are particularly manifested through veiling and dress because these women believe living in non-Muslim society is dangerous. On \textit{Al-Muhajirat}, women write, “In \textit{Dar Al-Kufr} [the non-Muslim world], a \textit{Muslimah} [female Muslim] is subjugated to the many oppressive laws which control her, she may not be given a job due to the way she dresses, she is ridiculed on the bus/train by the \textit{Kuffar}, and

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Loken and Zelenz, 62.
\textsuperscript{151} Perry, “Gendered Islamophobia…,” p. 75.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
no one can protect her as Islam wishes for her to be protected.” One *muhajira* recalls, “…I was smiling at [non-Muslims] as they walked by me knowing very well they hated the true essence of my religion and everything it stood for.” Another notes that when she arrived in Syria from the West, she finally felt safe. Women in the Al-Khansaa police force contend that veiling is a recovery of rights for women who were forcibly revealed by Western colonizers and modern leaders. They insist, “After the establishment of the caliphate, coverings and hijab…returned to the country and decency swept the country.”

Reclamation of modesty is a key concern for the *muhajirat*, and they believe that it is not possible to do this outside of an Islamic caliphate. Female recruits recall family in their home states asking them to stop wearing *niqabs* (covering that shows only their eyes) and non-Muslim women condescendingly addressing them in public. Lioness consistently stresses the importance of modestly and adores “being in a place not seeing no naked women, seeing every woman and child from the age of seven cover up fully in niqab with no eyes on show.” Many of these women believe that non-Muslim society “contaminates” women with sexualized expectations and public feminism. Others emphasize the uneven enforcement of veiling laws in the West. Bint Muhajid notes that Catholic nuns are not required to move their head coverings and laments that veiling laws are directly exclusively at Muslims. Experiences of isolation and, sometimes, violence separate the *muhjirat* from most women who join domestic Islamist organizations. While

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155 Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Jul 1, 2015).
156 Ibid.
159 Lioness, Twitter (Feb 27, 2013).
160 Umm U, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Sep 1, 2015).
161 Bint Muhajid, Twitter (Feb 27, 2015).
female fighters in domestic groups are often recruited from local communities with corresponding values, foreign women are seeking a society unlike their liberal homes.

Most Muslims who feel isolated or disconnected from their communities do not seek out and are not enticed by extremist violence. As Post, Mahmood and Rane, and others conclude, it is when isolation leads individuals to become embedded in online extremist networks that this factor increased the likelihood of radicalization. The data demonstrate that, beginning online and continuing after *hijra*, women are building close community ties that further mobilize them into political violence. *Muhajirat* treasure the support structures available for them within ISIL and on the Internet. They constantly refer to one another as *ukhti* (my sister) and *akhwati* (my sisters). While the *muhajirat* are failing to find these relationships locally, they are identifying with each other online and creating close communities held together by shared experience, devotion, ideology, and the desire to live under an Islamic caliphate. As traditional domestic insurgencies build these types of relationships within their communities, ISIL women are building them on the Internet. Isolation caused by anti-Muslim discrimination may push women into these online communities and may motivate their radicalization and journeys abroad.

### 6.4 Religious Ideology

For this motif, the data strongly suggests (48.34%) that, like male foreign fighters, *muhajirat* are motivated by an ideological commitment to ISIL that requires physical migration. *Hijra* enables women to participate in the creation and maintenance of the caliphate. Subsequently, the *muhajirat* view *hijra* as both central to Islamic practice and required by Islamic teachings. Some women explicitly emphasize *hijra*’s requisite nature.

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162 Post; Mahmood and Rane, etc.
163 Dearden, “How ISIS Attracts…”
One *muhajira* declares, “The Muslims could never have abandoned their homes and families, exposing themselves to the pain of separation and the hardship of migration if had not been indispensable to the practice of their religion and the assertion of Islam in the land.”\(^{164}\) Sakina believes that *jihad* is mandatory and deems those unwilling to take part as “hypocrites” and “dogs.”\(^{165}\) Another *muhajira* tells prospective recruits that if they are making *hijra* only for glory or land that they will not last in ISIL. She notes that only belief in Allah should motivate this migration.\(^{166}\)

The *muhajirat* show little patience for Muslims who do not migrate. Before they leave home, many of the women in the data profess the desire to make *hijra* despite legal obstacles or family disapproval. Umm Layth states that some women are courageous enough to make *hijra*, and that they hide behind the guilt that migrating would bring grief to their families.\(^{167}\) Ummu’AbbasAl-Britani, a British *muhajira*, berates women who do not make *hijra* by referencing the excuses they make, such as “I can’t shop online.”\(^{168}\)

Some, like Umm Abbas, offer a more direct approach:

If you neglect *Hijrah* & would rather be oppressed by *Darul KUFR* [the non-Muslim world] due to land preferences, then you are held for whatever the *Kuffar* do to you// IF THEY PRISON YOU, TORTURE YOU, RAPE YOU, SLAUGHTER YOU, TAKE YOUR KIDS, …WHATEVER THEY DO…It’s on you. You chose to neglect *Hijrah*.\(^{169}\)

Other women shame Western Muslims who have not made *hijra* by telling stories about those who have joined them in Syria and Iraq.\(^{170}\) Umm Nosaybah Kalashn notes that her 50 year old father has joined her and asks would-be recruits what they were waiting

\(^{164}\) Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Aug 1, 2015).
\(^{165}\) Sakina, Twitter (Aug 9, 2015).
\(^{166}\) Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (Jul 1, 2015).
\(^{167}\) Umm Layth, Tumblr (Jun 3, 2015).
\(^{168}\) Ummu’AbbasAl-Britani, Twitter (Apr 30, 2015).
\(^{169}\) Umm Abbas, Twitter (Sep 23, 2015).
\(^{170}\) Umm Abbas, Twitter (Sept 12, 2015), writes, “Don’t you feel ashamed? To see a child in kital [fighting with a weapon] whilst you neglect Hijrah, Ba’yah [allegiance] and Jihad #WilayatAlBarakah #IS.”
for. Another muhajirat recalls a woman who made hijra on foot, with her family, and without a passport. She writes that it took the woman four months to arrives and adds, “so if they can make Hijrah so can you.” These women view their physical obligation to ISIL as both mandatory for all Muslims and uniquely gendered. The muhajirat emphasize the important space women occupy and focus on marriage, martyrdom, modesty, and maintaining the caliphate’s moral compass.

The significance of their commitment is further captures in the capitalization of “Hijra” on social media. The capitalization of Hijra in much of the data suggests that while hijra literally means migration, the muhajirat are directly comparing their journeys to Mohammed’s hijra, which is known as “The Hijra.” This linguistic choice indicates that the muhajirat see themselves as emulating Mohammed – literally fleeing persecution and waging a violent jihad against non-believers. They believe that ISIL offers them an authentic space for pure religious practice, and they are courageously answering its call for true believers. As Umm Layth writes of herself, “Wallahi [I swear] my mother you have raised a Lioness among a land of cowards.”

Finally, muhajirat connect hijra and violent jihad. Their social media activity dually emphasizes the need to remove one’s self from the society of non-believers and their desire to violently attack this world. Women often post graphic videos and imagery of ISIL beheadings and public violence, as well as calls to a brutal war between the caliphate and the non-Muslim world. Umm Layth speaks to President Obama and Primer Minister Cameron directly, promising, “you and your countries will be beneath our feet

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171 Umm Nosaybah Kalashn, Twitter (Mar 17, 2015).
172 Ummu’AbbasAl-Britani, Twitter (Oct 29, 2014).
173 Umm Layth, Tumblr (Apr 9, 2015).
and your Kufr will be destroyed.”¹⁷⁴ Bint Muhajid also threatens domestic terrorism, saying, “Live in Fear. Sleeper cells & lone wolves are indetectable. They will strike against when you least suspect.”¹⁷⁵ Hoda Muthana demands someone, “Go on drive-bys and spill [American] blood, or rent a big truck and drive all over them…Kill them.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Umm Layth, Tumblr (Sep 11, 2014).
¹⁷⁵ Bint Muhajid, Twitter (Feb 10, 2015).
¹⁷⁶ Hoda Muthana, Twitter (Mar 19, 2015).
Chapter 7

Conclusion

As government officials, policymakers, and researchers struggle to explain ISIL’s recruitment of Western women, they often focus on factors unrelated to religion or ideology. This is likely because the narratives of tricked, brainwashed, and sexually lured women fit into existing orientalist narratives of women in the Middle East requiring liberation. This doesn’t necessarily mean it fits all cases, this is likely due to the orientalist interpretations that tend to favor a deterministic understanding of complex situations. The image of Western recruits as victims against an organization that has reported harsh treatments and conservative expectations of women and girls helps shape the gendered narrative. In this view, Western muhajirat are considered exceptional.

They differ from their domestic counterparts, drawn from predominately Muslim and “non-liberal” communities into Islamist groups and they differ from male foreign fighters as well. Indeed, Western male recruits are rarely imagined as victims of deception, perceived to be motivated by sexual interest in other recruits, offered immunity deals or treated as confused victims in need of rescue.177 This suggests that this approach is theoretically flawed and contributes to the long empirical history of erasing women’s engagement in political violence. Further, this framework is unsuitable to explain Western muhajirat. The data suggests that while ISIL recruits participate for complex reasons, Western women seem to be primarily drawn by a religious commitment and pushed by perceived isolation and alienation in their home societies.

177 Strommen. “Jihadi Brides…”
This analysis suggests that women join ISIL for largely the same reason as male recruits. Richard Barrett, co-founder of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, explains that male fighters are motivated by “relatively straightforward” factors including disillusionment, persecution, religious ideology, and a desire for brotherhood and belonging. He argues, “They’re going off there to do something which they believe is good.” The data suggests that these factors similarly motivate women. By their own accounts, the Western *muhajirat* are not so different from other Islamist women or their foreign male counterparts. They are not “jihadi-brides,” running after men for excitement or reward. They are committed actors making decisions they view as fundamental to their faith. Female recruits believe that *hijra* is mandatory, and that their sacrifice is required for religious fulfillment. These women have agency. They are individuals with the ability to make effective choices for themselves and not by others.

However, the *muhajirat* do uniquely reference violence in their home countries that may push them towards extremist communities. Muslim women in many Western countries are targeted by hate crimes, and the *muhajirat* directly reference fear of violence as a factor in their disaffection. Western *muhajirat* further feel violated by laws, political rhetoric, and social opposition to their outward practices of faith. They reject sexualized expectations and enthusiastically accept more conservative roles that they believe are unattainable in the West.

This disillusionment is evident in these online accounts, where women carve out a gendered space that is explicitly female, religious, and communal. Through social media,
women speak to a community of “sisters” that exalt Islamism and encourage others to pledge fully to the caliphate. James P. Farwell contends, on social media “the group’s narrative portrays [ISIL] as an agent of change, the true apostle of sovereign faith, a champion on its own perverse notions of social injustice, and a collection of avengers bent on settling accounts for the perceived suffering of others.”

Subsequently, ISIL may be attractive to those isolated in Western society who struggle to find community or face religious persecution. Women, like men, are subject to this narrative.

This paper encourages radicalization scholars to take seriously the intersection between individual psychology and the specifics of Islamist ideology. Much of the current literature is divided between viewing extremists as “troubled individuals” or seeing them “cogs (member) in a system.” Roy and Kepel’s debate about the role of religion in radicalization exemplifies this statement. Kepel directly links Islamist violence to the “intellectual resources of Salafism’, emphasizing developments in religious thought as an explanation. In contrast, Roy focuses on the application of religion to radical behavior. Others, like Anabel Inge, question the causal link between Salafism and violent extremism by exploring the lives of Western women who become Salafi but are not terrorists.

The *muhajirat* emphasize both individual factors (isolation and discrimination that cause them to seek out extremist communities) and specifically Islamist ideas (religious mandate for making *hijra*) in their justifications for joining ISIL. The

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181 Ibid.
combination of these factors in their testimony suggests it unwise to draw a conclusion between religions as a cause or cover extremism. The relationship between religion and radicalization process is outside the scope of this paper, but acknowledging the complex role of Islamic fundamentalism is important because it helps explain why these women chose to uproot their lives and travel to Syria and Iraq.

The data makes clear that ISIL women, like most participants in political violence, perform both as agents and non-agents. These recruits are pushed and pulled by external forces of violence, religion, and community. Restricting the analysis of these activities by marking them as either completely voluntary or fully coerced offers an inaccurate assessment of the *muhajirat* and their political practices. ISIL women are reacting to their social, political, and religious worlds and responding in ways that they feel benefit their interests are women and as Muslims. This paper opposes the interpretations of the *muhajirat* as being under-informed, deceived, and forcibly recruited actors. This researcher believes that the *muhajirat* are extremists actively engaged in political action and perform as agents.

The political implications of the findings are clear. Different treatment of male and female foreign recruits is misguided. This approach carries dangerous implications for the future of counter-extremism and the valuation of female terrorists as threats domestically and abroad. As Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone conclude, “women returning from conflict areas or those, even more numerous, anxious to join but unable to travel, could engage in violent acts.”\(^{184}\) By assuming that these women are harmless victims due to their gender, we may be missing a possible threat. While women take on primarily administrative roles in ISIL-controlled territory, female suicide bombers as well

\(^{184}\) Peresin & Cervone, 495.
as female lone wolf actors who swear allegiance to ISIL could be a possibility. As ISIL continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria and manpower shortages mount, it is very likely they could go back to their old attack tactics as they did while they were AQI and employ women as suicide bombers within Iraq and Syria, and may also try to do so in Western countries. These individuals should not be ignored due to our perceptions of ISIL gender narratives. These women need to be investigated and taken just as seriously as their male counterparts and seen as violent political actors.

While this study does not answer the question of whether hostility towards Muslims directly encourages extremism, the data does highlight the strong perception among these recruits that their home countries are oppressive. Whether drawing from personal experiences of hostility or narratives of Western oppression circulating online, the *muhajirat* view Western society as hateful and dangerous. They perceive anti-Muslim expectation enforced by law, advertising, and social relations. They denounce anti-veiling policies and antagonistic social interactions. Regardless of whether this reflects broader Muslim experiences or the empirical realities of anti-Muslim discrimination, Western governments should take these concerns seriously. ISIL portrays itself as a community that values Muslims’ social and religious contributions. This imagery may resonate with women, and men, who feel targeted by state politics or oppressed by dominant cultures.

Given these findings, here are some recommendations that could minimize the migration of these women:

1. Western governments should remain engaged with their Muslim communities. Within Europe, it is understood that engagement with the Muslim community is an essential aspect of any counter-terrorism strategy. People would not feel alienated.
2. Western governments should remove barriers to integration from within their societies through anti-discrimination legislation and similar instruments. For example, it’s meaningless to talk about the integration of Muslim communities in France while stigmatizing Muslim practices, such as the wearing of the headscarf. Social exclusion does not contribute to a healthy society. It breeds a society of disparate and disconnected entities, which in turn worsen other social ills and result in social upheaval.

3. This paper showed that the Internet is a key component in the radicalization process of aspiring female migrants and needs to be a key battleground in pushing back against this phenomenon. Counter-narratives need to be developed and targeted at a female audience.

The *muhajirat* travel for a variety of reasons, some in the hope of becoming part of something great, some for ideological reasons and others to feel part of a community and sense of belonging. These female recruits, through the dynamics of alienation, attraction, and agency may pose a unique and evolving threat to the West and should be taken as seriously as male insurgents. It is important to learn the lessons of the past decade about the sheer variety of factors that lead people down the path radicalization and make full use of the technology at our disposal.
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