

TERROR WITH A FEMALE FACE

European women drawn to ISIS in Syria and Iraq pose a potential threat if they return home

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The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has received considerable attention for its barbarity against women and its systematic degradation, abuse and humiliation, including formally approved physical and sexual violence and slavery, in the territory under its control. In spite of that, more than 550 Muslim women have recently left their Western countries and performed a *hijra*, the Arabic word for exodus or migration, to the newly proclaimed “caliphate.” These women represent about 10 percent of all ISIS’ Western foreign recruits. Apart from that, authorities from different Western countries continuously report new cases of women who are being arrested at airports on suspicion of trying to travel to Syria or who express willingness on their social media accounts to make the pilgrimage.

Understanding their motivations to join ISIS and the importance of their experience in ISIS-controlled territory is necessary to assess the capacity of some ISIS women to become female terrorists, incited and trained to commit violence in the “Islamic state” or in their Western countries of residence. Women who successfully went through different stages of the complex model of foreign fighter’s radicalization will require different types of treatment if and when they return to their home countries, something that needs to be recognized in counterradicalization and counterterrorism policies.

Who Are These Female Recruits?

It is impossible to create a profile of women at risk of being radicalized by ISIS based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations or religious background. They are mainly between the ages of 16 and 24. In most cases, they are second- or third-generation descendants of Muslim immigrants, but the number of converts is also growing. Generally, a significant number had good prospects for education and life in the West and hail from well-established, moderate and nonradicalized families.

An important question is what term should one use to refer to ISIS’ Western women, considering their motivation and the roles they play in the Islamic state? Should we label them naive, manipulated victims, *muhajirat*, female foreign fighters or female terrorists?

While many terrorist organizations have used women to carry out terrorist attacks, especially suicide bombings, such use of ISIS’ women has not yet been confirmed, but is also not strictly forbidden.

A broad definition of foreign fighters as noncitizens who travel to conflict states to participate in insurgencies and who are mainly motivated by religion and ideology could apply to these female migrants from the West, some of whom, once they arrive to Syria or Iraq, learn how to use weapons and can be seen carrying Kalashnikovs. However, a strict interpretation of Shariah law bars women from combat, and so far there is insufficient evidence of ISIS using women in that role.



Jennifer Vincenza M. stands trial in Düsseldorf, Germany, in January 2015, with another woman and a man, accused of supporting terrorism by collecting money for ISIS. EPA

In terms of self-identification, Muslim women who moved to the so-called caliphate call themselves *muhajirat*, indicating discontent with their previous social environment in the West, their desire to move to a place of ideal perfection (the caliphate) and their religious motivation for seeking that change. Notwithstanding how adolescents understand ISIS' ideology, the concepts of caliphate and the role of women in it, ISIS also uses naive and easily manipulated teenage girls to play a role in the territory under its control, inducing them to embrace a cause that they often do not clearly understand.

With the above-mentioned limitations in mind, none of the labels noted earlier apply generally to all the Western

female migrants. Proper labeling will depend on their evident motivations, roles and activities in ISIS-controlled territory. Although it is hard to quantify the extent of alienation of female migrants in their respective countries of residence, there is sufficient concern about this trend to necessitate learning what motivates women from the West to move to a war-torn area and join a notorious terrorist group.

Motivations

Women are joining ISIS for a number of reasons: religious, ideological, political and personal. First, women are responding to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who called upon

them to help create conditions for the growth and normal functioning of the newly proclaimed state in which some women see a chance to take part in the state-building process and creation of a new society in contrast to the “decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which has no respect for women.” With that in mind, women talk about joining the state, not a terrorist group, and expect to be given an important role in creating the new, ideologically pure state, where they could live “honorably” under a strict interpretation of Shariah law.

Those motivated more by political reasons believe that they have joined a humanitarian mission to relieve Syrian suffering after viewing horrific images of the conflict. This, together with the feelings of alienation and inequality, racism, religious restrictions, xenophobia or negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants in the West, is used by ISIS recruiters to boost the aspirations of Muslims to live and practice their religion in a more congenial environment.

When it comes to personal reasons, women have expressed a number of motivations: a desire for adventure, a feeling of alienation, dissatisfaction with their lives, a search for alternatives, romantic disappointments and adolescent rebellion. As is the case with some men, some women are bored, and the possibility of being part of a movement that claims to be shaping history seems attractive. Others are attracted to the prospect of marrying foreign fighters whom they view as heroic, sacrificial figures.

The motivation of female migrants also changes over time. Someone who was initially motivated primarily by one set of factors may thereafter gradually change her thoughts based on experience. Others assumed roles in the Islamic state different from what they had expected after the initial exposure to ISIS’ social media campaign.

Social Media Campaign

Its focus on foreign fighter recruitment can be considered the most effective ever conducted by a global terrorist group. A carefully planned and conducted media campaign in a variety of languages and on various platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram focused on female supporters who had already joined the group with the aim of demonstrating that living conditions of ISIS women, both material and intangible, were better than in the West.

Individual ISIS supporters, empowered to take part in creating and distributing the narrative, share official propaganda about ISIS’ victories in battles, promote ISIS ideology and regularly post personal details about their experiences in the group. By presenting their normal daily activities, such as cooking, making Nutella pancakes, playing with kittens or posting pictures of romantic sunsets in Syria, online promoters are offering a picture of life under ISIS rule that is positive and attractive to would-be followers, even if it is contrary to reality.

Social media posts also give a variety of practical and motivational tips and guidance to would-be migrants. They advise them how to travel, what and what not to pack, how to communicate with families back home, and how to adopt

different roles in the land of jihad, covering the competencies of housewives and facilitators. Women are taught not only how to cook meals from an ISIS recipe book, but also how to use weapons, administer first aid, and work with computers to design and edit programs to spread ISIS propaganda.

This is the first time that a militant organization has given strict guidance to women on their roles, preparing them for the “honor of jihad.” That raises the question of whether women are discovering what they expected in ISIS-controlled territory.

Life Under ISIS Rule

From ISIS propaganda, it is clear that the main attraction by which ISIS lures Western Muslim women is the opportunity to become wives of ISIS fighters and mothers of a new generation of jihadists. Additionally, they are needed for domestic female supporting roles, like cooking or nursing soldiers, or to take professional positions left unfilled by men, to control the civilian population and to recruit others.

To ensure that thousands of male Western foreign fighters will not leave ISIS territory, the group created a strategy to retain them with jobs, a house and a family. In addition to being promised a salary, they are promised a wife, often more than one. Western female migrants who enthusiastically make themselves available to marry ISIS foreign fighters are apparently regarded as better mothers and supporters of jihad than local women, who are often reluctant to marry foreigners. Western foreign fighters might also prefer Western women, who are culturally and linguistically closer to them.

The fact that these Muslim women left the West also demonstrates that they see ISIS as ideologically superior to the Western worldview. ISIS promotes having Western women in its ranks as a validation of its power, strength and the acceptance of its ideology throughout the world. What we know about the reality of life for Western Muslim women on the territory controlled by ISIS primarily comes from women’s social media posts.

On one hand, ISIS female online recruiters and promoters emphasize their satisfaction and assert that everything is functioning as in a normal society. They report they are treated better than in the West and express a sense of belonging. On the other hand, there are women who succeeded either in escaping or in contacting their families in a desperate attempt to receive help to return home. They talk about shocking experiences and an awareness of having made the biggest mistake of their lives, based on mistreatment by their husbands or dissatisfaction with their role within ISIS. Other frustrations also emerged, including complaints about being banned from combat, the strains of widowhood, and the harsh physical environment of Syria.

Even if well-treated, women are exposed to a very different type of life than in the West, in relation to the way they must dress, restrictions on their movement and other social controls, especially if they are unmarried. According to ISIS propaganda, women coming alone are welcomed and settled in an all-female hostel with a guaranteed monthly allowance, but are supposed to marry shortly after arriving in Syria.

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This 22-year-old French woman was recruited by ISIS through Internet chat rooms and was then married to a fighter. After she escaped, she was detained in Turkey and deported to France.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Veiled women chat in a garden in the ISIS-controlled Syrian province of Raqqa in March 2014. ISIS has imposed sweeping restrictions on personal freedoms, especially regarding women, who must follow a strict dress code in public or be punished. REUTERS

However, many ISIS online recruiters openly advise women to try to arrange a marriage before they arrive in Syria or Iraq. Finding an appropriate husband is an important precondition to make their position easier.

Migrating to the ISIS-controlled area does not mean that the life of muhajirat will be easy. Expected hardships in marriage and in other worldly matters are presented as a means by which Allah tests women's patience and faith.

Some women explained that foreigners are not always well-accepted by the local population and reported problems with local people who are generally unwelcoming. They report cases of mistreatment and discrimination in places such as hospitals. The better living conditions and benefits that foreign fighters enjoy create division and resentment among the local population, complicating relations. Additional tensions could be caused by unfilled

expectations of some Western women. ISIS propaganda mostly shows women carrying guns but enjoying traditional female activities.

Indeed, another question is whether women are satisfied with the strict rules and limited female roles, having imagined engaging in combat as featured on social media accounts. The role of ISIS women is most clearly described by ISIS itself. In an Arabic document posted on a jihadist forum in January 2015, ISIS, in contrast to what is promoted online to Western women in English, clarified that the designated role of women under its version of Shariah was primarily domestic: to raise the new generation of jihadists. On the other hand, this manifesto does not exclude a combat role for women, but permits it only in extreme cases such as enemy attack, lack of men or a fatwa issued by an imam. Considering the threat that

the returning women of ISIS could pose to the West, it is important to assess their attitudes toward violence and their intentions to participate in combat.

Tendency Toward Violence

Many posts published by ISIS women in the social media support and celebrate brutality and violence toward enemies, call for beheadings, and justify such brutality according to their reading of Islamic law or indicate a personal desire to inflict violence. Some women also display militancy, expressing a willingness to become a martyr as a fighter or suicide bomber.

Despite these expressions, ISIS' online promoters are clear. As one said: "Women may gain more *ajr* [reward] by spending years of sleepless nights raising children with the right intentions and for the sake of Allah than by doing a martyrdom operation." Whether or not women want to fight for ISIS, "for the sisters it is completely impossible for now. Inshallah (God willing) in the future."

Posted pictures and statements show that some women are trained to use weapons, but purportedly for their own protection. Also, members of two all-female brigades, Al-Khansaa and Umm al-Rayan, responsible for patrolling the streets, are armed. They accompany male fighters at checkpoints and on home raids to search women, look for male fighters who might have concealed their identities under a veil or niqab, and enforce ISIS' strict rules of dress and morality.

Members of Al-Khansaa, set up in Raqqa in February 2014 and composed mostly of British migrants, are presented in the media as being brutal with women who do not obey their strict morality. They have been accused of cruel punitive methods, such as disfiguring 15 women's faces with acid for not wearing a niqab or torturing a mother with a spiked clamp for breastfeeding in public.

The main role of these all-female brigades is expected to include strict control over people's behavior, essential for ISIS to impose the fear and obedience necessary to establish authoritarian rule over its territory and to generate civilian compliance. Such extended roles will fulfil the expectations of some women, giving them more power, but also making them more dangerous for the West if and when they return.

The Future of ISIS Women

A key concern is what the future of ISIS' Western women will be, especially if the so-called Islamic state collapses and the group loses control over its core territory. Disappointed, disillusioned and perhaps aware of having made a big mistake, some disenchanted women would probably not be interested in adopting violent jihad in the future.

The future activities of most Western female migrants will be closely intertwined with the future plans of their husbands, and with the future of ISIS as a group or the territory of the proclaimed caliphate. If the latter should collapse, many of those who remain fully committed to global jihad are likely to seek to help embattled Muslims elsewhere, migrating to other fronts where ISIS may

have found new allies. Others could be discouraged from returning home by the fear of arrest in their home countries; they would look for other places to live and continue their mission.

Some Western migrants will try to achieve more militant roles in the Islamic state if the situation on the ground worsens for ISIS. Other scenarios envisage a more active role for the women of ISIS in their home countries as recruiters, facilitators or direct perpetrators of violent acts. The fall of ISIS could strengthen their commitment and motivate them to continue the jihadist struggle in their home countries. Their motivation, together with the military training they received in Iraq or Syria and their experience of living in a war zone, means that they must be considered a potentially serious security threat to the West if and when they return.

Special attention should also be focused on children who have grown up there, since they have been exposed to the same scenes of violence and have been indoctrinated and trained in using weapons, just like their parents. On social network accounts, some women have already posted threats against the West by urging women to commit terror attacks on the domestic front.

Not all ISIS female sympathizers are active on social media, and this makes them less visible to security services. As such, they could pose an even more significant security threat. Compared to women who succeeded in joining ISIS, radicalized females who didn't make the hijra and who lack military training could be instructed to perform simpler attacks against unprotected and softer targets.

Conclusion

Explaining why a growing number of Muslim women from the West have left their countries to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria is a complex task and depends on a combination of different motivational factors and expectations. ISIS, for its part, has evident strategic reasons to attract women from the West, in consideration of their importance for the future of the movement. However, the realities of life in the "caliphate" for many women neither matches the romanticized and utopian image presented online, nor fulfils their expectations that they would assume significant military roles.

In consideration of their strong motivation, current engagement and potential role in the future, ISIS' Western women could pose a considerable security threat to the West. Some will come back disillusioned and, as such, will probably be easily reintegrated into society. Others, who will arrive with military training and the intention to remain active in the global jihadist network, could pose a more significant threat as potential female terrorists ready to plot against their home countries or to inspire others to do so. This group should be monitored, seriously assessed for risk, categorized and properly treated.

As of mid-2015, ISIS' Western women posed no direct physical threat to the West. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out a possible shift in roles in the future. As Umm Ubaydah, one of ISIS' best-known female recruiters, posted online: "Maybe the time for us to participate is soon." □