

LOCATING WOMEN IN JIHAD: THE CASE OF WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS)

Hamoon Khelghat-Doost¹

Introduction

There are several diverse notions along which the world is separated into different categories including gender, race, religion, nations, class or political ideologies. The gender relations and the position of women in society and labour force has been always a topic of serious discussions among scholars in different academic fields. In both their personal and professional lives, men and women are associated in close, collaborative relationships. Simultaneously, men have traditionally greater access to societal power than women do (Diekmann, Goodfriend and Goodwin 2004). As the most basic and predominant classification in social life throughout the world², gender hierarchies and women's position also play an important role in global labour force which has traditionally been a patriarchal domain which many women have found unreceptive or even hostile (United Nations 2006).

The current trend in global labour force employment clearly demonstrates a discriminatory pattern in favour of men in which in 2017, the male employment-to-population ratio was 72.2%, while the ratio for women was only 47.1% (International Labour Organization 2018). Although it is argued that a significant number of women are involved in informal employment as they often have less legal and social support however, the overall employment gender gap continues in favour of men.

In line with the global discriminative employment trend, women's employment rate in most of the Islamic countries -especially those in the Middle East and North Africa- is even more disappointing. The repercussions

¹ Department of Political Science and International Relations at Üsküdar University, Turkey. hamoon.khelghatdoost@uskudar.edu.tr

² Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. 2007. "Great divides: The cultural, cognitive, and social bases of the global subordination of women". *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 1 (2007): 1-22.

of social restrictions are readily observable in the lower number of Muslim women who are employed in the labour force in comparison to other countries and regions around the world. The 2017 World Bank's World Development Indicators clearly demonstrate that the level of women's employment in the labour force across countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is 25% below the global average (Elder, Sarah and Gianni 2015).

In line with social restrictions, the orthodox interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence also put restrictions on different other aspects of women's engagement in social affairs, including incorporation into militant organizations (Cook 2005). Traditional Islamic sources emphasize the importance of women's roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives of Muslim men at war (Sjoberg and Caron 2011).

Since the escalation of crisis in Syria and Iraq in 2013, and with the growth of new jihadi organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and, Jaish al-Fatah, there was a new wave of women being incorporated into such jihadi groups. It is reported that more than ten percent of all Western members of ISIS were women (Peresin and Cervone 2015). More than 750 women from various countries in the EU have also joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq including 150 Germans and 200 French (Reynolds and Hafez 2019). The same growth in women's joining groups such as ISIS was evident in the case of non-European female nationals including 700 Tunisians and more than 500 Moroccans³ (Bahija 2018).

However, against the current women's employment trends in most Islamic countries and contrary to the negative perspective of the Islamic jurisprudence on women's recruitment in militant organizations, there was an increase in the number of women incorporated into ISIS in both numbers and roles. However, this increasing trend is not the only puzzling issue about women's incorporation into ISIS. Conventionally, militant movements (such as the nationalist and leftist militant groups) were incorporating women only during periods of mobilization and political struggle. Upon the periods of state consolidation, women were however discarded and pushed out of the state institutions. Ironically and against the above established pattern, the trend was vice-versa in the case of jihadi organizations such as ISIS.

Focusing on the high rate of women's incorporation into ISIS as a manifestation of women's gender hierarchy (empowerment), this article therefore aims to explain the reasons behind high rate of women's incorporation into ISIS (empowerment) – both in numbers and roles – while

3 Barrett, Richard, Jack Berger, Lila Ghosh, Daniel Schoenfeld, Mohamed el Shawesh, Patrick M. Skinner, Susan Sim, and Ali Soufan. "Foreign fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq". The Soufan Group 4 (2015).

forwarding an explanation as to why such inclusion runs contrary to the incorporation trend of women in nationalist and leftist militant movements (disempowerment).

Methodology

The research was executed in qualitative form by using the phenomenological approach and through conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews (Creswell and Poth 2017). The questions were designed to develop a complete, accurate, clear and articulated description and understanding of the roles and positions of women in ISIS by using the respondent's own knowledge and/or feelings. The interview questions covered a range of open-ended questions depending on the respondents' backgrounds. The participants covered a wide range of individuals including ex-ISIS members, ISIS supporters, scholars, government and security officials, refugees, internally displaced people and journalists. The interview questions were used as the baseline of further discussions with the correspondents. Upon receiving ethical approval from relevant authorities, three rounds of field trips were made to conduct these interviews from July 2015 to January 2017. More than 150 interviews were conducted with the subjects in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the borders of then ISIS-controlled territories in Syria. In addition to in-person interviews, five interviews were also conducted over the phone with three Syrian and Iraqi Arab females and two Syrian and Iraqi Arab males (age between 26 to 39) who were still living in ISIS ruled territories in Syria and Iraq.

The interviews were conducted to examine how women's position in the ideology of ISIS was framed and the main reasons for the incorporation of women in the organization. The methods by which ISIS was incorporating women were also investigated in these interviews. Due to the nature of this research, accessibility to data was in itself a challenge. Direct access to jihadi organizations and their members was both legally and practically difficult. To overcome this challenge, I interviewed people with sufficient knowledge about ISIS by using proxy respondents for collecting the needed data for this research. These proxy respondents included ISIS defectors, ISIS supporters, refugees and eyewitnesses who have experienced living in territories run by jihadi organizations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

State Building and Change in Gender Hierarchies

The rise of ISIS has certainly changed the definition of jihadi organizations and their gender hierarchies. Initially the operative extension of Al-Qaeda in Iraq with *salafi* thoughts, ISIS stunned the world by declaring the establishment of its Caliphate in 2014 in an immense geographic area within Iraqi and Syrian terrains. Contrasting most other jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda with a vague idea about establishing and administrating a caliphate, ISIS had clearly set its objective to establish a new society, governed by a strict interpretation of sharia law in practice (Hoyle et. al 2015). Hence, a group such as ISIS should not be studied as a mere militant organization, but a group in control of a functioning caliphate. This approach of ISIS towards state building was resulted in migration and incorporation of thousands of women from around the world in its vision society (De Bont et. al 2017).

The state building project of ISIS shared similarities with the process of nation and state building in several other places in the world. Armed conflicts have been always an important phenomenon of studying state building. Just like external wars, internal conflicts -such as the Syrian civil war- can, under certain circumstances, promote state building (Rodriguez-Franco 2016). It is important to take note that there is no single pathway to state building. It is argued that several states were “built in unremitting blood and fire, others as fractious collections of elites, and others as stable but tacit deals between political forces.” (Staniland 2012). ISIS’s caliphate building process certainly falls into the violent path towards establishing a state.

Creating a state has been a central point of violent competition among different sectors of a society through the course of history (Mann 2012). This has been intensified in the aftermath of World War II where the most struggles in the world have been due to nation-building efforts (Conteh-Morgan 2004). Violence therefore has been a key component to the process of state building. In this case, militancy plays a vital role not only in “defending the nation-state, but also in arbitrating criteria for membership (citizenship) in the nation” (Nilsson, Ranchod and Tetreault 2000). This is evident in case of countries in which military (national) service is mandatory for its citizens including Singapore, Iran, Denmark or Turkey. In cases such as Israel, this mandatory military (national) service is compulsory for both men and women with no discrimination (Just 2016).

Charles Tilly’s statement of war makes state and states make war is certainly the most popular notion in the current literature for explaining the relationship between military conflicts (i.e. war) and the process of state building. His argument is based on three components of centralized

control over territory, development of the state apparatus, and process of civilianization (Tilly 2017). Based on this argument, state building would occur when “violent specialists and elites consolidate security and thereby provide the first and most important public good: the control over the use of force” (Duffield 2013).

Based on the above argument on the link between armed conflicts and the process of state building, and specific to this article, women’s active contribution to the process of state building through militant groups is evident (although less publicized) throughout the modern history (Rafik and Malik 2015). Women have been an important part of national revolutionary movements in conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Libya, Eritrea, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia (Omar 2004).

Together with that, there exists a link between gender hierarchies and violent conflicts (Maleevi 2010). Societies are often in need of a major catalyst—like war or conflict—to shake up the social and political orders (Webster, Chen and Beardsley 2019). For instance, with the beginning of the First Indochina War against the French, the communist oriented Vietnamese nationalists rebelled against the dominant Confucian values (favouring women’s domestic roles as good mothers and wives) by recruiting a huge number of women to mobilize more fighters against the enemy (Eager 2016). The emphasis on women’s participation in military affairs provided the Vietnamese national movement with a large number of women leaving their traditional domestic roles as mothers and wives and entering fighting force to pursue the state building cause. Between one third to half of Viet Cong troops were made up of women including regimental commanders (De Pauw 2014). During the Vietnam War, a female commander, Thi Dinh was the deputy commander of the entire Vietcong troops fighting against South Vietnamese. The Viet Cong troops were also consisted of few all-women platoons with duties including “reconnaissance, communications, commando operations and nursing”⁴.

Women in these platoons were trained on using different types of weapons, hand grenades, planting landmines, and even assassinating enemy’s key figures. It is reported that several female Viet Cong special commandos were effectively involved in one of the most famous operations against American forces in February 1969 in which 38 US army officers were killed in Cu Chi Airbase and all their Ch-47 Chinook helicopters were exploded by these commandos. The same pattern of women’s participation in military affairs is evident in several other anti-colonial liberation movements

⁴ Ibid.

including the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army. It is estimated that by 1979, nearly 7,500 of the 20,000 members of the Zimbabwe Liberation Army were female combatants and they were involved in several combat ranks including commanding female brigades and direct combat engagement with the enemies⁵ (Seidman 1984).

By gathering cross-national data from 1900 to 2015, Webster et al. established a link between armed conflict and gender power imbalances within society. They concluded that “warfare can disrupt social institutions and lead to an increase in women’s empowerment via mechanisms related to role shifts across society and political shifts catalysed by war” (Webster, Chen and Beardsley 2019). However, although warfare changes gender hierarchies and increases women’s empowerment, in all the above mentioned cases, it is evident that the nationalist or leftist movements have utilized women only during periods of mobilization and political struggle. Upon the periods of state consolidation, women were discarded and pushed out of the state institutions (Nilsson 2000). In other words, women were “disempowered” in the aftermath of establishing new states. In her study of national symbolism in constructing gender, Karima Omar has also identified the same trend of changes in gender hierarchies through women’s empowerment (during the struggle) and disempowerment (after the triumph of the struggle) in cases of the Vietnamese and Nicaraguan nationalist struggles (Omar 2004).

Ironically and against the above established trend, the following section of this article demonstrates that this trend is vice-versa in the case of ISIS. Women were largely absent (disempowered) at the midst of conflict and military clashes and were “empowered” and brought to the stage only after the triumph of ISIS in establishing its state.

Women, ISIS and the State Building Project

While women are integrated by few jihadi organizations such as Al-Qaeda and several other smaller groups in Pakistan, Palestine and Iraq, their number remains low compared to those of their male counterparts. Women are mostly integrated in these organizations as suicide bombers which is pre-eminently, a tactical tool than an expression of a long-term strategy. The female dress code in many Muslim societies provides a tactical advantage for jihadi organizations to conceal explosive and weapons they may need for their operations. Several female suicide bombers could pass security checkpoints

5 Kriger, Norma J. 2003. *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980–1987*. Vol. 105. Cambridge University Press.

and successfully conduct their operations due to this tactical advantage – especially as security forces in many Muslim countries are largely male dominant and thus unable to perform proper body search on women due to religious and cultural restrictions (Bloom 2012). However, due to strong religious and cultural negative sentiments against the use of women in violent operations, even this tactical advantage has not resulted in extensive use of women in combat roles.

The reason for women's lower integration into jihadi groups (disempowerment) is rooted in the principles of *mahram* and sexual purity. Based on these conservative principles of gender hierarchies, a Muslim woman should always be accompanied by a male *mahram* (either her husband or a relative in the prohibited degree of marriage) in public (Lahoud 2014). Due to the nature of war zones, women would unavoidably find themselves in the illicit company of non-*mahram* males, therefore, to avoid such seemingly sinful circumstances, jihadi groups initially barred women's involvement in jihadi activities. This is the main factor which makes jihadi organizations different from other non-jihadi militant organizations in incorporating women for militant activities.

Emphasizing women's sexual purity through the concept of *mahram*, shapes the ideological view of these organizations towards women and causes these groups to find themselves in a constant clash against "a world characterized by sexual disorder, one in which females are seen as encroaching on the male domain" (Helie-Lucus 1999). As a response, jihadi organizations stress the domestic roles of women in jihad, which included being virtuous wives to male jihadists and good mothers to the next generation of jihadists.

Contrary to the abovementioned classical approach of jihadi groups towards women's position in jihad ISIS practically incorporated a large number of women in its organizational structure upon establishing its state in Syria and Iraq. The success of ISIS in being the jihadi organization with the highest number of women should be viewed in two closely related levels; firstly, the success of the organization in solving the *mahram* obstacle, and secondly; transformation of ISIS from a mere militant jihadi establishment into a group in charge of administrating a functioning state.

Overcoming the Mahram Obstacle

By establishing 'gender-segregated parallel institution,' ISIS managed to minimize interactions between opposite sexes within its organization and therefore bypassed the *mahram* hurdle which was the main reason for women's

absence (disempowerment) during the group's militant struggle. This means a unit within virtually every existing ISIS institution was allocated to women only to address related women's affairs. These units were fully administrated by women, and their level of interaction with their male counterparts was minimized. This system comprised all ISIS state institutions, such as education, healthcare, administration, police, finance, and service provision. Unlike jihadi organizations, such as the Taliban and Al-Shabaab of Somalia with ultra-rigid orthodox ideological tenets, ISIS repeatedly showed interest in adopting pragmatic approaches learned from others.

Implementing gender-segregated parallel institutions, with the idea borrowed from the practices of Iran and Saudi Arabia was an example of such pragmatic approaches. ISIS might not have been the first entity to use gender segregation as a tool for social engineering⁶ however; it was the first jihadi organization to implement this policy effectively throughout its ruling territory (Baggini 2018). Through this mechanism and against the conventional trend of women's disempowerment in non-jihadi organizations, ISIS successfully "empowered" a group of ideologically dedicated women to be a part of its state apparatus.

Primary data collected through fieldwork in Iraq, the ISIS-controlled Syrian borders in southern regions of Turkey, and Lebanon reflect the effectiveness of ISIS in reconciling its ultra-conservative Islamic narrative of women, with the organization's incorporation of the same through establishing gender-segregated parallel institutions. ISIS defectors, and Iraqi and Syrian refugees interviewed for this research as well as conversations with Iraqi and Turkish security and military officials, confirmed the existence and functioning of these institutions across ISIS's territories.

Women of the ISIS State

In studying ISIS, it is important to note that unlike Al-Qaeda, the organization should not be treated as only a militant organization. ISIS has morphed into a state builder which made its structure and ultimately its view over women's incorporation different from other jihadi groups. ISIS claimed to have a stark vision for founding a state (caliphate), tracking the classical structure of the caliphates during the golden age of Islam (8th century to 13th century). ISIS envisaged a state as a unified, transnational government ruling over the entire Muslim community by imposing its strict interpretation of

⁶ "Social engineering is the attempt by legislators to change the operations of institutions or the behaviour of individuals in order to achieve a politically determined goal" (Baggini 2006).

sharia law (Sekulow 2015).

Within its controlling territory, ISIS implemented a detailed hierarchical structure of governance by using gender segregated parallel institutions, which encompassed of several councils including military, healthcare, education, defence, intelligence, and judiciary. ISIS's incorporation of women was operationalized through this framework. Some of the main roles assigned to women by ISIS through its gender-segregated parallel institutions were as follow:

Military Forces

There are confirmed reports that ISIS had established a battalion consisted of female suicide bombers in Syria by mid-2015 (RBSS 2015). Maha, a 25-year-old former resident of Raqqa who fled to the Turkish city of Gaziantep in early 2016 explained;

I was approached by an unknown woman in a female gathering in Raqqa and was asked if I would like to sacrifice my life in the path of Allah. I was told by the woman that I can join a group of martyrdom seeking women who would like to defend the caliphate against the crusaders and the infidels. The woman told me that I will be trained to fire rifles and even how to use explosive jackets⁷.

In July 7, 2016, ISIS officially claimed its first suicide attack conducted by one of its female members. Three ISIS members (including a women) conducted a series of suicide attacks against Sayyid Mohammed mosque (a Shi'a holy shrine) in the city of Balad, 80 kilometres north of Baghdad, Iraq. The attacks killed 35 civilians and left 60 others seriously injured. In an official announcement by ISIS which was published in its news agency Al Amaq, the group accepted the responsibility for the attacks and identified the female suicide bomber as Um Ja'ada (Hunter 2016).

It was also confirmed that ISIS was increasingly using its female members for fighting enemies in Libya, Kenya and European countries. In February 2016, seven ISIS female operatives were arrested by the Libyan officials in the western city of Sabratha in the Zawiya District of Libya. In the same attack, three more of ISIS female fighters were killed. Some of these women were fighting alongside their male jihadist counterparts in the battle field (Russia Today 2016).

⁷ Maha. In Discussion with the Author. May 24, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.

Police Force

Soon after declaring its caliphate in 2014, ISIS affirmed the establishment of *hisbah* (sharia police force)⁸ a female-only police squad that was supervising ISIS territory for proper implementation of the organization's strict interpretation of sharia law for women especially their dress code (Gardner 2015). It is difficult to estimate the exact number of women in this force due to the secretive structure of it and also limitations in accessing their members. However, General Mahdi Younis of Iraqi Peshmerga forces in northern Iraq told the author in an interview that about a thousand women were recruited by ISIS sharia police force throughout its territories (Yunis 2016).

The ISIS defectors and the Syrian and Iraqi refugees I interviewed during my field work in Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon explained that *hisbah* forces were functioning in all major towns throughout ISIS territories in Syria and Iraq. The interviewees told the author that they have witnessed women armed with AK-47s, covered in black robes patrolling the streets of Raqqa, Mosul, Fallujah, Manbij, Tell Abyed, Tell Afar and Jarablus either in cars or on feet. ISIS female police force was operating under the Security Council of ISIS which was in command of the internal policing.

Mohammad a 58-year-old Syrian refugee who was living in the southern city of Gaziantep in Turkey shared his personal encounter with ISIS *hisbah* in the Syrian city of Tell Abyed,

I was walking with my wife on the street for shopping groceries. Along the way, we have come across a group of 10 to 15 people who were gathered around a couple. We heard that a female *hisbah* force who was carrying a gun was speaking loud to the couple. She was shouting that the woman has not observed the dress code and that she has to come with her to the police station. The woman's husband was begging the woman to let her wife go. The ISIS woman had a clear North African accent of Arabic. As the population around the couple was mounting, a group of ISIS male police force showed up in a car to help their female colleagues. I told my wife to hurry up and stay away from the crowd. I do not know what happened to the couple⁹.

Mahmoud a 46-years-old ex-ISIS member and former resident of

8 Esposito, John, and Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina. 2004. *The Islamic World*. Vol. 3. Oxford University Press,

9 Mohammad. In Discussion with the Author. May 23, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.

Raqqa and currently a refugee in Gaziantep in south of Turkey also noted that,

Female *hisbah* members have a separate facility for their own in the city. This is to prevent them from mixing with us [their male jihadi counterparts]. *Hisbah* members take the women who have broken the sharia law to this facility in Raqqa. Women who wear tight *abaya* [long black dress], not being accompanied by a male family member in public, smoke cigarettes, drink and eat publicly during the fasting month, commit adultery, commit acts of homosexual nature or wearing bright nail polish will be arrested by the force and will be taken to its facilities¹⁰.

For ISIS to expand its ideological control over all its society members, the group incorporated a large number of women as police force through its mechanism of gender-segregated parallel institutions. This granted ISIS to increase its degree of control over its entire population.

Teachers and Educators

Education system and its affiliated institutes including schools and universities were crucial to ISIS as they were the perfect means for shaping the hearts and minds of the next generation of devoted jihadists (Benotman and Malik 2016). Hence, ISIS set its educational goal to “decrease ignorance, spread religious sciences, resist corrupt sciences and curricula and replace them with righteous Islamic curricula”¹¹.

Despite reports on the closure of girls’ schools in ISIS territories, a number of them were still operational under strict restrictions put upon them by ISIS *Diwan al-Ta’aleem* (council of education). Schools were entirely gender segregated and only female teachers were allowed to work in girls’ schools. It was compulsory for both female teachers and students to observe the dress code of black robe and full-face veil.

In city of Sanliurfa in southern Turkey, I also met Ayisha (30-year-old), a former teacher and a mother of two children who fled Deir ez-Zor in Syria in 2015. She explained to me that,

After the gender segregating of schools, only female teachers, principal and, cleaners were administrating the elementary school I was working

¹⁰ Mahmoud. In Discussion with the Author. June 18, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.

¹¹ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education Under Attack 2018 – Iraq*, (2018) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5be9430d4.html> (Accessed; 14 September 2018)

in. A thick curtain was set up behind the main gate of the school and only women could enter the school. I have personally seen a number of ISIS female police forces checking the school regularly to assure the school pupils' and staff's adherence to sharia laws especially in terms of dressing. This made many citizens of the city to refuse sending their kids to schools¹².

While conducting fieldwork in Erbil in northern Iraq, I had also the opportunity of meeting Sharifah (originally from Mosul) whom her relatives and friends were still living in Mosul under the ISIS rule. Through Sharifah, I was connected by phone to one of her friends, Jamilah (32-year-old), in then ISIS-controlled city of Mosul. Jamilah explained her experience of dealing with ISIS education system,

At the early stages of ISIS taking control of Mosul, many female teachers who were working at schools left their jobs as they were not satisfied with the Islamic State's ideological approach towards education. However, the caliphate forcefully called all female teachers to return to their schools under the new rules and regulations. Female teachers receive some minimal salaries directly from ISIS and they are threatened that upon leaving their jobs, their properties will be confiscated¹³.

Apart from the elementary and secondary schools, ISIS established its first female finishing school, Al-Zawra for adult women. According to the mission statement of the school, it was providing training for women "interested in explosive belt and suicide bombing more than a white dress or a castle or clothing or furniture" (Haaretz 2014). The institute provided a wide range of courses including "domestic work such as sewing and cooking, medical first aid, Islam and Sharia law, weaponry, training in social media and computer programs for editing and design" (Spencer 2016). Knowing the importance of women as the mothers of future jihadists, ISIS established a functioning system of ideological education for its female population based on gender segregation.

Doctors and Nurses

As ISIS has morphed beyond a plain militant organization towards founding its caliphate, providing public goods for its inhabitants while

¹² Ayisha. In Discussion with the Author. May 25, 2016. Sanliurfa, Turkey.

¹³ Jamilah. Phone Interview with the Author. July 11, 2016. Mosul, Iraq.

observing its strict interpretation of sharia law has become more important. The healthcare sector was one of those vital services which ISIS paid exceptional attention to. In early 2015, ISIS announced its Islamic State Healthcare System (ISHS) which was replicated from the UK National Healthcare System (NHS). In a YouTube video published by ISIS, an Indian doctor named Abu Muqatil al-Hindi, explains that “there are doctors from Russia, Tunisia, Sri Lanka and Australia, and that women are treated by female physicians” (Ho 2015). The same pattern of gender segregation in other ISIS institutions was applied on the organization’s healthcare system (ISHS) as well. Female patients were only permitted to be visited and treated by female doctors and nursed in ‘Women Only’ sections of hospitals within ISIS territory.

During my visit to Debaga refugee camp close to the city of Makhmur in Iraq, I met Kolthum, a 42-year-old female general physician who has fled the ISIS controlled city of Mosul with her husband and four children. She told me,

A section within Mosul general hospital is allocated to female patients to visit female doctors and nurses. ISIS threatened us [those female doctors who refused to return to their works in the hospital] with confiscation of our properties. The range of services offered by us [female doctors and nurses] was also more limited than those offered to men as the number of us [female doctors and nurses] were fewer than those of men¹⁴.

Adilah a 30-year-old female nurse from Raqqa whom I met in Istanbul in April 2016, also emphasized,

Despite female doctors being able to continue working in Raqqa general hospital, ISIS officials were very strict about implementing sharia law at medical centres. While I was a nurse at hospital, I was really afraid of even touching 5-6-year-old sick boys for medical check-up as I was not allowed to treat men¹⁵.

As an organization in charge of governing a society, ISIS quickly realized the importance of providing services for the entire population they rule. This included women as half of the populace as well. By segregating health centres, ISIS managed to provide the basic health services for women without jeopardizing its strict *salafi* ideological commitments.

14 Kolthum. In Discussion with the Author. July 13, 2016. Debaga Camp, Makhmur, Iraq.

15 Adilah. In Discussion with the Author. May 21, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.

Housing and Sheltering Officers

ISIS was offering free accommodation, utilities, and services for its members. In terms of their female recruits, there were women in charge of these arrangements. According to Sana a 39-year-old Syrian ex-ISIS female member whom I met in the Turkish city of Kilis;

Women who arrive in Syria or Iraq from abroad were being sent to ISIS owned houses called *maqars*. It is important to note that *maqars* were only for single women. Married women with their families would have been accommodated in proper houses by ISIS housing and sheltering officers. In this case since the male member of the family was in charge, they were attended by ISIS male housing and sheltering officers¹⁶.

A 46-year-old female former resident of Mosul who wanted her identity to be protected as she was serving ISIS for a short period of time in 2015 and currently lives in Debaga refugee camp in northern Iraq explained;

The female housing and sheltering officers were also acting as translators to the newly arrived foreign females and help them overcome the language barrier at their initial weeks in ISIS territories. As translators, they were helping women familiarize themselves with the neighbourhood and assisting them understand caliphate's official documents and announcements¹⁷.

These female officers were also in charge of controlling the mobility of women during their stay in *maqars*. Based on ISIS strict regulations, women's mobility in towns was limited and the officers were those ensuring these regulations to be observed by the newcomers. Contacts with local Syrian or Iraqi residents of the cities should have been arranged by the officers and it was very minimal at this stage. However, after leaving *maqars*, these women had more freedom to interact with locals in the cities they were assigned to live in. Several female housing and sheltering officers were also closely cooperating with ISIS authorities as matchmakers. Naqibah, a 34-year-old ex-ISIS female member from Raqqa noted that female housing and shelter officers were very much involved in introducing single women to male jihadists and vice-versa. They were introducing the women to male jihadi candidates under the

¹⁶ Sana. In Discussion with the Author. May 20, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.

¹⁷ Identity Protected. In Discussion with the Author July 13, 2016. Debaga Camp, Makhmur, Iraq.

surveillance of the ISIS Marriage Affairs Department¹⁸.

The job description of female ISIS housing and sheltering officers was going beyond mere accommodating the newcomer women in their new houses. They have been used as agents of social engineering by ISIS to allocate the newcomer women in their new social positions within the ISIS-run society.

Tax Collectors

Generating income was key to survival for groups such as ISIS. At its peak in 2014 and early 2015, ISIS was crowned as the richest terrorist group with the annual net income of 2 billion US dollars (Levitt 2014). The Syrian and Iraqi oil fields were the main sources of income for the group in those years generating millions of dollars per month. Losing its territories and therefore some of its most important oil fields, the group started to diversify its sources of revenue to counter its financial crisis. Taxation has been one of the important sources of income for ISIS since its establishment in 2014 however, upon losing its oil and gas revenues, the group intensified the use of tax money to overcome the crisis. By the end of 2016, taxation was making up to 50 percent of ISIS total revenue (Speckhard and Yayla 2016).

While news and reports coming out of ISIS territories were clearly verifying the existence of the tax authority, no mentioning of women's duty in the authority has been reported so far. However, upon the process of data collection along Syrian borders in southern Turkey, I have come across a couple of Syrian refugees who admitted the existence of a small group of female tax collectors within ISIS authority. Rashid, a 29-year-old who was a shopkeeper in Raqqa and now living in Kilis in south Turkey indicated that;

As the result of the international pressure on ISIS and as the aftermath of losing its oil revenue, jihadists have intensified their efforts in generating tax revenues. This would make women of no exception. Upon visiting the ISIS tax authority in Raqqa to pay my business tax, I noticed a room with closed door which was assigned by the group for women to pay their taxes. The process of tax collection was run by ISIS female tax collectors¹⁹.

Although ISIS was crowned as the richest terrorist organization of its time however; near the end of its caliphate, the organization was facing sever

¹⁸ Naqibah. In Discussion with the Author. May 22, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.

¹⁹ Rashid. In Discussion with the Author. May 21, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.

financial crisis. For this reason, and through its gender-segregated parallel institution, the organization started to exploit all the financial resources possible including those of women. For this reason, female tax collectors were recruited to maximize the organization's access to the scarce financial resources.

Hijrah

Women also contributed positively to the legitimacy of ISIS by making *hijrah* (migration) to its territory. Establishing a global caliphate for all Muslims (men and women) around the world regardless of their race, nationality and colour is on its own a form of what is called *Da'wa* (global invitation for all Muslims) in Islamic jurisprudence. This invitation encouraged Muslim men and women around the world to make *hijrah* (migration) to the "true" land of Islam and to form the "real" Islamic ummah (global community). Within this framework, thousands of women from all around the world migrated to the ISIS controlled territories in Syria and Iraq. In absence of conventional tools of providing legitimacy such as suffrage, women's participation in *Hijrah* in general was playing a vital role in providing ISIS with the legitimacy it needed to rule and run its caliphate.

ISIS claimed that by making *hijrah* to its newly established Islamic state, women who were socially and culturally alienated for their strong Islamist views and practices in western or secular Muslim countries could have found a conducive environment in which they could become active members of society (through gender-segregated parallel institutions) while adhering to their radical interpretation of religion. Noor, a 31-year-old former resident of Raqqa who was an English instructor and currently lives with her family in Gaziantep, southern Turkey shares her story of encountering a migrant female ISIS member in Raqqa in late 2014,

A French woman who was married to a Moroccan ISIS jihadist moved to our neighborhood. In one of the rare encounters I had with her, I asked her how come she left a country like France to come and live here? She replied with broken English that as a *Muslimah* [Muslim woman], she feels freer and more respected here. She is free to wear her *niqab* [face veil] with no shame and fear of being harassed by *kuffar* [infidels] like in France²⁰.

For these women, Islamic states founded by jihadi groups provide an

20 Noor. In Discussion with the Author. May 27, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.

escape from a society where to be equal citizens; one should abandon her religious duties (Perein 2015). The society established by ISIS claimed to provide the opportunity for these women to escape from a society in which to be an equal citizen required abandoning the duties of one's religion.

Final Remarks

ISIS might not be the first jihadi organization to try establishing its full-fledged state, however; it was the most effective and practical in terms of amount of territory and size of population controlled. Despite its brutal approach towards women of both religious and racial minorities, ISIS has challenged the conventional gender hierarchies among jihadi organizations by provided a platform to incorporate a large number of women in various social roles from all around the world. Such mobilization of women was unique in the history of jihadi organizations. The reason for ISIS's success in empowering a substantial number of like-minded women (through incorporating them in various social roles) against the restrictive interpretations of the Islamic jurisprudence, was rooted in the organization's structure. Unlike groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS had a clear vision of governing a society based upon the principles of sharia law in practice.

As a result, ISIS was morphed from a mere militant organization like other jihadi groups to a state builder. Along this metamorphosis, ISIS's objectives and therefore organizational structure was transformed as well. While other jihadi organizations seek to dismiss western troops from "Muslim" lands, and to topple down western supported local governments with vague plans for the morning after, ISIS had set its objective to revitalize its own interpretation of the Islamic tradition of caliphate. For that reason, ISIS's strategy for empowering women through incorporating them in large amounts was geared towards addressing the challenges facing a functioning state. These challenges included providing public good and services, maintaining order and security, and obtaining legitimacy.

To address these challenges, women were incorporated through gender-segregated parallel institutions in a variety of social roles which some of them were discussed in this article. By using these institutions, ISIS has successfully managed to solve the *mahram* issue unlike other jihadi organizations. The *mahram* concept burdens all jihadi organizations for incorporating more women in their ranks. It is almost impossible for jihadi organizations to ensure their female members are accompanied by a male *mahram* in all occasions especially during militant operations. For that reason,

most jihadi groups are reluctant about the widespread use of women. This counts for the lower number of women in these groups in compare to the nationalist and secular militant groups throughout their course of struggle against enemies.

However, upon triumph and establishing the state, while nationalist or secular movements dismiss or marginalize their female members, a jihadi group like ISIS challenged the conventional gender hierarchies of jihadi organizations and intensified its utilization of women to address the challenges of administrating a state. This was due to the ability of ISIS in providing a conducive environment for women's integration by solving the *mahram* burden through gender-segregated parallel institutions. By this mechanism, ISIS claimed to provide the platform needed for "repressed" Muslim women around the world to be "empowered" and to play a more active role in the creation of a new generation of believers, and a state in which practicing their extremist ideological commitments are recognized and protected unlike their countries of origin where they migrated to the ISIS territories from. Gender segregation provided the ideological justification for many faithful women to ISIS' ideology to participate more actively in social affairs against the established gender hierarchies among other jihadi organizations.

REFERENCES

- Adilah. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 21, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.
- Ayisha. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 25, 2016. Sanliurfa, Turkey.
- Baggini, Julian. 2006. "Briefing: Does Social Engineering Work?". *The Guardian*. Accessed August 17, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2006/aug/29/smoking.comment>.
- Barrett, Richard, Jack Berger, Lila Ghosh, Daniel Schoenfeld, Mohamed el Shawesh, Patrick M. Skinner, Susan Sim, and Ali Soufan. 2015. "Foreign fighters: An updated assessment of the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq". *The Soufan Group* 4.
- Benotman, Noman, and Nikita Malik. 2016. "The Children of Islamic State". *The Quilliam Foundation* (2016): 1-100.
- Bloom, Mia. 2012 *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Conteh-Morgan, Earl. 2004. *Collective political violence: An introduction to the theories and cases of violent conflicts*. Psychology Press.
- Cook, David. 2005. "Women fighting in Jihad?". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*

28, (5): 375-384.

Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. 2017. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

De Bont, Roel, Daan Weggemans, Ruud Peters, and Edwin Bakker. 2017. "Life at ISIS: The Roles of Western Men, Women and Children". *Security and Global Affairs* (2017): 3-17.

De Pauw, Linda Grant. 2014. *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present*. University of Oklahoma Press.

Diekman, Amanda B., Wind Goodfriend, and Stephanie Goodwin. "Dynamic stereotypes of power: Perceived change and stability in gender hierarchies". *Sex Roles* 50, no. 3-4 (2004): 201-215.

Duffield, Andrew Scott. 2013. "When Do Rebels Become State-builders? A Comparative Case Study of Somaliland, Puntland, and South-Central Somalia". *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 13 (2013): 10.

Eager, Paige Whaley. 2016. *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence*. Routledge.

Elder, Sarah, and Gianni Rosas. 2015. "Global employment trends for youth 2015: Scaling up investments in decent jobs for youth". *International Labour Organization* (2015).

Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. 2017. "Great divides: The cultural, cognitive, and social bases of the global subordination of women". *American Sociological Review* 72, no. (1): 1-22.

Esposito, John , and Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina. 2004. *The Islamic World*. Vol. 3. Oxford University Press.

Gardner, Frank. 2015. "The Crucial Role of Women within Islamic State". *BBC*. Accessed December 20, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33985441>.

Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. 2018. *Education Under Attack 2018 – Iraq*. Accessed 14 September 2018. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5be9430d4.html>.

Haaretz. 2014. "Cooking and Killing: Islamic State Opens Finishing School for Girls". *Haarestz*. Accessed September 12, 2018. <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.621380>.

Helie-Lucus, Marieme. 1999. "Women, Nationalism, and Religion in the Algerian Liberation Struggle". In *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue*, Edited by: Gibson, Nigel. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

Ho, Carolyn. 2015. "The Islamic State (Daesh) healthcare paradox: A caliphate

- in crisis". *The Journal of Global Health*.
- Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. 2015. *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue.
- Hunter, Isabel. 2016. "At Least 37 People Are Killed as Three ISIS Jihadis Including a Female Suicide Bomber Launch Co-Ordinated Attacks on a Shia Muslim Shrine North of Baghdad". *Dailymail*. Accessed November 22, 2018. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3680041/At-20-people-dead-car-bomb-tears-mausoleum-north-Baghdad.html>.
- Identity Protected. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author* July 13, 2016. Debag Camp, Makhmur, Iraq.
- International Labour Organization. 2018. "Global Employment Trends 2017: Risk of a jobless recovery?". *International Labour Organization*. Accessed January 18, 2019. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_233953.pdf.
- Jamal, Bahija. 2018. "Moroccan Counter-terrorism Policy: Case of Moroccan Female Migrants to ISIS". *International Annals of Criminology* 56,(1-2): 145-156.
- Jamilah. 2016. *Phone Interview with the Author*. July 11, 2016. Mosul, Iraq.
- Just, Renee. 2016. "GI Jane: A Comparison of the Legal Framework for Women's Military Service in Israel and the United States". *Creighton Int'l & Comp. LJ* 8 165.
- Kolthum. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. July 13, 2016. Debag Camp, Makhmur, Iraq.
- Kruger, Norma J. 2003. *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987*. Vol. 105. Cambridge University Press.
- Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, (5): 780-802.
- Levitt, Matthew. 2014. "Terrorist financing and the Islamic state". *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington (2014).
- Maha. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 24, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.
- Mahmoud. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. June 18, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.
- Maleevi, Sinia. 2010. *The Sociology of War and Violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, Michael. 2012. *The sources of social power: Volume 2, the rise of classes and nation-states, 1760-1914*. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press.

- Mohammad. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 23, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.
- Naqibah. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 22, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.
- Nilsson, Sita Ranchod, and Mary Ann Tetreault. 2000. "Women, States and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation" (2000).
- Noor. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 27, 2016. Gaziantep, Turkey.
- Omar, Karima. 2004. "National Symbolism in Constructions of Gender: Transformed Symbols in Post-Conflict States". *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 5 (2004).
- Peresin, Anita, and Alberto Cervone. 2015. "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, (7): 495-509.
- Perein, Anita. 2015. "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS". *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3.
- Rafik, Haras and Nikita Malik. 2015. "Caliphates: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State". *Quilliam Foundation* (2015).
- Rashid. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 21, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.
- Reynolds, Sean C., and Mohammed M. Hafez. 2019. "Social network analysis of German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, (4): 661-686.
- Rodriguez-Franco, Diana. 2016. "Internal wars, taxation, and state building". *American Sociological Review* 81, (1): 190-213.
- Russia Today. 2016. "ISIS Using Women in Combat Roles, 3 Dead and 7 Arrested – Libyan Military Leader". *RT News*. Accessed November 23, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/333991-isis-women-arrested-combat>.
- Sana. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. May 20, 2016. Kilis, Turkey.
- Seidman, Gay W. 1984. "Women in Zimbabwe: Post-independence Struggles". *Feminist Studies* 10, (3): 419-440.
- Sekulow, Jay. 2015. *Rise of ISIS: A threat we can't ignore*. Simon and Schuster.
- Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry, eds. 2011. *Women, gender, and terrorism*. University of Georgia Press.
- Speckhard, Anne, and Ahmet S. Yayla. 2016. "ISIS Revenues include Sales of Oil to the Al-Assad Regime". *ICSVE Brief Reports* (2016).
- Spencer, Amanda N. 2016. "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State". *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, (3): 74-98.
- Staniland, Paul. 2012. "States, insurgents, and wartime political orders". *Perspectives on politics* 10, (2): 243-264.

- Tilly, Charles. 2017. War Making and State Making as Organized Crime. In *Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change*. Routledge.
- United Nations. 2006. *Women and Elections: Guide to Promoting the Participation of Women in Elections*. United Nations Department of Publications.
- Webster, Kaitlyn, Chong Chen, and Kyle Beardsley. 2019. "Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment". *International Organization* 73, (2): 255-289.
- Webster, Kaitlyn, Chong Chen, and Kyle Beardsley. 2019) "Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment". *International Organization* 73, no. (2): 267.
- Yunis, Mahdi. 2016. In *Discussion with the Author*. July 12, 2016. Makhmur, Iraq.

ABSTRACT

Since the establishment of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), there was a wave of surge in women's incorporation into the organization. Traditionally, nationalist and leftist militant movements were utilizing women only during periods of mobilization and political struggle. Upon the periods of state consolidation, women were discarded and pushed out of the state institutions. Ironically and against the above established trend, this article demonstrates that this trend was vice-versa in the case of ISIS. By using the 'mahram' concept, the article also explains the reason why women were largely absent at the midst of ISIS's conflict and military clashes and were brought to the stage only after the triumph of the organization in establishing its state. The findings of this research are based on secondary sources and primary data personally collected from more than 150 interviews through multiple field trips to Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the borders of ISIS-controlled territories in Syria from July 2015 to January 2017.

KEYWORDS

Women; ISIS; Mahram; Empowerment; Gender Hierarchies; State Building.

Received on February 28, 2020

Approved on October 31, 2020