

# Women in Islamic State propaganda

Roles and incentives



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## 1. Key findings

- Women feature noticeably more in Islamic State (IS) propaganda than they had in the material of earlier jihadi organisations, both as a target audience and as authors in their own right.
- The nature and extent of their roles within the organisation — spanning media, moral policing and the health and education sectors — have also broadened. This is partly because IS's ambition to establish a functional state would be unachievable without a significant contribution by women.
- However, despite these transformations, the preferred nature of women's *jihad* remains that of the traditional stay-at-home mother and wife whose duty it is to motivate her husband and instil in her children the love of *jihad* and martyrdom.
- Since the English-language magazines *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq* have ceased to be published, the Arabic-language magazine *al-Naba'* has become the main source of information on developments in the organisation's political and ideological discourse.
- The incentives put across by IS to recruit women are in many ways gender neutral, and its propaganda speaks to the emotions of both men and women.
- Female jihadis — just like their male counterparts — are motivated by the opportunity to join a cause, and their sense of empowerment lies in contributing to the building of an Islamic state.
- IS propaganda is forthright in stressing the hazards and hardships of life in the caliphate. It equates the willingness to take on these hardships with the strength of a woman's faith.
- While IS's rhetoric is embedded in a highly patriarchal framework which sets strict limitations on women's role in society and at home, the group's narrative hints at possibilities for female empowerment (e.g. by underlining educational opportunities that IS makes available to women).
- IS propaganda in all languages — but more noticeably in *al-Naba'* — is replete with disparaging and condescending descriptions of women.
- Women who subscribe to IS ideology view these descriptions through a different cultural lens and perceive their roles — as delineated in IS propaganda — as non-negotiable given that they emanate from a divinely authoritative source that allows no room for interpretation.
- Publications in both Arabic and English endorse a highly conservative and patriarchal social order. The difference lies in that the English publications explicitly give a voice and a name to the female authors and devote lengthy articles

to discussing issues that specifically relate to women. In contrast, the articles in *al-Naba'* addressing women's issues remain brief and their authors unidentified.

- IS did not set a new precedent in urging women to take up arms. Neither did it depart from the position that previous scholars had taken concerning women's role in combat: essentially, that while women are exempted from offensive *jihad*, they are obligated to take part in defensive warfare as and when needed. IS's originality lies in allowing women to travel to the lands of the caliphate without the need for a male escort.
- IS revived the model of the early *mujahidat*<sup>(1)</sup>, the women who physically fought alongside the prophet. These *mujahidat* are used as icons for today's women to emulate. They are particularly important because IS uses them to frame the nature and limits of the present-day role of women while ensuring that the organisation's discourse remains rooted in a robust Salafi framework.
- The ideological basis for women to play a role in combatant *jihad* has been extensively argued and defended. The phenomenon of female combatants — along with the accompanying propaganda — will continue to evolve and shift according to the organisation's strategic needs.

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<sup>(1)</sup> *Mujahidat* is the feminine plural form of *mujahid*; the feminine singular form is *mujahida*.

## 2. Introduction

IS is not the first jihadi movement to attract female followers. Many of its predecessors — including al-Qaeda — also had their share of female supporters. Yet the meteoric rise of IS appears to have brought about a leap in the nature and extent of women's roles within jihadi groups. Alternatively, one could suggest that the increased assimilation of women into the organisation in itself contributed to IS's swift ascent.

What is certain is that women have become indispensable to IS, both in conflict areas and in the West (including in the European Union). They play their role in the organisation's state-building enterprise, produce and disseminate propaganda and have seemingly been granted more proactive roles on the 'battlefield'. The worry is that this increase in the involvement of women could pave the way for potentially major changes in the role of jihadi women in the future.

The report aims to shed light on how IS — a group that espouses a patriarchal authority par excellence — could appeal to women. In so doing, the research will explore the doctrinal dialectics put forward by IS regarding women and the role(s) they are expected to play in *jihad*. It will also focus on how the organisation uses Islamic jurisprudence to mould the role of women within *jihad*.

### 3. Methodology

The research attempts to provide a response to these questions by analysing chief IS publications, namely the Arabic-language weekly magazine *al-Naba'*, which is published by the organisation's Central Media Diwan, and the English-language *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* <sup>(2)</sup>, both of which were published on a monthly basis by the al-Hayat Media Center. The 145 issues of *al-Naba'*, 15 issues of *Dabiq* and 13 issues of *Rumiyah* cover the period from June 2014 to the end of August 2018. The report will also look into one further key source that delineates the role of women under IS territories: the al-Khansa' Media Brigade's manifesto titled *Women in the Islamic State: message and report* <sup>(3)</sup>.

The first phase of the research consisted in a systematic search in the abovementioned publications for the keywords 'woman', 'sister', '*muhajira*' <sup>(4)</sup> and '*mujahida*' in their singular and plural forms and in both Arabic and English in order to identify articles specifically targeting or discussing women.

It is beyond the remit of this study to understand the psychological and sociological factors that motivate women to join IS or subscribe to its ideology. Given that our study has focused almost exclusively on official IS propaganda, previous studies that explored the role of social media in women's violent radicalisation have been used to help build a broader picture of the phenomenon, specifically in order to ascertain whether the motives of these women in joining IS match the incentives put across by the organisation.

NB: The report was written for internal distribution in October 2018. The propaganda analysed covers the period from June 2014 to August 2018.

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<sup>(2)</sup> *Dabiq* ceased as of its 15th issue on 31 July 2016 and *Rumiyah* as of its 13th issue on 9 September 2017.

<sup>(3)</sup> *Women in the Islamic State: message and report*, Al-Khansa' Media Brigade, 16 February 2016.

<sup>(4)</sup> A *muhajira* is a woman who has undertaken *hijra*. For more information, consult Section 4.2 'Hijra: a religious obligation'.

## 4. Islamic State narratives and incentives

### 4.1. The caliphate: a shield and safe haven for Sunni Muslims

IS focuses on the plight of Muslims (especially women and children) in war zones, the discrimination they face in the West and the general oppression of the '*umma*' — a concept that encompasses the Muslim community worldwide, eliminating cultural, ethnic or national identities and adopting instead an identity based exclusively on religion. The jihadi narrative claims that the *umma* is under attack and portrays the various contemporary conflicts as part of a broader historical attack against Islam. These emotionally charged narratives create and help entrench an 'us versus them' outlook.

The humiliation and abuse of Sunni women in particular, including Sunni women detainees in 'apostate' prisons, is a recurrent theme in IS discourse. About a third of *al-Naba'* issues, as well as half of the *Dabiq* issues, <sup>(5)</sup> include some allusion to IS as the protector of Sunni Muslim women. IS propaganda cites the detainment, humiliation and rape of Sunni women at the hands of the Shia, Western 'crusaders' (namely the US <sup>(6)</sup>), or national armed forces <sup>(7)</sup> as a motive for IS attacks which are framed as just retribution. The theme constitutes one of the most important rallying cries for IS, just as it had done at the turn of the century in Iraq when the issue of women — particularly those detained in Iraqi and US-administered prisons — took centre stage. Speeches by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) <sup>(8)</sup> leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi focused heavily on the violations allegedly perpetrated by US and Iraqi government forces — mainly Shia — against Sunni Iraqi women <sup>(9)</sup>.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Dabiq* Issues 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 12.

<sup>(6)</sup> See, for example, 'Indeed your Lord is ever watchful', *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 12 October 2014; and 'I will outnumber the other nations through you', *al-Naba'*, Issue 52, 27 October 2016.

<sup>(7)</sup> See, for example, 'Targeting the security director for North Sinai after their arrest of women', *al-Naba'*, Issue 11, 29 December 2015; and 'The soldiers of the caliphate free 40 Sunni women from the hands of the rejectionists', *al-Naba'*, Issue 23, 22 March 2016.

<sup>(8)</sup> AQI was established in October 2004 when its leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden. Prior to that, the organisation — established in 1999 — had been known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Congregation of Monotheism and Jihad). It changed its name several times before labelling itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006.

<sup>(9)</sup> See, for example, Abu Hanieh, H. and Abu Rumman, M., *Infatuated with martyrdom: female jihadism from al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, 2017.

Numerous IS propaganda items stress the importance of liberating the faithful women imprisoned by ‘infidel governments’<sup>(10)</sup> and extol the men who wage *jihād* for the purpose of liberating these women. A case in point is the praise afforded to Abu Mansur al-Muhajir, an Australian of Lebanese descent who joined IS because of his ‘tremendous jealousy for his sisters’<sup>(11)</sup>. In contrast, IS disparagingly describes those who do not defend their Muslim sisters and do not take part in *jihād* as ‘effeminate “males”’<sup>(12)</sup>. Perhaps the clearest example of IS’ attempt to show dedication to its female constituents is its demand to exchange Sajida al-Rishawi — a would-be suicide bomber detained by Jordan — for the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh who was held captive by IS after his fighter plane crashed near Raqqa.

In exploiting the defence of women as a rallying call to motivate Sunni men into joining the organisation<sup>(13)</sup>, IS essentially drawing on honour-based appeals in a conservative society where such appeals can easily trigger religious fervour. In parallel, IS also draws heavily on a shared sense of guilt to defend the honour of the *umma*. These narratives resonate strongly in Muslim societies where a sense of victimisation and/or loss of identity is prevalent. In contrast, IS markets itself as the solution to this state of predicament by promising a return to Islam’s victorious past.

The promotion of a community in the caliphate is another major focus of IS propaganda. IS focuses on the idea of ‘strangers in their land’ versus community in the caliphate. It builds a picture of a multinational society, where Muslim men and women can belong and where Islam acts as the glue that bonds the community together.

## 4.2. Hijra: a religious obligation

IS’s ambition to establish a functional state would not be achievable without female contribution. Convincing women to travel to IS territories — in other words, to undertake *hijra* — was therefore of paramount importance.

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<sup>(10)</sup> See, for example, ‘The soldiers of the caliphate free 40 Sunni women from the hands of the rejectionists’, op. cit.; and ‘The soldiers of the caliphate free 150 of the people of the Sunna’, *al-Naba*, Issue 26, 12 April 2016.

<sup>(11)</sup> ‘Among the believers are men: Abu Mansur al-Muhajir’, *Rumiyah*, Issue 1, 5 September 2016.

<sup>(12)</sup> ‘The religion of Islam’, *Rumiyah*, Issue 2, 4 October 2016.

<sup>(13)</sup> See, for example, ‘Abu Hudhayfa al-Maghribi’, *al-Naba*, Issue 10, 19 December 2015; and ‘Indeed your Lord is ever watchful’, op. cit.



Understanding how IS messaging succeeds in inspiring Muslims to emigrate requires us to explore the concept of *hijra* — a potent and emotive term that resonates in Muslims' religious imagination.

In Islamic tradition, *hijra* refers to the Prophet's migration in the year 622 from Mecca, where Muslims were facing persecution, to Medina. As a consequence, *hijra* has come to signify a sacred migration from *dar al-harb* (also known as *dar al-kufr*, an 'abode of war' where Muslims cannot freely practice their religion) to *dar al-Islam* (areas under Islamic rule).

From there, all IS had to do was stress the incompatibility of living an Islamic life in *dar al-harb* (the West but also anywhere not under IS governance). IS does so by simultaneously arousing feelings of resentment in European Muslims towards their home countries while presenting the caliphate as a safe haven for those who wish to fully embrace and protect Islam. In an al-Hayat video titled 'Honour is in *jiḥād*'<sup>(14)</sup>, a fighter by the name of Salahudin al-Bosni addresses Muslims living in the West who 'complain of not being able to have a beard, [or] to wear *niqab*'<sup>(15)</sup> telling them 'here is your chance now. Make *hijra*.' Furthermore, IS insists that Muslims who live in *dar al-harb* are subjugated by non-Muslims and are therefore living in dishonour. In contrast, *hijra*, and travelling to a land where Muslims can freely practise their religion, is presented as a means of 'purification'<sup>(16)</sup>, a way of purging dishonour and 'wiping away all past sins'<sup>(17)</sup>.

Basing itself on the opinion of certain Islamic scholars, IS took the argument further and decreed that '*hijra* from *dar al-kufr* to *dar al-Islam* is an obligation'<sup>(18)</sup>, for men and women in equal measure<sup>(19)</sup>. Unsurprisingly, IS' propaganda in English and French attempts to be more persuasive on the topic<sup>(20)</sup> with *Dabiq*, for example, stressing the

<sup>(14)</sup> 'Honour is in *jiḥād*', al-Hayat Media Center, 4 June 2015.

<sup>(15)</sup> A *niqab* is a veil that covers the entire face apart from the eyes.

<sup>(16)</sup> 'The *hijrah* of Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah', *Rumiyah*, Issue 13, 9 September 2017.

<sup>(17)</sup> 'Hijrah and forgiveness', *Dabiq*, Issue 3, 29 August 2014.

<sup>(18)</sup> 'Story of a *muhajira*', *al-Naba*, Issue 46, 7 September 2016.

<sup>(19)</sup> 'The twin halves of the *muhajirin*', *Dabiq*, Issue 8, 30 March 2015; 'Story of a *muhajira*', *ibid.*; and 'Sheikh Hafidh Sa'id Khan, the *wali* of Khurasan', *al-Naba*, Issue 17, 9 February 2016.

<sup>(20)</sup> The first time *al-Naba* mentions *hijra* for women is in February 2016 in its 17th edition, in which the leader of IS Khorasan province states: 'every Muslim man and woman should hasten to undertake *hijra* and to declare their allegiance to the caliphate'. The second time is in Issue 46 in an article titled 'Story of a *muhajira*'. The article is narrated in third person singular and does not provide many details about the *muhajira*, barring the fact that she is of Arab origin but that she was born and raised in Germany.

religious obligation of *hijra* in six of its issues (spanning February 2015 to September 2015) <sup>(21)</sup>.

Interestingly, given the ideas promulgated in the media on the topic of ‘jihadi brides’, *al-Naba’* <sup>(22)</sup> states that for *hijra* to be acceptable ideologically it must be done ‘for the sake of God’ and not for the purpose of finding a husband. In fact, the ideal of romantic love is nowhere promoted in IS discourse. Quite the opposite: IS propaganda makes it clear that women should expect to marry more than once if they move to the caliphate with widows being encouraged to marry as soon as possible after the death of their husbands <sup>(23)</sup>. IS even went against traditional Islamic jurisprudence when it allowed women to perform *hijra* without a *mahram* <sup>(24)</sup>. It is worth noting that IS only allows a woman to travel without a *mahram* for the specific and exclusive purpose of reaching IS territory. As it stresses in *al-Naba’* Issue 137, no woman — even an elderly one (i.e. the one least likely to cause *fitna* [temptation]) — is allowed to travel under any other conditions without a *mahram*.

By presenting *hijra* as religiously compulsory, IS succeeded in creating binary thinking that reduces the options to make *hijra* or not being a true Muslim. A central piece of propaganda to understanding the emotional void to which IS speaks is a *Dabiq* article authored by Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya, a Finnish convert to Islam. Addressing Muslims in the West, she states unequivocally that ‘As Muslims, we need to disavow the disbelievers and live under the caliphate. The Prophet said, “I have nothing to do with any Muslim who resides amongst the pagans”. ... It’s not even allowed nor is it good for you to reside in the lands of the disbelievers. You may think that you’re able to practice your religion, but if you’re truly following the teachings of the Quran and the *Sunna*, you really can’t practice your religion there’ <sup>(25)</sup>.

Articles in both *Dabiq* and *al-Naba’* are forthright in stressing the hazards and hardships of *hijra* and include stories of women losing their children on the way or giving birth to stillborn children as a result of ‘pregnancy complications ... caused by the difficulty of the trip’ <sup>(26)</sup>. In fact, the articles equate the arduousness of the journey with the strength of the woman’s faith: ‘how valuable is the *hijra* and how valueless is every sacrifice on its

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<sup>(21)</sup> *Dabiq*, Issues 7, 8, 10 and 11.

<sup>(22)</sup> ‘Story of the *hadith*: deeds are judged according to the intention behind them’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 108, 30 November 2017.

<sup>(23)</sup> ‘Marrying widows is an established *Sunna*’, *Rumiyah*, Issue 4, 7 December 2016. The article is a translation of an article from *al-Naba’*, Issue 54, 10 November 2016.

<sup>(24)</sup> A male relative with whom marriage or sexual intercourse would be considered illegal in Islam. See ‘The twin halves of the *muhajirin*’, op. cit.

<sup>(25)</sup> ‘Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya, ‘How I came to Islam’, *Dabiq*, Issue 15, 31 July 2016.

<sup>(26)</sup> ‘The twin halves of the *muhajirin*’, op. cit.

path ... was the path of truth covered with anything but thorns? ... On the path towards *Jannah* [paradise], there is no place for the fearful and for cowards ... Do not forget that reward is in accordance with the degree of hardship' (<sup>27</sup>).

Perhaps the strongest praise for IS as a safe haven for Muslims and an insight into the incentive for a European Muslim woman to travel to a war zone was formulated by Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya who wrote 'I can't even describe the feeling of when you finally cross that border and enter the lands of the caliphate. It is such a blessing from Allah to be able to live under the caliphate. ...Of course, when you come to the caliphate, after sacrificing everything for the sake of Allah, you'll continue to be tested. You're going to see hardships and trials, but every day you're thankful to Allah for allowing you to perform *hijra* and to live under the *Sharia*. Life in the Islamic State is such a blessing. You face difficulties and hardship, you're not used to the food or the change of life, you may not know the local language, you hear bombing and the children may get scared, but none of that takes away from the gratitude you have towards Allah for allowing you to be here. ...Here you're living a pure life and your children are being raised with plenty of good influence around them.' She adds that these children need not be 'ashamed of their religion', i.e. as they would be, were they to grow up in what IS describes as the disgrace and dishonour of *dar al-harb* (<sup>28</sup>).

### 4.3. Finding roots in a jihadi feminism

IS propaganda relies on attacking Western concepts of feminism and urges Muslim women to push back against what it deems as encroachment. Issue 42 of *al-Naba'* regrets that 'the call to emancipate women' in the West has blurred the line between the genders and turned women into 'endangered creatures' (<sup>29</sup>).

In attempting to understand why women choose to join IS and what form of empowerment they hope to find therein, it is important to recognise that the notion of 'empowerment' differs substantially depending on the religious and cultural lens through which it is viewed.

To illustrate the potential for such cultural misunderstanding, it may be useful to refer to an oft-cited prophetic narration in IS propaganda (<sup>30</sup>) titled *Be gentle to women for they*

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(<sup>27</sup>) Ibid.

(<sup>28</sup>) Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya, op. cit.

(<sup>29</sup>) 'Break the cross: the 15th edition of the *Dabiq* newspaper', *al-Naba'*, Issue 42, 9 August 2016. See also: 'The *fitrah* of mankind and the near extinction of the Western woman', *Dabiq*, Issue 15, 31 July 2016.

(<sup>30</sup>) 'Story of the *hadith*: "Be gentle to women for they are like vessels of glass"', *al-Naba'*, Issue 112; 'The twin halves of the *muhajirin*', op. cit.

are like vessels of glass. *Al-Naba'* explains that this *hadith* <sup>(31)</sup> embodies 'the care and appreciation given to women by Islam and [from thence] Islam's concern to distance women from anything that may harm them' <sup>(32)</sup>. The article in *al-Naba'* continues: 'women were labelled "glass vessels" because of their lack of determination and the swifter likelihood of them breaking' and concludes that 'from here it transpires that the concern for women is first and foremost a protection of her religion, her virtue and her modesty, followed by concern for her because she is weaker and requires someone to take care of her'. While some observers are likely to see in it a form of condescension towards the female sex, it could appeal to a certain segment of the female population who might see in it proof of Islam's interest in protecting them.

Indeed, women who subscribe to jihadism believe — like their male counterparts — that the roles and responsibilities of each gender are subject to a divine reference. Female *jihadis* believe that Islam granted women a superior status to that given to them in modern-day Western societies. They believe the West's aim is to weaken if not completely obliterate Islam and furthermore that it does so first and foremost by attacking the identity of the Muslim woman. In this context, the Islamic female dress code is understood as a renunciation of Western culture and is viewed as a right reclaimed post-independence <sup>(33)</sup>.

While Islamist movements also gave birth to what may be termed 'Islamic feminism' — which seeks to reinterpret sources of scriptural authority in such a way as to achieve broader rights for women from within an Islamic framework — 'female jihadism' views 'Islamic feminism' as sacrilegious and a capitulation to pressure by the West. In this sense, 'female jihadism' sets itself against both Western and Islamic feminism <sup>(34)</sup>. An elucidation of this is to be found in the foundational statement issued by IS's al-Khansa' Women's Media Brigade. The statement addresses and distances itself from Islamic feminists (the internal enemies) boasting that 'our girls have returned to their modest cloaks and our women have settled in their homes ... you are not from us and we are not from you' while at the same time accusing the West ('Satan's soldiers') of forcing women

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<sup>(31)</sup> Narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>(32)</sup> 'Story of the *hadith* "Be gentle to women for they are like vessels of glass"', *al-Naba'* 112, 29 December 2017.

<sup>(33)</sup> Women in the Islamic State: message and report', op. cit.; 'Gaps in women's modesty', *al-Naba'*, Issue 80, 11 May 2017; 'Lawful *hijab* for the Muslim woman', *al-Naba'*, Issue 23, 22 March 2016; 'How a Muslim woman should dress in front of [other] women', *al-Naba'*, Issue 71, 9 March 2017.

<sup>(34)</sup> See, for example, Abu Hanieh, H. and Abu Rumman, M., *Infatuated with martyrdom: female jihadism from al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, 2017.



to leave 'their gardens [of paradise] in the shelter of their husbands to [go to] the hellfire of hard work, travail, and exhaustion' <sup>(35)</sup>.

#### 4.4. A new wave of jihadi torchbearers

The above reasons go some way towards explaining why a number of women chose to bear the IS torch and echo the organisation's official line which appears to many to be an ultra-conservative misogynistic organisation.

Women feature noticeably more in IS propaganda than in the material of earlier jihadi organisations and IS clearly recognises the importance of women and their role in producing and disseminating propaganda. However, this is not to say that IS was the first to recognise women's role in jihadi propaganda efforts or the first to attempt to give them a voice.

In fact, IS follows in the trend set by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP publications addressing women included al-Khansa' magazine (albeit only one issue was published, and that in September 2004), numerous articles of which were written under female aliases. In turn, the AQAP-Yemen branch allocated a chapter to women titled *The Granddaughters of Umm Ammara* in its magazine Sada al-Malahim. This was followed by two issues of another women's magazine *al-Shamikhah (The Majestic Woman)* in February and March 2011 published by al-Fajr Media Centre, the exclusive online distributor of al-Qaeda's propaganda at the time. Other jihadi women's magazines included *al-Khansa's Granddaughters* published by al-Sumud Media Brigade, *Aisha's Granddaughters* and *The Female Captives*. All of these confined women to non-combatant and supportive roles (e.g. caring for the children and wounded, preparing food, as well as playing their part as propagandists and fundraisers).

AQAP's stop-start attempts paved the way for IS to increase its female-tailored narrative and to enlist women more systematically in its media production and outreach efforts <sup>(36)</sup>. However, it was social media in particular that boosted women's engagement.

As a result, a number of prominent IS female propagandists emerged. The majority of these, however, publish in Arabic. In terms of English-speaking authors, Umm Sumayya al-Muhajirah appears to be the most devoted. She contributed regularly to *Dabiq* where she defended the organization's most controversial fatwas (e.g. on the enslavement of female captives and the permissibility of a woman travelling without a male companion to the lands of the caliphate). Other IS propagandists include Nada al-Qahtani, better

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<sup>(35)</sup> Women in the Islamic State: message and report', op. cit.

<sup>(36)</sup> See, for example, Abu Hanieh, H. and Abu Rumman, M., *Infatuated with martyrdom: female jihadism from al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Ammam, 2017.

known as Ukht Julaybib, as well as women poets of the likes of Ahlam al-Nasr and Sulaf al-Najdiyya.

## 5. Life for women in the caliphate

### 5.1. Well-defined parameters: rules and regulations

In June 2014, the same month in which it declared the establishment of its so-called caliphate, IS issued a set of fundamental principles in its pseudo-constitution. Titled *The charter of Medina*, the document encouraged women to remain at home and to only go out if necessary<sup>(37)</sup>. The virtue of staying at home is frequently stressed in IS propaganda and husbands are instructed that it is their right — even their duty — to impose restrictions if their wives leave their homes too frequently<sup>(38)</sup>. Indeed, IS rhetoric is embedded in a patriarchal framework where men hold the responsibility of *qiwama* (guardianship) over women. Male relatives (whether fathers, brothers or other guardians) are told they will have to answer for their female relatives' morality — or lack thereof — in front of God<sup>(39)</sup>. As a result, masculine authority and dominance are emphasised across the repertoire of IS propaganda with numerous articles stressing the indispensable need for women to marry so that they may be looked after: 'a woman is always in need of a husband who will look after her and tend to her affairs, and any woman who says otherwise is opposing the *fitra* (human nature or instinct) upon which Allah created her' <sup>(40)</sup>.

If a woman is forced to leave the house, she must abide by a set of rules: seek permission from her husband; dress in black from head to toe in loose clothing that is neither tight nor see-through; avoid all aspects of adornment including perfume and high heels; lower her gaze and her voice lest her tone appeal to men and finally go about her business as quickly as possible without loitering or wasting time window-shopping<sup>(41)</sup>. She is also warned against eating ice cream in public even if she is wearing a *niqab*<sup>(42)</sup>, presumably to avoid any evocative sexual imagery. IS propaganda even discusses her obligations

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<sup>(37)</sup> Originally published in June 2014, the text was republished by Maktabat al-Himma in August 2015. See *The charter of Medina*, Maktabat al-Himma, 10 August 2015.

<sup>(38)</sup> 'Abide in your homes', *Rumiyah*, Issue 3, 11 November 2016. The article is a translation of an article from *al-Naba'*, Issue 50, 13 October 2016.

<sup>(39)</sup> 'How a Muslim woman should dress in front of [other] women', op. cit.

<sup>(40)</sup> 'Marrying widows is an established Sunna', op. cit. The article is a translation of an article from *al-Naba'*, Issue 54, 10 November 2016.

<sup>(41)</sup> 'Lawful *hijab* for the Muslim woman', op. cit; 'General rules on the Muslim woman's leaving the house to go to the market', *al-Naba'*, Issue 28, 26 April 2016.

<sup>(42)</sup> 'Gaps in women's modesty', op. cit.

inside the house, with *al-Naba'* reiterating the importance of not mixing with male relatives who are not *maharim* <sup>(43)</sup>.

Numerous items of IS propaganda also discuss and offer morality lessons on marriage relations. The articles focus on the obligations and rights of both spouses <sup>(44)</sup>. An article titled *You [masculine declination] have an obligation towards your family* starts by condemning husbands who choose to spend time away from their wives and urges them instead to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad who took every possible opportunity to 'bring happiness to his wives' hearts' <sup>(45)</sup>. However, the article quickly moves to point the finger at the 'numerous' nagging and ungrateful wives who fail to appreciate that their husband is at home as often as is possible for him. The article stresses that 'these women must know that men were not created to remain confined to the home with their wives and children' <sup>(46)</sup>.

Topics broached with regard to matrimony include a woman's obligation to obey her husband, a right that is just as important as that of 'praying, fasting, giving charity and *hijra*' for 'a woman does not fulfil her rights to her God until she fulfils those of her husband' <sup>(47)</sup>. To substantiate this, IS refers to numerous prophetic narrations including: 'if I were to order anyone to bow down [in prayer] to another, I would have ordered the wife to bow down to her husband' <sup>(48)</sup>. Obedience to one's husband (especially if this husband happens to be a *mujahid* <sup>(49)</sup>) is 'a form of worship by which she can get closer to her creator' <sup>(50)</sup>. Women are told to be grateful to their husbands for their protection, care and upkeep. IS articles also cover such particulars as the immorality of criticising one's spouse (whether a wife or husband) in public <sup>(51)</sup>, the permissibility of intercourse

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<sup>(43)</sup> 'The male in-laws are death', *al-Naba'*, Issue 24, 29 March 2016; 'Beware not to mix with women', *al-Naba'*, Issue 43, 16 August 2016.

<sup>(44)</sup> See, for example, 'Be gentle to women for they are like vessels of glass', op. cit.

<sup>(45)</sup> 'You have an obligation towards your family', *al-Naba'*, Issue 49, 6 October 2016.

<sup>(46)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(47)</sup> 'Women's obedience to [their] husbands is an obligatory religious duty', *al-Naba'*, Issue 30, 10 May 2016.

<sup>(48)</sup> 'You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands', *al-Naba'*, Issue 57, 1 December 2016.

<sup>(49)</sup> 'If a *mujahid*, whose character and religion please you, comes to you, marry him', *al-Naba'*, Issue 33, 1 June 2016.

<sup>(50)</sup> 'Women's obedience to [their] husbands is an obligatory religious duty', op. cit.

<sup>(51)</sup> 'The flesh of [your] spouse is poisonous', *al-Naba'*, Issue 67, 9 February 2017.

if a woman is menstruating<sup>(52)</sup> and the conditions of the '*idda*'<sup>(53)</sup> (the period of time a woman must observe after the death of her spouse or after a divorce during which she may not remarry)<sup>(54)</sup>.

The articles are in many ways revelatory of the social stresses that resulted from IS's attempt to establish a state based on Sharia law in this day and age and give an insight into the likely resistance of some women to the micromanagement of their daily movements<sup>(55)</sup>. Other articles appear to address governance and military challenges faced by the group (e.g., when women are warned against attempting to intervene in the decision of which fronts their husbands are posted to).

Polygamy and the enslavement of female captives are likely the two practices that would have faced the most significant resistance from women and as such, would have required that IS find ways to mitigate its female constituents' reactions to them. The first step was to ground them in Islamic jurisprudence, thereby presenting IS as an organisation that follows Islamic jurisprudence to the letter.

This was made manifest in an article titled *Two, three or four* which appeared in Issue 12 of *Dabiq*, the title of which refers to a Quranic verse that allows men to marry up to four wives<sup>(56)</sup>. The article in *Dabiq* as well as a similar one in Issue 35 of *al-Naba'*<sup>(57)</sup> warn women not to commit apostasy by resisting a prophetic practice decreed by God. While the *al-Naba'* article is by an unknown author, the *Dabiq* article is explicitly authored by a woman, Umm Summayyah al-Muhajirah, presumably to bolster the argument from a female perspective. Women are informed that if their husband were to have another wife, they themselves would find more time to pray and to deepen their knowledge of Islam, as well as generally have more time for themselves and for their children. Both articles advise women to put aside their jealousy and selfishness and underline the importance of producing progeny for the benefits of the Islamic *umma*. They also appeal to women's charitable emotions by reminding them of God's command to fend for widows and orphans. The following issue of *al-Naba'* (Issue 36) warns women against asking for a divorce in case of their husbands remarrying<sup>(58)</sup>. In addressing the topic of polygamy,

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<sup>(52)</sup> 'What the woman menstruating and in childbed must be aware of', *al-Naba'*, Issue 72, 16 March 2017.

<sup>(53)</sup> The purpose of the '*idda*' is to ascertain the identity of the male parent of any offspring produced.

<sup>(54)</sup> 'The widow's '*idda*', *al-Naba'*, Issue 81, 15 May 2017; 'Advice on *ihdad*', *Dabiq*, Issue 13, 19 January 2016.

<sup>(55)</sup> See, for more information, Lahoud, N., *Empowerment or subjugation: an analysis of ISIL's gendered messaging*, UN Women, Cairo, 2018.

<sup>(56)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'Two, three or four', *Dabiq*, Issue 12, 18 November 2015.

<sup>(57)</sup> 'Polygamy is a prophetic practice', *al-Naba'*, Issue 35, 14 June 2016.

<sup>(58)</sup> 'Polygamy [but] without transgression', *al-Naba'*, Issue 36, 17 June 2016.



*al-Naba'* also focuses on the need for fairness, blaming men for this shortcoming which causes women to reject the practice and reminding them that it is not religiously lawful to force their wives to live under the same roof<sup>(59)</sup>.

Accusing women of bowing to Western ideas, Issue 35 of *al-Naba'* states that 'the sensible Muslim woman should not heed what the enemies of God promoted saying that polygamy is an injustice to women and a violation of her rights' <sup>(60)</sup>. Similarly, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah writing in *Dabiq* regrets that 'the opposition to polygyny ...has gone beyond the blind women and now sits in the hearts of some of the female seekers of knowledge and women who adhere to the bulk of the *shar'i* [religious] rulings. This became so after the calls of the enemies of Allah, the religion, and His messenger found their way towards them through the doubts that these enemies propagate, doubts that effectively state, "No to polygyny. Polygyny is oppression towards women"' <sup>(61)</sup>.

Numerous issues of *al-Naba'* also urge men to treat their wives well and to not be 'rude or coarse' to them, often referring to the *hadith* which compares women to fragile glass vessels as well as the narration that states: 'accept the advice regarding good treatment of women for they are *'awan* [slaves] of yours' <sup>(62)</sup>. One article explains that women were equated with slaves given that men have control over them. Men are requested to be patient vis-à-vis their wives' deficiencies, for although 'neither men nor women are complete beings, men are gifted with more composure, wisdom and patience which women do not have, for they [women] are deficient in their reasoning and in their religion' <sup>(63)</sup>. Women are advised to donate to the jihadi cause as way of atonement for these shortcomings <sup>(64)</sup>.

Another thorny issue which manifestly brought its share of domestic issues was the revival of the practice of slavery. Unsurprisingly, IS made sure to imbue its argumentation on the topic with eschatological associations and religious obligations in the hope of making it more palatable to its female supporters.

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<sup>(59)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(60)</sup> 'Polygamy is a prophetic practice', *al-Naba'* Issue 35, 14 June 2016.

<sup>(61)</sup> 'Polygamy is a prophetic practice', op., cit.; see also: 'Ruling on the woman who does not accept polygamy', *al-Naba'*, Issue 140, 20 July 2018.

<sup>(62)</sup> It is worth noting that other Islamic jurists have interpreted the word *'awan* as 'duty bound [to fulfil your marital rights]' instead of 'slaves'.

<sup>(63)</sup> 'Be gentle to women for they are like vessels of glass', op cit.

<sup>(64)</sup> 'O women, give charity', *al-Naba'*, Issue 45, 30 August 2016. For *Rumiyah's* take on the issue, see also: 'Brutality and slavery towards the *kuffar*', *Rumiyah*, Issue 2, 4 October 2016.

*Dabiq* explored the topic of slavery in two articles: *The revival of slavery before the hour* <sup>(65)</sup> and *Slave-girls or prostitutes* <sup>(66)</sup>. The latter was authored by the enthusiastic apologist Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah. She presents the enslaving of non-Muslim women as a revival of a 'great prophetic practice' and reminds the 'weak-hearted and weak-minded' Muslims who might succumb to the devil's planting of doubts (read: western media) that 'enslaving the families of the *kuffar* and taking their women as concubines is a firmly established aspect of the Sharia' <sup>(67)</sup>. She also warned that denying or mocking this aspect would amount to 'apostatizing from Islam' <sup>(68)</sup>. Instead, Umm Sumayyah urges Muslims to be grateful for the re-establishment of such a *Sunna* and to be proud of an achievement that has brought 'honour and pride for the Muslims and humiliation and degradation for the *Kafir*' <sup>(69)</sup>. In other words, the capture (as well as sexual exploitation) of the infidels' women is a statement of power and a way of humiliating the enemy. Enslavement is also perceived as a sign of approaching victory and is presented as a quintessential part of IS's mission to return the world to the days of a pure and untainted Islam.

*The revival of slavery before the hour* also outlines the religious justification for enslaving Yazidi women, explaining that — as polytheists and unlike Christians — they could not simply be made to simply pay the *jizya* <sup>(70)</sup>. Referring to a prophetic narration, the article states that one of the signs of the Day of Judgement is that 'the slave-girl gives birth to her master' <sup>(71)</sup>, thereby embedding slavery in Islamic eschatology.

Both articles attempt to present slavery as an opportunity for redemption and salvation with Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah stating that God 'made their [female slaves] liberation from the lands of *kufr* a way for their salvation and guidance towards the straight path' <sup>(72)</sup>. Indeed, both articles affirm that a slave-girl may be set free if she converts to Islam. In the same vein, *al-Naba'* in its 70<sup>th</sup> issue promotes marriage with freed slave women ('*ata'iq*') <sup>(73)</sup>. As Umm Muhajirah points out in *Slave-girls or prostitutes*, the Prophet Muhammad himself freed and married his slave-girl, the Jewish Safiyyah Bint Huyayy Ibn Akhtab. The articles also attempt to highlight the fact that slavery, like every

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<sup>(65)</sup> 'The revival of slavery before the hour', *Dabiq*, Issue 4, 12 October 2014.

<sup>(66)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'Slave-girls or prostitutes', *Dabiq*, Issue 9, 21 May 2015.

<sup>(67)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(68)</sup> 'The revival of slavery before the hour', op. cit.

<sup>(69)</sup> Umm Summayah al-Muhajirah, 'Slave-girls or prostitutes', op. cit.

<sup>(70)</sup> Tax to be paid by non-Muslims in *dar al-Islam* in return for their security.

<sup>(71)</sup> 'The revival of slavery before the hour', op. cit.

<sup>(72)</sup> Umm Summayah al-Muhajirah, 'Slave-girls or prostitutes', op. cit.

<sup>(73)</sup> 'Marriage with freed slave women is the practice of the best of men', *al-Naba'*, Issue 70, 2 March 2017.

other practice condoned by Islam, has strict parameters and rules including for example ‘the prohibition of separating a mother from her young children’<sup>(74)</sup> and the fair and compassionate treatment which is due to slaves, regardless of their religious views.

While the *Dabiq* articles argue the legitimacy of enslaving non-Muslim women, *al-Naba’* presents the practice as a *fait accompli*. In its Issue 47<sup>(75)</sup>, women are warned against mistreating their husband’s slaves. The article quotes from a narration that affirms that the Prophet’s last instruction on his deathbed was to ‘pray and [treat well] those whom you own’<sup>(76)</sup> (meaning slaves). The article stresses the importance of such a commandment, which was put on a par with prayer (the latter representing ‘the backbone of the [Islamic] religion’). As for the wives who were incensed by their husbands’ provision of separate homes for their slave girls, the article contends that the troublesome wives have themselves to blame<sup>(77)</sup>.

It is fair to say that IS propaganda, with *al-Naba’* leading the way, abounds with unflattering generalisations and disparaging descriptions of women. Women are described as prone to gossiping<sup>(78)</sup>, scheming<sup>(79)</sup>, ‘spreading [damaging] rumours’<sup>(80)</sup>, cursing and complaining<sup>(81)</sup>. Numerous articles also portray women as ‘backbiters’<sup>(82)</sup>, ‘ungrateful’ especially towards their husbands<sup>(83)</sup> as well as quick to forget the good deeds of their neighbours, their families and even their children<sup>(84)</sup>.

Many articles also describe women as wasteful, both of their time and their money. One of the many sweeping statements voiced by IS is that women invariably concern themselves more with the frivolities of ‘this world’ as opposed to focusing on attaining paradise in the hereafter<sup>(85)</sup>.

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<sup>(74)</sup> ‘The revival of slavery before the hour’, op. cit.

<sup>(75)</sup> ‘Fear God in the way you treat what your right hands possess’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 47, 20 September 2016.

<sup>(76)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(77)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(78)</sup> ‘The Zaqum of women’s gatherings’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 40, 26 July 2016; ‘The flesh of [your] spouse is poisonous’, op. cit.

<sup>(79)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah. ‘Two, three or four’, op. cit.

<sup>(80)</sup> ‘[Be a woman who] promotes steadfastness not discouragement’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 31, 17 May 2016; ‘The Zaqum of women’s gatherings’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 40, 26 July 2016

<sup>(81)</sup> ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands’, op. cit.

<sup>(82)</sup> ‘The Zaqum of women’s gatherings’, op. cit; ‘Advice on *ihdad*’, op. cit.

<sup>(83)</sup> ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands’, op. cit.

<sup>(84)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(85)</sup> ‘The last ten days [of Ramadan] are for making deals with God not for retreats in marketplaces’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 37, 28 June 2016; ‘And you [female declination] will be asked about your time [in this

## 5.2. Islamic State women: mothers first and foremost

IS posits that a woman's principal responsibility (and a central part of her *jihad*) is to be a good wife and mother<sup>(86)</sup>. The group repeatedly emphasises the role of women as the bearers and carers of future jihadi generations. Their duty is to instil in their offspring a love of *jihad* and a yearning for martyrdom. Women are urged to encourage and motivate their husbands and sons to fight and to shame them if they do not comply<sup>(87)</sup>. Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah explains that a woman is to prepare her children for the moral and physical fight against the enemies of Islam: 'you are in *jihad* when you ... succeed in raising a generation that sees honour in the pages of the Quran and the muzzle of a rifle'<sup>(88)</sup>. Women are advised to raise their children in austerity and hardship in order to ensure a strong generation of staunch and faithful jihadis<sup>(89)</sup>. Mothers are told they are 'the hope of the *umma* given that their 'raising [of] the sons of the caliphate on pure *tawhid* [monotheism], and its daughters on chastity and decency' will form 'the building blocks of the monument of glory' that is IS<sup>(90)</sup>.

Women are also reminded that the defence of Islam must take precedence over their sons' safety<sup>(91)</sup>. In recognition of what IS mothers have already provided to the caliphate, IS does not fail to acknowledge their contributions and praises them for their following in the footsteps of the earlier *mujahidat* who welcomed their sons' martyrdom: 'we thought that the time of al-Khansa'<sup>(92)</sup> had passed and that wombs could no longer give birth to her kind, until the Islamic State returned.' It goes on to praise the mothers of the caliphate as 'women with the mettle of men', who 'bow down in thankful prayer' upon hearing news of their sons' death<sup>(93)</sup>.

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world] and how you spent it', *al-Naba'*, Issue 42, 9 August 2016; 'Ascetism is part of the way of the *Salaf*', *al-Naba'*, Issue 68, 16 February 2017.

(86) 'A woman is the guardian in her husband's home and is responsible for her flock', *al-Naba'*, Issue 38, 12 July 2016.

(87) '[Be a woman who] promotes steadfastness not discouragement', op. cit.

(88) Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah. 'A *Jihad* without fighting', *Dabiq*, Issue 11, 9 September 2015.

(89) 'A woman is the guardian in her husband's home and is responsible for her flock', op. cit.

(90) 'Women in the Islamic State: message and report', op. cit.

(91) 'Tales of women's *jihad* 2', *al-Naba'*, Issue 103, 26 October 2017.

(92) Al-Khansa' bint 'Amr al-Salamiyyah is perhaps the most famous Arab female poet. She gained fame for her elegies in which she praised her brothers who were killed in battle. Instead of grieving when she lost all four of her sons during one battle, she praised God for the honour He had bestowed on her.

(93) 'The Khansas of the caliphate are examples of patience', *al-Naba'*, Issue 20, 1 March 2016.



Women are also urged to marry young and to bear as many children as possible for ‘with every Muslim newborn a thorn is planted in the throat of disbelief, and a dagger is shoved in the loin of polytheism’ <sup>(94)</sup>. They are warned against using contraceptive methods for ‘contraception is but a disease brought by our enemies, so that the number of Muslims decreases’ <sup>(95)</sup>. Delayed marriage is also presented as a ‘ruse’ instigated by ‘the enemies of Islam ... who attempt to turn Muslim women away from their true role in this life: ... to serve the religion in whichever way they can, including by getting married, giving birth and raising [children]’ <sup>(96)</sup>.

### 5.3. Patient and steadfast supporters

In navigating the polysemous concept of *jihad* and what it entails for women, IS focuses repeatedly on the need for patience and steadfastness <sup>(97)</sup>. According to IS, a woman is in a state of *jihad* when she patiently awaits the return of her husband, praying for him and those with him to attain victory <sup>(98)</sup>. She must remain ‘steadfast and unshakeable’. Furthermore, in addition to keeping her own spirits up, she must also play a key role in keeping her husband and children committed to the cause <sup>(99)</sup>.

IS explicitly states that life as a Muslim woman, and even more so, as a *muhajira* is not an easy one. Indeed, a Muslim woman ‘should expect to be tormented for the sake of her religion’ <sup>(100)</sup>. Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah asks forthrightly: ‘O my sister, who deluded you and told you that the life of *jihad* is one of comfort and ease?’ <sup>(101)</sup>. One can assume that IS is understandably intent on recruiting the women who are least likely to abandon their goal when faced with hardships. Women are told that, if paradise is truly their goal, then they should know that ‘it is encircled by thorns not roses’ <sup>(102)</sup>. It is part of God’s plan that true believers be tested: ‘paradise is the reward for those who pass the test and have patience during the trials, remaining steadfast upon hardship, neither panicking nor

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<sup>(94)</sup> ‘I will outnumber the other nations through you’, op. cit.

<sup>(95)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(96)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(97)</sup> ‘To our sisters: a brief interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajirah’, *Dabiq*, Issue 7, 12 February 2015.

<sup>(98)</sup> ‘The twin halves of the *muhajirin*’, op. cit.

<sup>(99)</sup> ‘Our journey to Allah’, *Rumiyah*, Issue 11, 9 September 2015; ‘Stories of steadfastness from the lives of the *sahabiyyat*’, *Rumiyah*, Issue 2, al-Hayat media Centre, 4 October 2016 — the latter is a translation from an article by the same title in *al-Naba*, Issue 46, 7 September 2016.

<sup>(100)</sup> ‘Stories of steadfastness from the lives of the *sahabiyyat*’, op. cit.

<sup>(101)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, ‘A *Jihad* without fighting’, op. cit.

<sup>(102)</sup> ‘Stories of steadfastness from the lives of the *sahabiyyat*’, op. cit.

becoming resentful'. Perhaps more importantly, 'reward is in accordance with the degree of hardship' <sup>(103)</sup>.

The articles are revelatory in that they also expose IS' fear of women leaving the so-called caliphate after being widowed in a process of reverse migration or of asking for a divorce when their husbands are taken prisoner <sup>(104)</sup>. Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah advises 'every muhajirah sister who has been afflicted with the loss of her husband on the battlefield' to 'be firm, ... be patient, and await your reward. Be wary, be wary of thinking of going back to the lands of the *tawaghit* [tyrants]' <sup>(105)</sup>. She also shames those who would consider asking for a divorce and the return to an easier life.

Instead, women are advised to emulate the wives of the prophet and of his companions who, instead of complaining about the hardships they endured, 'carried on their shoulders the weight of their religion and of their *umma*' and unwaveringly persisted in encouraging their husbands and sons to fight for Islam <sup>(106)</sup>. Women are reminded that the first Muslim martyr was a woman, Sumayyah bint Khayyat: 'yes, O Muslimah, the first blood to be shed for the cause of *la ilaha illa Allah* <sup>(107)</sup> was the blood of a woman. ... and despite the severe torture, and despite Summayyah being a weak, oppressed woman, she remained firm and ... she refused to reject Islam until they killed her. So her end was that of *shahadah* [martyrdom], after she was patient and steadfast when the enemy of Allah — Abu Jahl — pierced her with a spear' <sup>(108)</sup>.

## 5.4. Women in combat: the revival of the early Islamic *mujahida*

While there have long been debates about whether combative *jihad* — in the context of offensive *jihad* — is an individual obligation for every man (*fard 'ayn*) or a collective duty that can be carried out by some members of the Muslim male community (*fard kifaya*),

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<sup>(103)</sup> 'The twin halves of the *muhajirin*', op. cit.

<sup>(104)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah. 'A *Jihad* without fighting', op. cit.; 'The twin halves of the *muhajirin*', op. cit. — the latter was also penned by Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.

<sup>(105)</sup> 'The twin halves of the *muhajirin*', op. cit.

<sup>(106)</sup> *al-Naba'*, Issues 46 and 103; Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'A *Jihad* without fighting', op. cit.

<sup>(107)</sup> *La ilaha illa Allah* is the Muslim proclamation of faith and can be translated as 'There is no God but Allah'.

<sup>(108)</sup> 'Stories of steadfastness from the lives of the *sahabiyyat*', op. cit.

scholars unanimously agree that women are exempted from this obligation<sup>(109)</sup>. Various reasons given for this exemption have included her weaker physique and lesser aptitude for fighting<sup>(110)</sup>, the dishonour she would face if she were to be taken prisoner as a result of a lost battle<sup>(111)</sup>, or the fact that it would restrict the rights of her husband. The wife of Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>(112)</sup> provided an additional reason in *A message to the Muslim sisters*<sup>(113)</sup>, stressing the requirement and impracticality of a *mahram*.

In contrast, the doctrine of defensive warfare (*jihad al-daf*) has been interpreted since the mid-1980s as enforcing an obligation upon men and women alike to take up arms<sup>(114)</sup>. Some scholars even argued that women could take part in defensive *jihad* without the permission of their husbands or other male guardians<sup>(115)</sup>. As a result, many scholars agree that women should undergo military training, but only insofar as it would equip them with knowledge of self-defence<sup>(116)</sup>.

IS does not depart from this position. The organisation's propaganda repeatedly stresses that a woman's role is to encourage her husband and sons and to strengthen their faith and determination. A woman's honour lies in being a producer of jihadis, rather than a warrior herself. As *al-Naba'* confirms: 'God, in his mercy ... did not make [combative] *jihad* an obligation for women'<sup>(117)</sup>. The same article, however, reminds women that there are occasions when *jihad* is an obligation for women as it is for men, namely the need to repel the enemy if he enters the woman's 'land or home'. Similarly, an article in *al-Naba'* Issue 59 states that 'while it is known that *jihad* is not [obligatory] for women in principle, the Muslim woman should know that if an enemy enters her home, *jihad* is incumbent on her as it is on men and she should repel him by whatever means possible'<sup>(118)</sup>. Umm

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<sup>(109)</sup> See the following classical works on Islamic jurisprudence: Ibn Hazm, Abu Muhammad Ali, 'Maratib al-ijma', Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmiyya, Beirut; Ibn Abidin, Muhammad Amin, 'Radd al-muhtar 'ala al-durr al-mukhtar, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut; and Al-Mardawi, A., 'Al-Insaf fi ma'rifat al-raji min al-khilaf', Dar ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1998.

<sup>(110)</sup> al-Kasani, A., 'Bada'i' al-Sana'i' fi Tartib al-Shara'i', Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya.

<sup>(111)</sup> al-'Ayni, M., 'Al-binaya sharh al-hidaya', Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut.

<sup>(112)</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri is the current leader of al-Qaeda.

<sup>(113)</sup> Hassan, U., 'A message to the Muslim sisters', Al-Sahab Media Foundation, December 2009.

<sup>(114)</sup> Azzam, A., 'The defence of Muslim lands: the most important of individual duties', Minbar al-Tawhid wal Jihad, 1984.

<sup>(115)</sup> Ibn Abd al-Aziz, A., 'Umda fi l'dad al-'uddah lil-jihad fi sabili Allah ta'la' [Faithful guide to preparation for *jihad*], Amman: Dar al-Bayariq lil-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1999.

<sup>(116)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(117)</sup> 'Be a support to the *mujahidin*', *al-Naba'*, Issue 83, 1 June 2017.

<sup>(118)</sup> 'I will die while Islam is glorious', *al-Naba'*, Issue 59, 15 December 2016.

Sumayyah al-Muhajirah also wrote that while the battlefield is a man's remit<sup>(119)</sup>, she must defend herself 'against someone attacking her' (120). Similarly, *Women in the Islamic State: message and report* (121) argues that a woman may leave her home in circumstances necessitating her service to society, including obligatory defensive jihad. Thus, it is made clear throughout IS' propaganda that a woman may take part in combative jihad, but only when this is part of defensive warfare (122). In fact, IS' originality — in comparison to previous jihadi organisations — lay almost exclusively in decreeing that women could travel to the lands of *jihad* without the need for a *mahram*.

While IS agrees that offensive *jihad* is not obligatory for women, it nevertheless encourages women to carry out attacks against the enemy. Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya urges 'those people who cannot perform *hijra* ... to attack the crusaders and their allies wherever you are' (123). IS even portrays operations carried out by women (e.g. the San Bernardino attack in which a couple 'aiding one another in righteousness and *taqwa* [piety]' (124) carried out the attack together) as more meritorious and commendable *because* of it not being obligatory. Husband and wife are both lauded as 'martyrs' (125).

Similarly, IS welcomed the attack carried out by three women in Mombasa, Kenya in September 2016 in an article titled 'Safiyya's granddaughters vie with the soldiers of the caliphate in Kenya' which was featured as a front-page headline in *al-Naba'* Issue 47 (126). The article alluded to these women as IS 'supporters,' and not 'soldiers' which is the term the group uses to refer to the men who carry out attacks in its name. Nevertheless, the *Rumiyah* Issue 2 article on the attack *A message from East Africa* was lavish in its praise of the three women and used the opportunity to shame men into action: 'so what is the matter with those men who ... continue to remain behind, having laid down their swords, even watching passively as they are surpassed on occasion by the women of the Ummah?! Such was the case on 11 September 2016, when three *muwahhid* [monotheist] sisters carried out a daring attack on a police station in Mombasa, Kenya, targeting the security forces of a Crusader nation, and doing so in support of the Islamic State .... With all three sisters attaining *shahadah* [martyrdom] after voluntarily shouldering a duty that Allah

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(119) Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'A *Jihad* without fighting', op. cit.

(120) Ibid.

(121) 'Women in the Islamic State: message and report', op. cit.

(122) Abdullah Azzam, 'Join the caravan', The Media Center of Martyr Abdullah Azzam, Peshawar, 1987.

(123) Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyya, op. cit.

(124) 'Foreword', *Dabiq*, Issue 13, 19 January 2016.

(125) Ibid.

(126) 'Safiyya's granddaughters vie with the soldiers of the caliphate in Kenya', *al-Naba'*, Issue 47, 20 September 2016.



had placed on the shoulders of the men of the Ummah .... The *Sunna* of the Prophet directed its incitement for physical combat towards the men of the Ummah. Why, then, do so many men continue to neglect their duty? Why have they laid down their swords and armed themselves instead with one excuse after another for not fulfilling their obligation? ... And why have they sat back idly — if not cowardly — while the Ummah's chaste, noble women, for whom *jihad* is a voluntary and righteous deed, stood in all their bravery to fulfil the duty of men?! ... They can take a lesson from their courageous sisters. These men can learn what it means to be sincere to Allah by reading the last testament of their sisters in Kenya who have joined the ranks of the *shuhada* [martyrs]' (<sup>127</sup>).

To emphasise that men have no excuse given their sisters' willingness to take up arms in their stead, Issue 82 of *al-Naba'* points out that the campaign *Answer the call* launched in al-Khayr, al-Furat and al-Raqqa provinces received many requests from Muslim women to join the IS army and be allowed to participate in the fighting. The article stated: "We apologize to them every time they call for affiliation, and we tell them that God has singled out men for combat" (<sup>128</sup>).

The general tone of IS' discourse changed slightly towards the end of 2017 when the organisation explicitly called on women to become actively engaged in battles and released three almost consecutive issues of *al-Naba'* discussing and legitimising combative *jihad* for women. The articles referred to the *mujahidat* from the early Islamic period as examples for today's IS followers to emulate. Issue 100 titled 'The obligation of women in [waging] *jihad* against the enemy' opens with a sentence that implies equality between the sexes: 'women are the sisters of men' (<sup>129</sup>). It continues: 'how many a Muslim woman was not hindered by her weakness or her preoccupation with the bringing up of her children and obeying her husband from gaining the favour gained by the most complete of men' (<sup>130</sup>). The article explicitly states why women's combative *jihad* is so paramount today, explaining that given the current situation and IS' current 'misfortune', 'it has become an obligation for Muslim women to carry out their duty on all fronts in supporting [the male] *mujahidin* in this battle. They should count themselves as *mujahidat* in the cause of God, and prepare themselves to defend their religion with their [souls]' (<sup>131</sup>). The article draws a parallel between today's conflict which sets 'the nations of disbelief [against] the nation of Islam' with that of the first century of Islam before

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(<sup>127</sup>) 'A message from East Africa', Rumiyyah Issue 2, al-Hayat Media Center, 4 October 2016.

(<sup>128</sup>) "'Answer the call" galvanised hundreds of new recruits to [join] the Islamic State army', *al-Naba'*, Issue 82, 25 May 2017.

(<sup>129</sup>) 'The obligation of women in [waging] *jihad* against the enemy', *al-Naba'*, Issue 100, 5 October 2017.

(<sup>130</sup>) Ibid.

(<sup>131</sup>) Ibid.

going on to list examples of women who had fought on the battlefield alongside the Prophet and who ‘aspired to fight ... not due to a lack of men but rather out of love for divine compensation’<sup>(132)</sup>. The article attempts to rally women to champion Islam by comparing today’s Muslim women to the first *mujahidat*: ‘it would not be strange for Muslim women today to have the same [sense of] sacrifice and sincerity and love for the religion as the previous *mujahidat*’<sup>(133)</sup>. The article expresses the hope that the examples listed will act as an impetus for today’s women to emulate them, even hinting that the burden of victory lies on women’s shoulders and urging them to fight for in so doing ‘good might happen to you as it did to them and to the religion in their times’<sup>(134)</sup>. Two similar *al-Naba’* articles *Stories of women’s jihad* parts one and two, in *al-Naba’* Issues 102<sup>(135)</sup> and 103<sup>(136)</sup> respectively, followed suit.

A few weeks later, in an infographic released in Issue 125 of *al-Naba’*, IS summed up the rules of *jihad* for women<sup>(137)</sup>. The infographic reaffirmed that ‘there is no fighting in women’s *jihad*’, women may fight to defend themselves; women can wage *jihad* by donating to the cause<sup>(138)</sup>, and women can be called upon to carry out non-combative services such as tending to the sick. Nevertheless, it added that they are obligated to fight if the enemy attacks their country and furthermore that they do not require their husbands’ consent to do so.

A crucial turning point came in February 2018<sup>(139)</sup>, when al-Hayat Media Center released a video in Arabic and English, featuring women clad in full *niqab* fighting against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The context of *jihad* is ambiguous given that it is unclear whether the situation is part of offensive or defensive warfare: while the narrator states that this is part of a new era of ‘conquest’, the fact that the video features men on crutches and in wheelchairs make it obvious that the organisation is forced to defend itself after almost complete decimation.

Although predecessor jihadi organisations never denied the role of women who fought alongside the Prophet, IS invested more avidly in reviving the *muhajida* model. As a result,

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<sup>(132)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(133)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(134)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(135)</sup> ‘Tales of women’s *jihad* 1’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 102, 20 October 2017.

<sup>(136)</sup> ‘Tales of women’s *jihad* 2’, op. cit.

<sup>(137)</sup> ‘Women’s *jihad*’, *al-Naba’*, Issue 125, 29 March 2018.

<sup>(138)</sup> ‘O women, give charity’, op. cit. For *Rumiyah*’s take on the issue, see also: ‘Brutality and slavery towards the *kuffar*’, op. cit.

<sup>(139)</sup> ‘Inside the Khilafah 7’, Islamic State, 7 February 2018.

IS propaganda abounds with examples of female heroes from the early Islamic years. They are used to provide guidance and are portrayed as role models for contemporary female jihadis. IS propaganda underlines their courage and enthusiasm in defending Islam and attempts to incentivise today's *mujahidat* by labelling them 'the granddaughters of Safiyya and of Umm 'Ammara' <sup>(140)</sup>. The early *mujahidat* most often cited are Umm 'Ammara Nusayba bint Ka'b al-Ansariyya who is repeatedly praised for her defence of the Prophet at the Battle of Uhud <sup>(141)</sup>; Umm Saleem who entered the battlefield on the day of Hunain armed with a dagger so that she may 'pierce the stomach ... of any approaching polytheist'; Safiyya bint Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's paternal aunt, who killed a man with a pole and then cut off his head when he attempted to enter the women's hideouts <sup>(142)</sup>; Asma bint Yazid al-Sakan, known as Umm Salama, who took part in the battle of al-Yarmuk and reportedly killed nine soldiers with a pole that was holding up her tent. Interestingly, one article in *al-Naba'* commends Safiyya for 'not limiting herself to encouraging words' and instead taking action <sup>(143)</sup> as well as for striking the faces of retreating Muslim fighters on the day of Uhud to push them back towards the battlefield <sup>(144)</sup>. These icons are particularly important because IS uses them to frame the nature and limits of the role of women today while ensuring the organisation's discourse remains rooted in a robust Salafi framework.

It is important to stress that IS did not set a precedent in urging women to take up arms. Indeed, if anything it was the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who had been at the vanguard of engaging women in combative roles, particularly suicide bombings. In 2005, al-Zarqawi issued a speech titled "Religion shall not lack while I live" <sup>(145)</sup>, in which he called on Muslim women to take up a more active role in jihad: 'this message is to the free women of Mesopotamia in particular and the women of the Muslim Umma in general: Where are you from this holy *jihad*? What have you contributed to this Umma? Do you not fear God? Do you raise your children to be slaughtered by tyrants? Have you accepted submissiveness and shunned *jihad*? Are you not seeing that men have 'neglected their horses and laid down their arms?' [...] You are the granddaughters of Umm 'Amarah. ... The Prophet said about her on the day of Uhud: 'her position today "in paradise" is higher than the position of so and so. [...] She also witnessed the Battle of al-

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<sup>(140)</sup> 'I will die while Islam is glorious', op. cit.

<sup>(141)</sup> 'The obligation of women in [waging] *jihad* against the enemy', op. cit.

<sup>(142)</sup> 'I will die while Islam is glorious', op. cit.

<sup>(143)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(144)</sup> 'Tales of women's *jihad* 1', op. cit.

<sup>(145)</sup> Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, 'Religion shall not lack while I live', al-Malahim Media, 7 July 2005.

Yamama, and fought until her arm was severed and sustained twelve wounds. ... Many jihadi sisters in Iraq sent me requests to carry out martyrdom operations ...' <sup>(146)</sup>.

Al-Zarqawi's plea paved the way for women to legitimately seek martyrdom in the same way as men. Indeed, his speech led to an exponential increase in the number of female volunteers wishing to take part in suicide attacks, leading ISI to establish the first all-female martyrdom brigade in Iraq in 2007 <sup>(147)</sup>.

IS allocated women more roles when, in February 2014, it established an all-female morality police force as part of its security apparatus and *Hisba* department <sup>(148)</sup>. The al-Khansa' Brigade, as it was named, included European and Arab women <sup>(149)</sup>.

## 5.5. Women and education

With the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014 and the institutionalisation of governance in IS-controlled territories, the organisation found it necessary — especially given the strict gender segregation — to increase women's roles in various fields, including health, education, and security.

In contrast with organisations like the Taliban or Boko Haram who held an anti-education stance for women, IS stresses that 'Islam does not prohibit education for women'. A number of articles in *al-Naba'* encourage women to attend the religious classes made available to them in IS territory <sup>(150)</sup> and commend IS for offering them these educational opportunities <sup>(151)</sup>.

The organisation posits that a Muslim woman cannot carry out her required duty of raising and educating her children 'if she is illiterate and ignorant' <sup>(152)</sup>. According to IS, women have even more of a responsibility to ensure a grounding in Islamic education given that this would give them the capacity to 'do away with ignorance in herself, her

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<sup>(146)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(147)</sup> al-Jabouri, M., 'Generations of death: female suicide bombers in the shadows of strange killers', *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism*, 6 July 2011.

<sup>(148)</sup> *Hisba* can be loosely translated as 'reckoning' or 'accountability'. It refers to the activities of state-appointed individuals whose duty it is to enforce Islamic law.

<sup>(149)</sup> It is worth noting that more recently, in territories controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, women have also begun serving as social enforcers of the group's rule.

<sup>(150)</sup> See, for example, 'Modesty did not forbid them from studying religion', *al-Naba'*, Issue 32, 24 May 2016.

<sup>(151)</sup> 'Mosques fill up with Muslims after religious classes', *al-Naba'*, Issue 26, 12 April 2016; see also Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'A *Jihad* without fighting', op. cit.

<sup>(152)</sup> 'Women in the Islamic State: message and report', op. cit.



family and her entourage' <sup>(153)</sup>. *Dabiq* Issue 11 states 'you know that acquiring knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim and every Muslimah, and Allah has blessed the Islamic state, which has not been stingy towards its women in providing institutions and courses on the entirety of the sharia sciences. So shake off the dust of laziness and procrastination and come forth, free yourself from ignorance and learn the matters of your religion' <sup>(154)</sup>. An article in *Dabiq* appears to even provide women with a sense of empowerment in declaring that women 'degrade [themselves] by thinking [they] cannot understand the Quran and *Sunna*' without the help of an *imam* <sup>(155)</sup> or scholar.

Instead, Umm Basir al-Muhajirah, the author of the *Dabiq* article, encourages them to have faith in their own capabilities <sup>(156)</sup>.

IS also explains that religious learning is not the only knowledge worthy of attainment and that women are free to deepen their knowledge in the profane sciences (although articles on this topic are scarce). One such article appears in Issue 18 of *al-Naba'* and is titled *The faculty of medicine in al-Raqqa*. The article proudly states that a third of the students enrolled at the faculty are women and includes an interview with the father of a female medical student who moved to Raqqa from Mosul with his daughter so that she may study to one day 'serve the caliphate' as a doctor <sup>(157)</sup>.

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<sup>(153)</sup> 'From the atheist training camps in the Qandil mountains to *jihad* in the ranks of the caliphate army', *al-Naba'*, Issue 14, 19 January 2016.

<sup>(154)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 'A *Jihad* without fighting', op. cit.

<sup>(155)</sup> In Sunni Islam, *imam* is most commonly used to refer to the person who leads the communal mosque prayer. Imams can also be sought for specific religious guidance.

<sup>(156)</sup> 'To our sisters: a brief interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajirah', op. cit.

<sup>(157)</sup> 'The faculty of Medicine in al-Raqqa province', *al-Naba'*, Issue 18, 16 February 2016.

## 6. Conclusion

IS seeks to present itself as an organisation that is grateful to its female constituents for their contributions to the jihadi cause. Women are valued as mothers to the next generation, guardians of the IS ideology and — increasingly — actors in their own right. It is worth noting that the first time women are mentioned in *Rumiyah* (Issue 1), they are described as the ‘allies’ of men.

However, despite the transformations witnessed in the role of women, the preferred nature of women’s *jihad* remains that of the traditional stay-at-home woman who supports her family and husband and instils in her children the love of *jihad* and sacrifice.

Throughout its publications — in Arabic and in English — IS unabashedly and emphatically promotes a patriarchy (‘men are in charge of women’<sup>(158)</sup>), enforces segregation of the sexes and severely restricts women’s movement (both in public and within their own homes). However, in contrast to its predecessors in the jihadi arena, the group hints at the possibility for female self-development, including through education.

Furthermore, the voices of women in the English publications — exemplified by Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah — are highly assertive. Whether it is defending sex slavery or urging the wives of the Sunnis who are fighting against IS to leave their ‘apostate’ husbands<sup>(159)</sup>, these female propagandists help promote the interests of IS.

The incentives put across by IS to recruit women are in many ways gender neutral. IS propaganda focuses on ideas and concepts that speak to the emotions of both men and women in equal measure, namely the revival of the Islamic caliphate. An additional incentive for women lies in that they deem themselves to be the first line of defence against so-called western efforts to eradicate authentic Muslim identity.

Female jihadis are as ideologically motivated as their male counterparts and their sense of empowerment lies in contributing to the building of an Islamic state. They also seek martyrdom and divine compensation. In the words of one IS propagandist (Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah): ‘let these Crusaders take heed, for just as the *Khilafah* [caliphate] is filled with men who love death more than the Crusaders love life, likewise are the women of the Islamic State’<sup>(160)</sup>.

Women are also aware of the difficulties that await them when they travel to IS territories. IS publications certainly do not attempt to portray women’s lives in the

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<sup>(158)</sup> ‘The *fitrah* of mankind and the near extinction of the Western woman’, op. cit.

<sup>(159)</sup> Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, ‘From our sisters: they are not lawful spouses for one another’, *Dabiq*, Issue 10, 13 July 2015.

<sup>(160)</sup> ‘The *hijrah* of Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah’, op. cit.

caliphate through rose-tinted glasses. On the contrary, IS is upfront in informing would-be recruits about the hardships they can expect to find in their new home; however, the group portrays the impending suffering and adversity as part of God's plan and as a stepping stone to paradise.

One of the most problematic issues in understanding the motives behind female jihadism is that it is often measured by Western standards. It is important to realise that women accept their roles as delineated in IS propaganda — seen as infantilising or disparaging by those who do not subscribe to a similar worldview — because they believe them to be divinely ordained. This explains why the discourse promoted by IS female propagandists does not differ from that of their male counterparts <sup>(161)</sup>.

While IS did contribute to the revival of the early combatant *mujahida* model, it did not attempt to rearticulate the discourse concerning the rights of women in Islam. Thus, while the call for women to play their part in combatant *jihad* is likely to continue to evolve, IS argumentation will remain embedded within classical frames of reference and will continue to draw exclusively on traditional Islamic jurisprudential methods of authentication.

In effect, the ideological basis for women's participation in physical *jihad* has been extensively argued and defended. Numerous examples of women, who either carried out terrorist attacks or were arrested preventively, prove that women are willing to use violence if the ideology allows them to do so. For now, it is not yet their role, but this balance may easily shift according to the organisation's strategic needs and developments on the ground.

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<sup>(161)</sup> See, for example, Abu Hanieh, H. and Abu Rumman, M., *Infatuated with martyrdom: female jihadism from al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, 2017.

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