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WOMEN OF ISIS: AN OVERVIEW OF GENDER FEMALE ROLES WITHIN THE CALIPHATE

Lorena Stella Martini

More than a year after the declaration of the defeat of Da'esh in Iraq and while the battle against its last strongholds in Syria is said to be over, there is still a lot of debate going on about the way how this self-declared state defied the modern nation state to craft a transnational polity based on an extremely strict, fundamentalist interpretation of the *shari'a*. While IS's military dimension has widely been under the international spotlights, details about its internal, organizational and social nature have not been as much disclosed. Other than the obvious difficulties of obtaining first-hand information about life under ISIS, it is also worth wondering whether showing how this proto-state was structured by applying Islamic traditional categories over modern institutions might have actually frightened and discouraged many.

Nevertheless, while many questions still linger unanswered, a framework of life under the Caliphate has been provided by various sources. Among the many issues that can be delved into, focusing on the role of women within the Islamic State allows us to dismantle some of those stereotypes linked to the exclusive image of the woman in this context as a subaltern member of society, often disempowered and subjugated. While it would be absurd to deny the factual nature of such image, it is worth taking a closer, more detailed look to the evolving directions that a woman's life within the Islamic State could also acquire.

The primary role that was drawn for women within this jihadist stronghold was first of all the one of wife and mother. Thus, the woman was responsible for taking care of her *mujahid* husband, giving birth to as many children as possible and bringing them up according to the ideology of the Caliphate. Fulfilling such a role implies that women joining the Islamic State would be willing – or either, would be pushed – to marry soon after their arrival, and that the wife of a *shahid* (martyr) would be strongly encouraged to remarry as soon as possible so as to keep on performing her duty.

In this framework, women's role was so important that they can to a certain extent be considered as "agents of state-building" that "contribute to ISIS's expansion efforts as wives and mothers."[1] This well responds to the conceptualization of a so-called "female jihad", namely a gender-specific interpretation of this concept that qualifies and elevates the so-called motherly and wifely duties to the status of a political act, given their backstage yet fundamental contribution to the jihadist mission.[2]

Indeed, the eleventh number of Dabiq (September 2015), the magazine of the Islamic State, addressed women in the following way: "As for you, O mother of lion cubs […] I inform you of the statement of the Prophet, "Every one of you is a shepherd and everyone is responsible for his herd ... And the woman is a shepherd in her house and is responsible for her herd." So have

[1] Saltman E. M., Smith M., "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part – Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2015), p. 14.
[2] Kneip K., "Female jihad—Women in the ISIS", *Politikon*, vol. 29 (2016), 88–106.

you understood, my Muslim sister, the enormity of the responsibility that you carry?"[3]

To corroborate IS's insistence on the traditional role of women, it is also worth mentioning the Manifesto on Women written and published in January 2015 by some supporters of the al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female police force whose specificity we will deal with later on. In spite of the active role played by the members of this brigade, this document overtly states that the woman is instrumental to the man and to her family: "(…) she was made from Adam and for Adam. Beyond this, her creator ruled that there was no responsibility greater for her than that of being a wife to her husband. (…) This is women's fundamental role and rightful place. It is the harmonious way for her to live and interact amidst her sons and her people, to bring up and educate, protect and care for the next generation to come."[4]

Anyway, this extremely conservative manifesto also recognized that there might be cases where women could be forced to leave the household, namely their place *par excellence*. Among such cases – the authors describe them as 'secondary functions of a woman'[5] – we find the possibility that a woman might have to work as a doctor or as a teacher. Such a mention paves the way to an extremely relevant issue, the one of the so-called gender parallel institutions, which were indispensable to the maintenance of the system of gender-segregation that Da'esh applied over its territories.

Hence, female-only sections were established in all those institutions where there was the need to address women-related affairs, so that the so feared gender mixing could be avoided. Women were thus included in the Islamic State's apparatus as

[3] "To our sisters: a jihad without fighting", Dabiq, n. 11 (September 2015), p. 44.
[4] Winter C., "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade", Quilliam (2015).
[5] Ibidem, p. 22

teachers (or more generally as educators) in girls' schools and universities, as doctors and nurses for female patients, or also as administrative employees in those offices meant to provide a range of services to the female new-comers (match-making included)[6].

Such an arrangement answered to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call for "scholars, judges, as well as people with military, administrative and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields"[7] to join the Islamic State's ranks. The need and search of female health workers was also confirmed by the online plea of 'Shams', a supposedly Malaysian doctor who migrated to the Islamic State in 2014. Once in Tabqah (Syria), she reported having been asked by the female representative of the local Emir to start working as a doctor for the women and children of the community. In this respect, in December 2014 she tweeted: "we need more professional *muhajirah* in the Islamic State. Currently we have all female staffs (sic!) hospital in Tabqah"[8]. As we can also see from this message, women would act as online recruiters and propagandists searching for new female initiates, following the logics that "women make more effective recruiters of other women than men"[9]. This is a role often played by Western female fighters, since their knowledge of the English language can prove extremely useful to recruit further *muhajirah*.

According to several sources, women also performed the role of vigilantes in the street of the Caliphate, thus engaging in the so-called *hisba*, in its recurrent meaning of "the actions of individuals or, more often, collective bodies that enforce Islamic law through

[6] Khelghat-Doost H., "Women of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): Redefining Empowerment for Caliphate Building", *Kanita international conference on gender studies- Universiti Sains Malaysia* (2018).
[7] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "A message to the mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan", *Al-Ḥayāt Media Center* (1 July 2014).
[8] Saltman E. M., Smith M., "Till Martyrdom…", p. 38
[9] Rafiq H., Malik N., "Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State", *Quilliam* (2015), p. 42.

coercion"[10]. The most representative example of such a role is provided by the al-Khansaa Brigade, a female police force that used to patrol the streets of Raqqa to control the adherence of women to the norms of the Caliphate and to violently punish those who did not respect them, by whipping or through torture instruments – such as the notorious 'biter'. The creation of this brigade in 2014 stemmed from the need to control women crossing checkpoints in the above-described situations of gender segregation that prevented men to search for weapons or smuggled objects under a woman's niqab.[11] The brigade would then evolve from a mere checkpoint guard force to an armed morality force, spreading from Raqqa to Mosul, Iraq.[12]

In this framework, it is paradoxical to notice how one of the highest form of "women empowerment" that was granted within the Caliphate, that is the possibility for women to be part of the local police, actually represented a tool to limit other women's rights and freedoms. Some records suggest how these women forces would be later found also in the territories controlled by IS in Libya, due to the movement of one of al-Khansaa's founders, Umm Rayan, from Raqqa to Sirte. [13] There, women have also been reported to receive proper military training, as if they would also have to fight on the war field[14], thus confirming as well as going beyond the gendered conception of female jihad above described. This instance leads us to try to frame the Islamic State in the debate concerning the participation of women to armed jihad, which has been a subject of discussion within the jihadist galaxy throughout the last decades.

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[10] Vidino L., "Hisba in Europe? Assessing a murky phenomenon", European Foundation for Democracy (2013).

[11] "How the Islamic State uses women to control women", *Syria Direct*, 25 March 2015.

[12] "Isis's persecution of women", Counter Extremism Project (2017).

[13] Zelin A.Y., "The others- Foreign fighters in Libya", The Washington Institute for Near Est Policy, Policy Note n. 45 (2018), pp. 11-12.

[14] Idem.

Indeed, there seems to have been a rhetorical and tactical shift throughout the last few years concerning the active fighting roles that women affiliated to Da'esh can assume.

While its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) made overtly use of female suicide bombers, especially during the civil war in 2007-2008, the newly proclaimed Islamic Caliphate initially adopted a different policy, explaining how women's place was meant to be far from the battlefield. One of the reasons for such a difference could be found in a *fatwa* issued by 'Abdullah 'Azzam in the eighties: according to the Palestinian scholar, defensive jihad was to be conceived as "*fard al-'ayn*" (a personal duty) for all Muslims, being them men or women.[15] In this framework, as declared by AQI's leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2005, the situation of occupation in Iraq at the time constituted a situation of emergency where also women, such as all the other believers, were asked to take a more active role.[16] This is also recalled by the al-Khansaa Brigade's Manifesto mentioned above, where the authors specify how a woman should only engage in jihad in very extreme cases such as the Iraqi or the Chechen ones, 'when the enemy is attacking her country and the men are not enough to protect it'.[17] The first period of the Caliphate was instead characterized by territorial gains stemming from offensive jihad, with plenty of male volunteers that could fight and sacrifice without the need to call women to arms.

Following the content of Azzam's *fatwa*, the group started to change its rhetoric and communication strategy coinciding with its first important territorial losses in the framework of the extenuating battles against the international coalition opposing it. Among the most representative examples of such a change, the message

[15] Winter C., Margolin D., "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combattants and the Islamic State", *CTC Sentinel*, n. 10 (2017).
[16] Winter C., "ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention", Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (September 2018).
[17] Winter C., "Women of the Islamic State…", p. 22.

spread by the eleventh issue of Rumiyah (July 2017), an online magazine published by Da'esh between 2016 and 2017. After having outlined the traditional role of women - "Let us be as those women who knew their role and fulfilled them, for being supportive of your *mujahid* husband is one of your key roles in the land of jihad, my dear sister, and the importance of it cannot be overemphasized. Let your home be a place of rest for his mind rather than a house of complaints…"[18]-, in the next page we find clear references to women on the battlefield: "Rise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah […] The race is at its final stages, so continue your struggle, my dear sister, even if you are trembling or slowing down."[19]

Moreover, a video broadcasted by IS on February 2018, titled "Inside the Khilafah n°7", shows for the first time women carrying weapons and fighting, while the voice describes them as "chaste *mujahid* women journeying to their Lord with the garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for their religion and for the honor of their sisters imprisoned by the apostate Kurds".[20]

Neither an overt message nor a clarification concerning the diverse role that women could assume to defend IS's territories – see proper fighting on the war field or guerilla fighting or suicide operations – were spread by IS concerning this matter; nevertheless, the use of female suicide bombers in the battle for Mosul was often reported[21], though not verified.

[18] "Our Journey to Allah", *Rumiyah,* n. XI (July 2017), p. 14.
[19] Ibidem, p. 15.
[20] "New video message from The Islamic State: "Inside the Caliphate #7"", Jihadology (February 2018), min. 2:30.
[21] Trew B., Shammary A., "Isis turns to jihadist brides in last-ditch attempt to hold off Iraqi forces in Mosul", *The Times* (July 2017).

All in all, a proper understanding of the role of women within IS needs an in-depth analysis suitable to show its multi-layered nature: beyond the most traditional image of the woman as a wife and mother, the organization demonstrated to also necessitate female efforts within its complex state-building process. More than that, when this stage of expansion left the pace to a much more defensive phase and the focus on building an Islamic society was shadowed by the need to struggle for the very existence of the Caliphate, the organization made some first hints to the necessity of having also women pro-actively participating to the jihad.

In conclusion, what we can draw from this analysis is that while the Islamic State in its most ideological (and utopist) form had shaped specific, *ad hoc* roles for its women, an emergency status calls for emergency measures, though always justified by Islamic references.

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