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Gendered Jihad

Islamic State's Appeal to Western Women

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Abstract

This master thesis explores the relation between gender and female involvement in jihadist terrorist organisations. The aim is to comprehend Islamic State (IS)'s success in recruiting the largest number of Western women compared to its jihadist predecessors. In doing so, this thesis tackles the following research question: To what extent do jihadist terrorist organisations make use of gender in their appeal to women and how can this appeal be explained through feminist theory? In answering this question, this thesis is divided threefold. First, it explores the role of gender and female involvement in three jihadist terrorist organisations: the Chechen, Palestinian and Al-Qaeda case. Second, it analyses the appeal IS makes in its recruitment of Western women from a gender perspective. Third, it comprehends how this appeal can fit in the framework of feminist theory. This thesis concludes that the narrative IS puts forward to Western women is highly gendered. In its attempt to recruit Western women, IS frames the contribution of women as essential to the survival of the caliphate and calls on women to express their feminine identity. Herewith, IS constructs a powerful image of the 'ideal female recruit'.

Though often overlooked in terrorism research, using gender as an analytical tool can facilitate a broader theoretical understanding of the narratives of jihadist organisations and the ways they might appeal to women. In order to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon, this thesis calls for (1) broadening the feminist conception of agency and (2) rethinking the public/private dichotomy. Critically assessing feminist conceptualisations allows to unravel how jihadist organisations increasingly recruit women and exploit gender by constructing female agency and a promise of empowerment.

Key words: Islamic State, terrorism, women, gender, feminist theory, radicalisation, agency

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Introduction

In November 2013, 19-year old Aqsa Mahmood called her parents from Syria to tell them she had joined Islamic State (IS). Before her move to the IS-held territory, Mahmood was raised in an affluent neighbourhood in Glasgow and attended a private school. As a teenager, she listened to Coldplay, read Harry Potter, shared her father's passion for cricket and aspired a career in pharmacy. When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Mahmood grew more religious and started spending more time online. She became obsessed with Islamist extremism. She started to promote life under IS and called for terror attacks against her home country. After her move to Syria, she remained present online, advising other girls and women on making *hijrah*[1] to IS-held territory and praising terror attacks committed in Europe.[2] In Syria, Mahmood rose up to IS's all-female force Al-Khansaa brigade. She was put under United Nations (UN) sanctions subjecting her to a global asset freeze and travel ban.[3]

Mahmood is one of the estimated 550 Western women known to have travelled from Western countries to Iraq and Syria to join IS, along with a few thousand women from the Middle East and North Africa.[4] The organisation has recruited over 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries as of December 2015, more than any jihadist organisation in the past.[5] IS's embrace of transnational terrorism has alarmed policymakers around the world and spurred debate over strategies for defeating the group.[6]

The unprecedented speed and scope by which IS has recruited and mobilised these fighters has been researched extensively.[7] However, the scope of this debate has mainly been confined to men's motivations. Women are generally neglected in the discussion.[8] This is somewhat surprising, as the number of women drastically increased since IS-leader Abu Bakr

[1] See Appendix I for a glossary with non-English terms.
[2] Counter Extremism Project, 'Aqsa Mahmood' https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/aqsa-mahmood (12 March 2018).
[3] Independent, 'UN Sanctions on British IS Members' (version 29 September 2015), http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/un-sanctions-on-british-isis-members-family-of-aqsa-mahmood-describe-governments-move-as-useless-a6672616.html (12 March 2018).
[4] Carolyn Hoyle (ed.), 'Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS' (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2015) 8.
[5] Julia Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah": Narratives in the propaganda of the Islamic State to address and radicalize Western Women. An Exemplary analysis of the online magazine Dabiq', *Journal for Deradicalisation* 9 (2017), 39-100, there 44.
[6] Debangana Chatterjee, 'Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3 (2016) 2, 201-218, there 201.
[7] Ibidem.
[8] Edwin Bakker, Seran De Leede, 'European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic', *ICCT International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (1 April 2015), 1-15.

al-Baghdadi declared the caliphate in 2014.[9] Societies are confronted with the challenge of an increasing number of women travelling to IS-territory, as well as an influx of women returning from IS to their home countries.[10]

The calling on women by terrorist organisations is not a new phenomenon. Over the past two decades in particular, the number of female participants in terrorist organisations has been growing significantly and is expected to increase in the future.[11] The involvement of women in IS brings this debate back in focus.[12] The organisation makes a puzzling case in its recruitment of women, especially with regards to Western women.[13] It appears paradoxical that women from countries that emphasise gender equality and emancipation have the wish to start a new life within a jihadist group known for its gender conservative character.[14]

The relatively high involvement of women in IS underscores the relevance of studying the message the organisation spreads in recruiting women.[15] In this thesis, the complex and sensitive matter of (Western) female migrants joining terrorist organisations will be examined through a gendered lens. The aim is to answer the following research question: To what extent do jihadist terrorist organisations make use of gender in their appeal to women and how can this appeal be explained through feminist theory?

Academic debate

Women and terrorism are often treated as antithetical to one another.[16] As a consequence, research on female radicalisation is limited. Gendered assumptions have primarily victimised

[9] Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah", 44.
[10] Ibidem, 45.
[11] Katharina von Knop, 'The Female Jihad: Al-Qaeda's Women', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007) 5, 397-414, there 398-399.
[12] Bakker, De Leede, 'European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic', 2-3. Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, ''Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon' (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2015) 4.
[13] This research makes use of the term 'Western women' to refer to women who originated from Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand. There is a significant amount of diversity within the profiles of radicalized women who have migrated to IS territory. It is thus not possible to create a broad profile of females likely to be radicalized based on age, location, ethnicity, family relations and even religious backgrounds. Because of this, it remains difficult and even controversial to label certain groups as susceptible or 'at risk' of radicalisation, based on socioeconomic or religious backgrounds. To avoid this risk, this thesis focuses on Western women in general. For more information on the profiling of women: Saltman and Smith, ''Till Martyrdom Do Us Part': Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon' (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2015).
[14] Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah", 45. Katharina Kneip, 'Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS', *Politikon* 29 (2016), 88-106, there 88.
[15] Anita Peresin, Alberto Cervone, 'The Western Muhajirat of ISIS', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (2015) 7, 495-509, there 506.
[16] Rachel K. Inch, 'Jihad and Hashtags: Women's Roles in the Islamic State and Pro-Jihadist Social Networks' (MA Research Paper Western University 2017) 2.

women: they are often perceived as inherently more peaceful and nonviolent compared to men.[17] Similarly, many studies that deal with female participation in terrorist organisations assign women the victim role therewith neglecting their agency.[18] Subsequently, representations of female extremism are often based on 'racial, religious and gendered presuppositions'.[19] The discussion about women in contemporary jihadist groups tends to essentialise the phenomenon on the basis of gender stereotypes.[20] Women who join jihadist organisations are quickly labelled 'jihadist brides' performing 'sexual jihad'. These representations reduce women to the status of 'sex slaves' and 'naïve young girls'. Scholars have increasingly started to deconstruct and critique these representations as they neglect the underlying mechanisms of the different levels of radicalisation associated with jihadist groups.[21]

Following this logic, gender scholar Sandra Ponzanesi concludes that radicalised females are often assigned as deviant, sick and powerless. As a result, the response of authorities is caretaking rather than repressive.[22] The phenomenon is frequently characterised as 'psychological rather than political, and involuntary rather than agential'.[23] Such characterisations fall short of the complex nature of women's participation.

In order to close this gap in terrorism research, scholars Jacob L. Stump and Priya Dixit suggest a feminist analysis with a focus on gender as it underlines the agency of women and questions traditional methodology of terrorism research.[24] Hence, the basis of this thesis lies in questioning the framing of radicalised women as victims and inactive agents by using as gender as an analytical tool.

Indeed, scholars who have incorporated this gender perspective made significant contributions to the debate of female participation in terrorist groups.[25] In the case of IS, scholar Dallinn Van Leuven contends that making use of gender as an analytical tool is vital in

[17] Alisa O'Connor Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows: Women as Propaganda in the Chechen Conflict', in: Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry (eds.), *Women, Gender and Terrorism* (London 2011), 83-95, there 85.
[18] Cindy D. Ness, Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility and Organization (Routledge 2015).
[19] Jessica Katz, 'Where do the women fit in? A theoretical analysis of Western women's participation and role in the Islamic State' (Swedish Defence University 2015) 10.
[20] Ibidem, 29; Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Pennsylvania 2011) 33.
[21] Conseil du statut de la femme, 'Women and Violent Radicalization' (Quebec Research Paper 2016), 30.
[22] Katz, 'Where do the women fit in?', 15. Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Female Suicide Bombers and the Politics of Gendered Militancy', in: Sandra Ponzanesi (red.), *Gender, Globalization, and Violence: Postcolonial Conflict Zones* (New York 2014), 82-107, there 82-84.
[23] Ponzanesi, 'Female Suicide Bombers', 83.
[24] Jacob L. Stump, Priya Dixit, Critical Terrorism Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods (London 2013), 68-78.
[25] Ibidem.

understanding the group's dynamics, motivations and strategies.[26] Using this perspective, counter-extremism scholars Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith conclude that women are often attracted to the ideology of IS because of feelings of social isolation, uncertainty of belonging to a (Muslim) community, anger, frustration and feelings of injustice.[27] Another conclusion that could be drawn from the existing literature is the importance of the internet in female radicalisation.[28] According to political scientist Olivier Roy, the internet is the 'female tool of communication, propaganda and information'.[29] This phenomenon continues after their move to IS as they establish active online presences. Not only does the internet function as a means to justify their decision, it is also a way to attract others to join the caliphate.[30]

Based on the above, there might be a relation between gender and the process of radicalisation. However, there is still an absence of both a strong theory on the role of gender in female participation in terrorist groups and testing of that theory.[31] Moreover, few studies have been conducted into the gender mechanisms at work in the narrative and recruitment strategies of IS. Van Leuven found that the narrative of IS is largely structured to draw young men as recruits by employing 'hyper-masculinised' and 'hyper-militarised' representations as the epitome of 'real men'.[32] Using this perspective to comprehend the way IS appeals to Western women remains largely under researched.[33]

This thesis will contribute to the debate in two ways. First, the disciplinary gap of women in terrorism studies will be addressed by incorporating a gender perspective. Second, this thesis attempts to provide insight on whether, and if so, IS makes use of gender as an appeal to recruit Western women. In doing so, this thesis will add to the existing literature by examining the relation between gender and female radicalisation.

[26] Dallin Van Leuven (ed.), 'Analysing the Recruitment and Use of Foreign Men and Women in ISIL through a Gender Perspective', in: Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, Christophe Paulusen (red.), *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond* (The Hague 2016), 97-120, there 107.
[27] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 9.
[28] Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah"', 56.
[29] Olivier Roy, 'What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism? – A scientific perspective on the causes/circumstances of joining the scene' (Speech BKA Autumn Conference 2015) 8.
[30] Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah", 56.
[31] Karen Jacques, Paul J. Taylor, 'Female Terrorism: A Review', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (2009) 3, 499-515, there 500.
[32] Van Leuven, 'Analysing the Recruitment and Use of Foreign Men and Women in ISIL', 107.
[33] Mehmet Ümit Necef, '"If men were men then women would be women": ISIL's construction of masculinity and femininity' (Center for Mellemoststudier 2016) 6.

Theoretical framework

In order to comprehend the relation between gender and female radicalisation, it is first important to outline the definitions of key concepts and the theoretical base on which this thesis builds. The first is the concept of radicalisation, a highly contested term within academic literature.[34] Radicalisation is often understood as an individual process that transforms one's value system and happens not promptly but in several phases towards extremism.[35] Theoretical radicalisation models developed over the years suggest the necessity of multilevel analysis; it is the interconnection of multi-layered, complex factors involving both radicalisation and recruitment to extremism which results in a 'distinct cocktail of grievance, mobilisation and ideology'.[36] Radicalisation ranges from personal questions of agency and belonging, to structural circumstances such as unemployment, to organisational factors such as the chance to join a high-status group.[37] Radicalisation is henceforth defined as 'the adoption of an ideologized reading of the world whose logic becomes a framework for life, action and meaning' and 'the process of withdrawal into ideological certainties, accompanied by a totalising and exclusive way of interpreting the world'.[38]

Engaging with research on radicalisation thus provides knowledge into the motivations and circumstances that make individuals perceptive to radical ideologies. Within radicalisation theory, two types of factors are distinguished that influence the process. On the one hand, *push factors* are personal reasons that push individuals towards radical ideas. Scholars demonstrate male and female radicalisation is comparable regarding push factors, although not fully equivalent.[39] On the other hand, *pull factors* attract potential radicals and consist of narratives that offer alternatives to negative push factors. Push factors are rooted in the individual background, whereas pull factors are rooted in the offered ideology of a certain group.[40] Since push factors are highly individual and fit more in the study of psychology, this thesis focuses primarily on pull factors.

[34] Some scholars define it as the pathway towards violence, while others define it as the pathway towards extreme thought, see: Peter Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalization', *International Affairs* 89 (2013) 4, 873-893, there 873.
[35] Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalization', 873.
[36] Haras Rafiq, Nikita Malik, 'Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State' (Quilliam Foundation 2015) 16.
[37] Elizabeth Pearson, Emily Winterbotham, 'Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation', *The RUSI Journal* 162 (2017) 3, 60-72, there 61.
[38] Conseil du statut de la femme, 'Women and Violent Radicalization', 19.
[39] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 9.
[40] Idem.

As this thesis will address radicalisation from a gender perspective, it is necessary to define what gender is. Early definitions of gender were meant to distinguish between the social and biological differences of men and women. The term was 'conceptualised as the socially defined roles, attitudes and values which society ascribes as appropriate for one sex or the other'.[41] Later conceptualisations include the notion of power and thus view it as a social and cultural construct based on the assumed power and position that a person possesses.[42] Since gender is used as a major criterion for the distribution of important resources in society, including political positions, it is an important determinant of social stratification and inequality.

Though often confused, gender and sex are not synonymous. While biological maleness and femaleness is one's sex, gender refers to characteristics that a person biologically classified as either male or female is expected to have based on the person's sex.[43] In other words, gender describes the socially constituted behavioural expectations, stereotypes and rules that construct masculinity and femininity.[44] Gender roles are strongly determined by cultural and social backgrounds. Indeed, gender is one of the main determinants of marginalisation, which has been a primary concern of feminist theory.[45] However, feminist theory has yet to engage with radicalisation theory on the basis of gender analysis. The focus in terrorism research is often on ideological and cognitive factors, whereas radicalisation is in most cases connected to gender-related issues such as sexism and gender-role rigidity.[46] Engaging with a gender perspective does not only provide insights into gender-specific aspects of the radicalisation processes, but also into the possible prevention of terrorism and countering radicalisation. In fact, recent research on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) argues that governments should 'turn their eyes more towards women', as they play a valuable role in countering terrorism. It urges that 'a gendered approach to CVE programming' is essential in countering terrorism.[47]

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[41] Tunde Agara, 'Gendering Terrorism: Women, Gender, Terrorism and Suicide Bombers', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5 (2015) 6, 115-125, there 118-119.
[42] Ibidem, 118-119.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986) 5, 1053-1075, there 1056-1057.
[45] Anna Gilarek, 'Marginalization of "the Other": Gender Discrimination in Dystopian Visions by Feminist Science Fiction Authors', *Text Matters* 2 (2012) 2, 221-238, there 222.
[46] European Union, 'Radicalisation and counter-radicalisation: A Gender Perspective' (version April 2016), http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/581955/EPRS_BRI(2016)581955_EN.pdf (9 January 2018).
[47] Brookings, 'A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism' (version 30 July 2014), https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-gendered-approach-to-countering-violent-extremism-lessons-learned-

By analysing the appeal IS makes to Western women from a gender perspective, this thesis engages with feminist constructivism as a theoretical base. This international relations theory is concerned with how ideas about gender influence global politics. Scholars Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl argue that feminism and constructivism complement each other on the basis of agency.[48] Feminism contributes to constructivism in the sense that gender and power are integral elements in the processes of construction, whereas constructivism provides tools in explaining how gender and power is socially constructed and reproduced.[49] Similarly, as feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe argues, a feminist approach is distinctive in three major aspects: (1) *epistemologically* because it challenges traditional understanding of knowledge, (2) *methodologically* as it involves curiosity that takes women's lives seriously and (3) *politically* since it is driven by goals to bring about social change.[50] Ultimately, a feminist interpretation allows to unravel how gendered ideas of masculinity and femininity have formed the lives of individuals and can therefore be seen as an important determinant of one's choices and of global power relations.

The aim of engaging with this theory is threefold. First, a feminist constructivist perspective allows to critique and deconstruct current definitions of terrorism of what constitutes a terrorist act or method. The second is to include female terrorists in the terrorist frame and critique the conventional notion of women as victims.[51] Last, but certainly not the least, feminist constructivism allows to view female participation in terrorist organisations as proclaiming their agency through resistance to gender norms.[52]

Methodology and sources

To comprehend the recent rise of female participation in terrorist organisations, the historical background of the phenomenon will be explored in the first chapter. Broader analysis of the evolution of women in terrorism is vital to explain the phenomenon in the context of IS. Does gender play a role at all in other terrorist groups? And are these women liberated or

from-women-in-peacebuilding-and-conflict-prevention-applied-successfully-in-bangladesh-and-morocco/ (9 January 2017).

[48] Birgit Locher, Elisabeth Prügl, 'Feminism and Constructivism: Worlds Apart or Sharing the Middle Ground', *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (2001) 1, 112-129, there 113.

[49] Ibidem, 113.

[50] Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Sense of International Politics (Berkeley 2014) 31.

[51] Laura Sjoberg, 'Feminist Interrogations of Terrorism/Terrorism Studies', *International Relations* 23 (2009) 1, 69-74, there 71.

[52] Jessica Auchter, 'Gendering Terror', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14 (2012) 1, 121-139, there 123.

subjugated?[53] Or would it be useful to comprehend the phenomenon in a different conceptualisation of liberation? It is important to analyse female involvement in other terrorist groups as these are likely to correspond with the case of IS.[54] Still, the roles and opportunities in the organisations differ according to ideology.[55] By means of a literature review, the aim of the first chapter is to analyse how gender plays a role in jihadist terrorist organisations to recruit women. Scholars argue that the roots of increasing female participation in terrorist organisations can be found in religious groups since the late 1990s.[56] Therefore, three case studies will be analysed: the Chechen, Palestinian and Al-Qaeda female terrorists.[57] These organisations are most notorious for their employment of women and allow for a greater understanding in the changing subjectivity of women in terrorist groups and the diversification of their responsibilities.[58]

In the second and third chapter, the message IS spreads to Western women will be examined. Since the declaration of the caliphate, IS's propaganda became increasingly focused on women, planned and distributed with the utmost precision.[59] Compared to other jihadist organisations, IS's intensive use of the internet and social media has reached professionality and maximum output.[60] Since the internet serves as an important tool in female radicalisation, it would be valuable to research female-targeted social media accounts and online platforms. However, even though these online messages are often in line with IS's thought, they are decentralized and frequently unofficial.[61] In order to get a coherent image of IS's female targeted narratives, the online magazine *Dabiq* (chapter two) and the online manifesto *Women of the Islamic State* (chapter three) will be analysed. These two documents are few of the

[53] S.V. Raghavan, V. Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?, *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15 (2014) 2, 197-211, there 198.
[54] Musial, '"My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah"', 48.
[55] Bloom, *Bombshell,* 10.
[56] Adriana Obonova, The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists: The Case of Islamic State's Recruitment (Master thesis Prague 2017) 32.
[57] Labelling a group or a person 'terrorist' is contested in itself. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the definition of Alex P. Schmid will be used in defining terrorism. Following this definition, it is agreed upon that these three cases can be labelled 'terrorist groups'. See: Alex P. Schmid, 'The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6 (2012) 2, 158-160, there 158; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 'How New is the New Terrorism?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (2004) 5, 439-454.
[58] Obonova, 'The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists', 1.
[59] Gabriel Weimann, Jannis Jost, 'Neuer Terrorismus und Neue Medien', *Zeitschrift für Au ßen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 8 (2015) 3, 369-388, there 373; Musial, '" My sister, indeed you are a mujahidah"', 60.
[60] Musial, '" My sister, indeed you are a mujahidah"', 60.
[61] Combating Terrorism Center, 'The Islamic State's Internal Rifts and Social Media Ban' (21 June 2017), https://ctc.usma.edu/ctc-perspectives-the-islamic-states-internal-rifts-and-social-media-ban/ (10 May 2018).

original sources of data that were directly distributed by IS.[62] The expectation here is that IS makes use of a gender-specific narrative to specifically target women.

Dabiq is recognised as the leading propaganda medium of IS until September 2016, when *Rumiyah* replaced it.[63] The magazine was published by IS via the deep web, but it soon became widely distributed through various online platforms.[64] The aim of the internet magazine is 'not to get young radicalised Western Muslims to carry out attacks but to come to Syria' and is primarily focused on recruiting new members, state-building and legitimising IS.[65] It is targeted at potential radicals, specifically Western Muslims, rather than individuals who already sympathise with the ideology. For the analysis of the second chapter, the female-targeted section *To Our Sisters* will be used, which invites women to join the caliphate and offers ways for them to participate.[66]

To comprehend the narratives IS constructs, this thesis will build on the theory of *framing*. Theories on framing are largely founded in an attempt to better understand how social movements or groups construct messages. Social movements do not simply carry out ideas but are actively engaged in (re)producing frames to draw individuals to participate. Borrowing the definition of scholars Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, 'framing' is henceforth defined as the 'active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction'.[67] Hence, framing refers to the process in which agents develop a certain conceptualisation of an issue or change their thinking about that issue.[68] The result of this process leading to action is labelled 'collective action frames'.[69]

Scholars of framing often subsume the concept of narrative under the broader theory of framing.[70] Feminist theory has actively engaged with narrative as a way to persuasively communicate or convince those who lack access to expert discourses.[71] Research on narratives

[62] Matteo Vergani, Ana-Maria Bliuc, 'The evolution of ISIS' language: a quantitative analysis of the language of the first year of Dabiq magazine', *Terrorismo e Società* 2 (2015), 6-20, there, 8.
[63] The magazine is available online in several languages including English, Arabic, German and French.
[64] Vergani, Bliuc, 'The evolution of ISIS' language: a quantitative analysis of the language of the first year of Dabiq magazine', 8.
[65] Obonova, 'The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists', 21.
[66] Ibidem.
[67] Robert D. Benford, David A. Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), 611-639, there 614.
[68] Dennis Chong, James N. Druckman, 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007), 99-118, there 104-105.
[69] Ibidem.
[70] Kristine A. Olsen, 'Telling Our Stories: Narrative and Framing in the Movement for Same-Sex Marriage', *Social Movement Studies* 13 (2014) 2, 248-266, there 250.
[71] Ibidem, 249.

in social movements parallels but also diverges from framing.[72] Scholar Kristine A. Olsen distinguishes framing and narrative on the following basis:

> 'While frames specify a diagnosis and prognosis of a problem, narrative draws the audience in with the features of emplotment and temporality, which require the interpretive participation of listeners as they are engaged in an unfolding sequence of events that contains moral or practical consequences. Like frames, narratives are also action-oriented in that they are used to incite and sustain mobilization'.[73]

It is henceforth argued that the best way to study the narratives of IS, is to explore how the frames are constructed within a specific narrative as it provides insights into how potential recruits are drawn to its message. This thesis will focus on *strategic* framing from a gender perspective, which entails the process of framing that is deliberative, functional and goal directed: certain frames are developed to attract and interest individuals.[74]

Subsequently, the third chapter of this thesis will discuss how IS presents its perception of the role of women. In doing so, the manifesto *Women of the Islamic State* by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade will be analysed. The document was published on 23 January 2015 and is regarded as a recruitment tool IS uses to target women.[75] Comprehending how IS perceives women will allow for a more thorough understanding of the message it communicates and how it tries to attract potential female recruits.

The fourth chapter will provide insights in how the appeal IS makes can be understood from a feminist perspective. How can a gender interpretation of IS's narrative be useful in understanding the motivations of Western women to join the organisation? By making use of gender as an analytical tool, this thesis aims to uncover how gender is utilised by jihadist organisations in their appeal to recruit women.

[72] Olsen, 'Telling Our Stories', 250.
[73] Idem.
[74] Benford, Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements', 624.
[75] The manifesto was published in Arab. This might point out that it was not meant as propaganda for non-Arabic women. However, it is still perceived an important recruitment tool by IS as it strongly proclaims how women should develop, behave, dress and act in the caliphate. Charlie Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade' (Quilliam Foundation 2015).

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Context

Before moving to the historical analysis, it is first important to comprehend the context in which IS was founded. IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh, was founded in 1999 as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.[76] It initially pledged allegiance to terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Over the years, IS became notorious for its brutality including mass killings, abductions and beheadings, used to spread fear and terrorize its enemies. In June 2014, IS proclaimed itself as a 'worldwide caliphate', controlling a vast area of Syria and North-West Iraq.[77] The organisation demanded Muslims across the world to swear allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and to migrate to IS-territory. In July 2017, the group lost its largest city, Mosul, to the Iraqi army. After this defeat, its base shrunk dramatically. In December 2017, the United States (US) reported that the group retained a mere 2 percent of the territory it previously held.[78] Even though the group has weakened, the threat IS poses remains significant.[79] With its loss of territory, IS's recruitment efforts have intensified and its message continues to resonate with potential radicals.[80]

Inside IS-controlled areas, a strict interpretation of Sharia law is implemented. Unlike its jihadist predecessors, IS has a clear vision of where women stand in its society and the ambition to include women in the caliphate.[81] The organisation generally excludes women from public positions and emphasises their roles as mothers and wives.[82] However, the rejection of women in combat has started to shift.[83] October 2017 marked a change when *Rumiyah*

[76] ISIS is an acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; ISIL stands for Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; Daesh is an acronym for al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wal-Sham. This thesis refers to the organization as IS, as it is the most accepted term in academia. For a thorough analysis of IS's intentions and origins, see: The Atlantic, 'What ISIS Really Wants' (version March 2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/ (1 February 2018).
[77] The concept of 'caliphate' can be interpreted in various ways. Fundamental to all is the idea of leadership which is about the just ordering of Muslim society according to the will of God. IS has made the establishment of the caliphate a keystone of its ideological project. More information: Hugh Kennedy, *Caliphate: The History of an Idea* (New York 2016).
[78] Fox News, 'ISIS has lost 98 percent of its territory, officials say' (version 26 December 2017), http://www.fox32chicago.com/news/dont-miss/isis-has-lost-98-percent-of-its-territory-officials-say (15 April 2018).
[79] United Nations, 'Security Council 8178th Meeting' (version 8 February 2018), https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13202.doc.htm (15 April 2018).
[80] Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 'Dead or Alive? The Future of the Islamic State' (version 2 May 2018) https://www.gcsp.ch/News-Knowledge/Global-insight/Dead-or-Alive-The-Future-of-the-Islamic-State (15 May 2018).
[81] Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, 'Women of the Islamic State: The Evolving Role of Women in Jihad', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 8 (2016) 9, 21-26, there 21.
[82] Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows' 84.
[83] This thesis focuses will not focus on women's potential violent role in IS, since the impact of this announcement is still difficult to measure.

suggested that women must pick up arms and fight in jihad.[84] This is explained by the operational necessity and demonstrates the 'group's desperation'.[85] It also illustrates that IS has become increasingly appreciative of female participation in jihad.[86] It is expected that IS will make use of more women to participate in (suicide) missions, which might result in a further increasing number of women joining IS.[87]

[84] The Atlantic, 'The Myth of the ISIS Female Suicide Bomber' (version 8 September 2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/isis-female-suicide-bomber/539172/ (10 March 2018).
[85] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 18
[86] Ibidem, 18
[87] The Atlantic, 'The Myth of the ISIS Female Suicide Bomber' (version 8 September 2017), https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/isis-female-suicide-bomber/539172/ (10 March 2018).

Chapter 1. Female Terrorists: Reality versus Myth

> 'It is a woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of Jihad, and the way to die a martyr death… It is a woman who has shocked the enemy, with her thin, meager, and weak body… It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about women's weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement.'[88]

The above excerpt from an editorial in the Egyptian newspaper Al-Sha'ab illustrates the perception of female involvement in today's terrorism. Historically, women have been active in terrorist activities carried out by numerous groups.[89] Over the years, their roles have shifted from 'soft roles', such as logistics and recruitment, to more visible and often violent roles.[90] This growing trend has the general public and counterterrorism specialists concerned because of the implication that women will be key players in future terrorist attacks.[91]

The transformation of the role of women is mostly pronounced in religious groups since the late 1990s.[92] In early years, Islamic extremist groups explicitly relegated women to supporting roles. Generally characterised by a conservative vision of women's roles, the groups used religious arguments to justify women's exclusion and offered them no visible role.[93] The late 1990s and beyond witnessed women playing a greater 'frontline' role in these groups.[94] Martyrdom is one of the highest priorities in Islamic jihad and as Islamic terrorism has been the most common form of terrorism since the 1990s, the number of women active in violent roles increased.[95] Terrorist groups are becoming more aware of the tactical and strategical advantages of employing women for (suicide) missions.[96] They are often confronted with the pragmatic need of mobilising women.[97] At the same time, feminist scholars argue that the increased

[88] Karla J. Cunningham, 'Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26 (2003) 3, 171-195, there 183.
[89] Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 198.
[90] Ibidem, 197; Between 1985 and 2010, female suicide bombers committed over 257 attacks on behalf of terrorist networks, which represents approximately a quarter of the total number of the attacks committed; Mia Bloom, 'Bombshells: Women and Terror', *Gender Issues* 28 (2011), 1-21, there 2.
[91] Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 197.
[92] Obonova, 'The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists', 32.
[93] David Cook, 'Women Fighting in Jihad?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005) 5, 375-384, there 376.
[94] Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 197.
[95] IS belongs to the 'religious wave' of terrorism, which emerged in 1979. For a thorough analysis of the historical overview of terrorism and which waves of terrorism can be distinguished throughout history, please see: David C. Rapoport, 'The four waves of modern terrorism', in: A.L. Cronin & J.M. Ludes (eds.), *Attacking terrorism. Elements of a grand strategy* (Georgetown 2004), 46-74.
[96] Four frequent mentioned factors which contributed to the rise of women as suicide bombers are (1) their operational advantage, (2) greater publicity, (3) increased recruitment and (4) competition among terrorist groups in the same space. See: Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 202.
[97] Conseil du statut de la femme, 'Women and Violent Radicalization', 28.

presence of women might point to an evolving nature of their importance in the groups.[98] This raises the question to what extent the rise of female participation stems from pure pragmatism or from a progressed position of women in terrorist groups. Does gender play a role in jihadist terrorist groups? In this chapter, the increased participation of women in terrorist groups will be approached by examining their involvement in three case studies: the Chechen, Palestinian and Al-Qaeda case. By using gender analysis, this chapter will illuminate the gendered representations of female motivations to join a terrorist organisation. Emphasis is placed on the violent side of female involvement as this has been documented more extensively.

1.1 'Black Widows' and 'Zombies'

> 'Chechen women are the most dangerous for national security because they have carried out the most risky operations. If the trend continues, Chechen female bombers will continue to be a grave threat to Russian national security.' (statement by Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, on 11 May 2005)[99]

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chechnya tried to achieve independence.[100] In December 1995, Russian troops invaded Chechnya to disarm illegal arms foundations and to unseat General Dzhokar Dudayev, who had proclaimed Chechnya's independence. The invasion culminated in several failed coups resulting into a long series of military operations by the Russians and guerrilla attacks by the Chechen separatists. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed and over 500,000 people displaced since the start of the conflict. Since February 2000, rebel separatists started to apply terrorist tactics, carrying out multiple attacks on Russian civilians. In June 2000, the first suicide bombing took place, perpetrated by Hawa Barayev who became known as the first 'black widow'.[101]

Russian security services initially paid greater attention to men, but the 'mythology of the wily female suicide bomber began to take shape early in the conflict'.[102] After the attack on

[98] Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 200.
[99] Anne Speckhard, Khapta Akhmedova, 'The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006) 5, 429-492, there 468.
[100] The origins of the Russian-Chechen conflict lay much deeper and its roots can be traced back to the 19th century.
[101] Ness, Female Terrorism and Militancy, 361- 362.
[102] Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows', 84.

the Dubrovka Theatre in October 2002,[103] women accounted for the majority of suicide attacks in Russia.[104] Attacks committed by Chechen women have been incredibly lethal, killing over 320 people, with 11 people on average per attack.[105] The Chechen women present an intriguing case as they 'gave a clear way to the other Islamic females to fight in jihad'.[106]

Chechen female terrorists were named Black Widows by the Russian and international press when it became clear that many were acting out of revenge for the deaths of their husbands, brothers and close relatives in one of the two Chechen wars that Russia fought against Islamist rebels since 1994.[107] Besides the Black Widow narrative, another dominant representation of these women is the 'zombie narrative', which depicts these women as forced into terrorism by Chechen men.[108] There are several objections to make against these representations. The first narrative paints these women as victimised and the second as merely emotional, therewith perpetuating gendered assumptions about women and violence.[109] These representations reinforce gender roles, particularly the masculine/feminine divide of political/apolitical.[110] Reducing them to such neglects their relevance and significance in the Chechen-Russian conflict.

It is useful to approach such categorisations with the second wave feminist insight by recognising the personal as political.[111] This entails that all aspects of one's lives that were previously understood as purely 'personal' are in fact shaped by their broader social context.[112] Although the conception 'personal is political' has been in danger of becoming a cliché, it does highlight the importance of approaching the dichotomous thinking of the fundamentally dualistic private/public and personal/political divide with some fluidity. One of the implications that follows this logic, is that aspects of the personal life can be seen as 'stakes' in political struggle.[113] Herewith, the private life can be placed on the political agenda. Moreover, this

[103] During this attack, forty-one terrorists, including nineteen women, stormed the threatre and took eight hundred people hostage. After a three-day siege, Russian forces took control and killed all forty-one terrorists and up to 204 hostages due to gas poisoning.
[104] Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows', 86.
[105] Farhana Qazi, 'The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warrior of Islam', in: Laura Sjoberg, Caron E. Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (University of Georgia Press 2011) 29-56, there 33.
[106] Obonova, 'The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists', 35.
[107] Speckhard, Akhmedova, 'Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists', 2.
[108] Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows', 85.
[109] Jessica West, 'Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows': Reproducing Gendered Divisions', *Innovations: A Journal of Politics* 5 (2004), 1-16, there 6.
[110] Ibidem, 7.
[111] Gemma Edwards, 'Personal Life and Politics', in: Vanessa May (ed.), *Sociology of Personal Life* (London 2011), 147-160, there 153.
[112] Ibidem.
[113] Edwards, 'Personal Life and Politics', 153.

allows to include the acts of women in terrorism who may find their motivation in the 'personal' as political.

The Chechen case scrutinises this dichotomous understanding, as scholars researching Chechen female motivations found 'strong evidence of self-recruitment and strong willingness to martyr oneself on behalf of one's country and independence from Russia, to enact social justice for wrongs done to them, and to avenge for the loss of loved ones in their families'.[114] This further demonstrates that the personal and political may very well overlap and complement each other and can thus not be approached purely distinct. Moreover, scholar Mia Bloom found that the Chechen female terrorists acted out of 'revenge' and 'rape'.[115] The Chechen women were 'prepared to kill and to die to avenge the deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers and sons'.[116] The 'routine rape of the Chechen women by the Russian soldiers', which brought dishonour and shame, made up an additional motivating factor.[117] Chechen society is known for its traditional gender structures and women who have been raped are unable to marry or have children. Participating in terrorist attacks is seen as a means to reinstate that honour.[118] Following this logic, gender indeed plays a significant role in the Chechen case. In one of the few studies conducted into the role of gender in terror organisations, scholars S.V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramaniyan conclude that the Chechen female terrorists acted out of suppression to overcome their gender marginalisation.[119]

These motivations appear to be answered by the terrorist group. As a result of this marginalisation, women may seek refuge in a terrorist organisation. What follows is the offer of a 'double benefit' to these women: the group accepts the women who have been excluded from mainstream society or traditional gender roles and allows them to regain this honour by committing a terrorist act.[120] This is underlined by the following statement made by Chechen rebels after the first female suicide attack:

> 'The young woman, who was – inshaa-Allah – martyred, Hawa Barayev, is one of the few women, whose name will be recorded in history. Undoubtedly, she has set the most

[114] Ibidem; Speckhard, Akhmedova, 'Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists', 9.
[115] Bloom, *Bombshell*, 61-62.
[116] Laura Sjoberg, Caron E. Gentry, Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics (London 2007) 41.
[117] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 400.
[118] Olivia M. Bizovi, 'Deviant Women: Female Involvement in Terrorist Organizations' (Master thesis Pennsylvania 2014) 41.
[119] Raghavan, Balasubramaniyan, 'Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups', 205.
[120] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 400.

> marvellous example by her sacrifice. The Russians may well await death from every quarter now, and their hearts may appropriately be filled with terror on account of women like her. Let every jealous one perish in his rage! Let every sluggish individual bury his head in the dirt! She has done what few men have done'.[121]

The statement above marks a change in the perception of females seeking martyrdom. Since Barayev's action, the number of Chechen female terrorists radically increased. Indeed, scholars argue that the 'identity of women started to change from oppressed victims (…) to the successful warriors fighting for social change and crucial for the fruitful fulfilment of the group's aims'.[122]

However, looking more closely into the group's leaders' response to other female suicide attacks, we find that the group itself exploits gender for the purpose of recruitment.[123] Chechen terrorist leaders view the use of women in attacks as something of a failure and therefore make use of these female acts to attract men. The leaders blame the passivity of Chechen men for the sacrifice that these women made. The Chechen group notes that 'women's courage is a disgrace to a lot of modern 'men''.[124] Chechen women's involvement is herewith invoked by the group and its militant leaders to persuade men to abdicate their duty. The women are being recruited *because* they are female and therefore arouse less suspicion than men. It hence seems like their agency is still defined by men and is therefore limited.

1.2 'Virtuous Heroines', 'Damaged Goods' and 'Failed Women'

> 'She's the mother of the martyr, sister of the martyr, daughter of the martyr – and now she is the martyr herself'.[125]

The statement above was exclaimed by a Palestinian female leader in a rally honouring female suicide bombers. Since the late 1960s, Palestinian terrorists have grabbed headlines across the globe with high profile terror attacks.[126] The cause of modern Palestinian terrorism can be

[121] Cindy D. Ness, 'In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005) 5, 353-373, there 360-361.
[122] Obonova, 'The Changing Subjectivity of Female Terrorists', 35.
[123] Stack, 'Zombies versus Black Widows', 89.
[124] Ibidem.
[125] Anat Berko, Edna Erez, 'Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (2007) 6, 493-519, there 494-495.
[126] Devorah Margolin, 'A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism: Organized Perpetrators or Individual Actors?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39 (2016) 10, 912-934, there 913.

traced to a large number of instigators. One of the most popular explanations is the defeat of Arab states by Israel in the Six Days War of 1967, leading to the realisation that Palestinians could no longer rely on neighbouring Arab regimes, forcing them to work together as a people to achieve their goals.[127] Although the Arab defeat was instrumental, it was coupled with numerous other factors that led to increased Israeli-Palestinian and Palestinian-Arab relations.[128] After the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)'s expulsion from Jordan in 1970, numerous other significant events occurred, including Black September, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty and the 1982 Lebanon War. Hamas, created during the First Intifada (1987-1991), offered a religious jihadist military alternative to the Palestinian people. In the years that followed, increased tensions and resentment among all parties became a daily reality.

Correspondingly with aforementioned gendered notions, women in the Palestinian conflict are often seen as victims of violence, rather than perpetrators. The Islamic tradition, to which many Palestinian female terrorists belong, relegates women to the private sphere and restricts them from participating in the public domain.[129] Palestinian terrorist organisations emphasise the domestic aspects of women's contribution to national causes, such as bearing children and taking care of their family.[130] However, with the inclusion of women as suicide bombers, they are no longer praised for their support role, but also for 'becoming men's presumed equal partner in the national struggle'.[131] The Palestinian female terrorists therewith represent an interesting case, as they have indeed been called to participate violently, but at the same time have to obey patriarchal hegemony.

The catalyst for increased Palestinian female suicide bombings occurred on January 27, 2002, when a bomb exploded in the handbag of Wafa Idris in Jerusalem.[132] Idris was crowned a hero and represented as a symbol of new Muslim feminism. After Idris's action until May 2006, sixty-seven Palestinian women are known to have planned to carry out suicide attacks. Eight of them blew themselves up, the others were arrested. These women have been 'absorbed

[127] Margolin, 'A Palestinian Woman's Place in Terrorism', 918.
[128] Idem.
[129] Idem.
[130] Idem.
[131] Ibidem, 495.
[132] The roots of female participation within Palestinian terrorist groups lie already in the Intifada when an offshoot of Fatah- Al-Aqsa Martyrs Bridge – began recruiting women to support men's suicide attacks.

into a growing Palestinian cult of martyrdom'.[133] The myth that followed these women's actions in the Arab media has created the idea that these women acted independently and voluntarily and portrays these women as role models.[134] The Arab media have not only praised their acts, but also called upon men to learn from these women.[135]

As in the Chechen case, Palestinian female terrorists are subjected to similar representations. Besides the Arab representation of Palestinian female terrorists as heroines and pioneers, another more dominant approach is the casting of these women as 'damaged goods', particularly present in Western media.[136] Within this framing, the women are portrayed as being forcibly recruited for their missions, which explains women's choice for terrorism because she is unmarried, divorced or barren. It seeks to attribute certain 'shortcomings' that can be traced from the woman's personal past. This again scrutinises the understanding of the personal as presumably non- or less political. Reducing women's motivations for terrorism to personal stories such as trauma, abuse or an event that triggered the act neglects the political and structural circumstances that led to the events.

Approaching the Palestinian case with this logic provides grounds on which we can understand these personal problems as part of a greater political struggle.[137] To illustrate, in a study conducted by scholar Yoram Schweitzer, several failed female suicide bombers were interviewed. The interviewees agree that being viewed as 'damaged goods' by the society around them was not the main incentive to perpetrate their attacks. In many cases, the motives were phrased in nationalistic and religious terms. An additional factor was the desire to commit revenge against Israel.[138]

The 'damaged goods' interpretation can however be better understood when comprehending the actions of Palestinian female terrorists as a 'deviation' of assigned gender norms. As political scientist Katharina von Knop argues, 'female terrorists are motivated by many of the same reasons as men, but the gender-based oppression they face creates additional

[133] Jeffrey P. Rush, Elizabeth Schafluetzel-Iles, 'Fem Fatales: The Evolution and Significance of Female Involvement in Terrorist Networks and Suicide Bombing', *Professional Issue sin Criminal Justice* 2 (2001) 1, 1-22, there 10.
[134] Yoram Schweitzer, 'Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Reality vs. Myth', in: Yoram Schweitzer (ed.), *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality?* (Tel Aviv 2006), 25-41, there 28.
[135] Yoram Schweitzer, 'Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?' (Institute for National Security Studies 2008) 2.
[136] Washington Post, 'Female Suicide Bombers: The New Factor in Mideast's Deadly Equation' (version 27 April 2002), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/04/27/female-suicide-bombers-the-new-factor-in-mideasts-deadly-equation/52b4e38e-0798-4746-929c-5664d7f49004/?utm_term=.189edfbf3c01 (10 April 2018).
[137] Berko, Erez, 'Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism', 494-495.
[138] Schweitzer, 'Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?', 1-3.

motivation'.[139] Indeed, carrying out attacks allows these women to fulfil traditional male duties and provide the chance of being honoured in society. Especially in an ideology in which martyrdom is the highest goal, expressing radicalisation through violence is not surprising. Interpreting these women's actions within the framework of gender, political scientists Anat Berko and Edna Erez conclude that there are two types of Palestinian female terrorists: women who resist to *political* oppression and try to break gender structures to implement their resistance ('*motive'*), and those who oppose *patriarchal* oppression and use the Palestinian national struggle as a 'respectable' means to express their resistance ('*excuse'*). In some cases, there is a coalescing of dual oppression, therewith blurring the distinction between motive and excuse.[140] This motivation is far more present in the Palestinian case than in the Chechen. Scholars argue that the Chechen women did not seek the same kind of emancipation as the Palestinian women.[141] Journalist Barbara Victor underlines this notion, by stating that it is likely that Palestinian female bombers choose suicide terrorism as a means of escaping the tight constraints of traditional roles and obtain an equal status as their male counterparts.[142] Counter-extremism scholars Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova argue that this observation does not apply to the Chechen females.[143]

The findings of Berko and Erez's study however show that gender liberation for Palestinian women is never achieved. The attempt of women to 'claim a stake in male dominated national affairs', often results in a shaming of these women. In the end, many of the Palestinian women Berko and Erez interviewed regretted their decision for terrorism and saw it as a deviation from their destined family roles. This leads to a dominant third framing of Palestinian women's involvement in terrorism as 'failed women', in the women's eyes as well as in the eyes of their community.[144]

Palestinian resistance groups have been even more active in utilising women's (success) stories for the group's benefit than the Chechens. This is similarly done for the purpose of shaming men into action.[145] Even though the Palestinian groups are aware of the tactical and strategic benefits of utilising women for suicide missions, the group's leaders remain

[139] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 399.
[140] Berko, Erez, 'Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism', 511.
[141] Speckhard, Akhmedova, 'Black Widows', 10-11.
[142] Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Suicide Bombers* (New York 2003) 192.
[143] Ibidem.
[144] Berko, Erez, 'Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism', 511.
[145] Alisa Stack-O'Connor, 'Picked Last: Women and Terrorism', *Joint Force Quarterly* 44 (2007) 1, 95-100, 97.

conservative on this stance. As the leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ramadan Shallah, explained:

> 'The Shari'ah or religious judgment also deems that if there are sufficient numbers of men to carry out jihad, it is not preferable for women to carry out the jihad. The reason is to keep the woman away from any kind of harm.'[146]

In other words, female suicide bombers in Palestinian attacks is a matter of last resort. Moreover, research demonstrates that indeed the role of Palestinian women is mostly confined to a secondary role (providing support and facilitating in recruitment).[147] Even when a woman executes a suicide mission, the missions have largely been designed and orchestrated by men.[148] Hence, despite the framing of Palestinian women as heroes, this progressed position is in reality never achieved.

1.3 Al-Qaeda's Women

Al-Qaeda is a militant Jihadist organisation founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden and others who fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda presents an interesting link to the further development of IS as a terrorist organisation. Over the years, Al-Qaeda evolved from a close-knit group of 'Arab Afghans' fighting the Soviets into a transnational Islamic global movement.[149] Until the 2003 Iraq conflict, there were no reports of Al-Qaeda employing female suicide bombers, nor did the organisation appear to have a significant number of female members.[150] In March 2003, Al-Qaeda established a women's suicide division led by a woman supposedly named *Umm Osama* (the mother of Osama).[151] In an interview, Umm Osama declared that:

> 'the idea gathered interests after female suicide missions in Palestine and Chechnya. (…) We are willing to take any Muslim woman and we have Chechens, Afghans and Arabs from all countries. We are preparing to carry out operations as our predecessors did in Palestine and

[146] Stack-O'Connor, 'Picked Last' 97-98.
[147] Schweitzer, 'Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?', 39.
[148] Berko, Erez, 'Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism', 510.
[149] Sean P. Wilson, *The Evolution of Al-Qaeda* (Fort Leavenworth 2007) 1.
[150] Jessica Davis, 'Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (2013) 4, 279-291, there 282.
[151] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 404.

> Chechnya. (…) As a network and organization, we rely on the Internet for widest distribution.'[152]

In April 2003, the first female executed suicide attack took place in Iraq, which was claimed by Al-Qaeda in 2005. Scholars Jeffrey P. Rush and Elizabeth Schafluetzel-Iles note that: 'the fact that this terrorist network utilised the threat of this type of tactic is significant to the evolution of the female participation in terrorist networks'.[153] With the establishment of Umm Osama, the threat of female terrorists became regarded as credible and realistic which provided the group with more sensationalised media attention and attributing more attention to the group's political cause.[154] Indeed, a month after Umm's establishment, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued its first 'lookout for a female' in the War on Terrorism, leading to several arrests of women.[155]

The organisation has however been ambiguous on utilising women for missions. Ayman Al-Zawahri, Al-Qaeda's number two leader, announced in April 2008 that Al-Qaeda limits the role of women to caring for homes and children of fighters. This statement caused shock and disappointment amongst the Al-Qaeda women.[156] On several online platforms, women posted responses such as: 'How many times have I wished I were a man… When Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahri said there are no women in Al-Qaeda, he saddened and hurt me (…) I felt that my heart was about to explode in my chest… I am powerless'.[157] This quotation illustrates the desire amongst these women to participate violently in the struggle.

Similar to the previous cases, the attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda women were used for recruitment purposes. The attacks were not utilised to mobilise other women, but again, for the purpose of shaming Muslim men. Former head of Al-Qaeda, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi posted on a website: 'Are there no men, so that we have to recruit women? (…) Isn't it a shame for the sons of my nation that our sisters ask to conduct martyrdom operations while men are preoccupied with life?'[158] Moreover, Al-Qaeda seems to be even more aware of the tactical

[152] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 404.
[153] Rush, Schafluetzel-Iles, 'Fem Fatales', 10.
[154] Ibidem,11.
[155] Idem.
[156] Mia Bloom, 'Women and Terrorism' (version January 2017), http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-124 (15 April 2018).
[157] CBS News, 'Women Fight For Right to Join Al-Qaeda' (version 31 May 2008), https://www.cbsnews.com/news/women-fight-for-right-to-join-al-qaeda/ (20 April 2018).
[158] Jennie Stone, Katherine Pattillo, 'Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq: A Case Study', in: Laura Sjoberg, Caron E. Gentry (ed.), *Women, Gender and Terrorism* (Athens 2011), 159-176, there 161.

advantages of female suicide bombers. Research has shown that female terrorist attacks draw eight times more media attention than their male counterparts.[159] Indeed, after Al-Qaeda's first female suicide attack, an additional three attacks using female suicide bombers followed within six weeks. Scholars note that it is likely that al-Zarqawi noticed the significant media response by Western news outlets leading to increased media attention.[160] Another driving force to make use of female suicide bombers was operational necessity; in contrast to the Palestinian case, Al-Qaeda simply did not have sufficient numbers of male suicide bomber recruits and had to resort to the use of women.[161]

Al-Qaeda is considered one of the most hostile organisations to women because of its extreme religiously grounded ideological conservatism.[162] Yet, the reality is more complicated. Even though women do not make executive decisions, nor have leadership roles, they are generally considered to be very important in recruitment and logistical support. Where in the Chechen and Palestinian case the operational success of women is underlined by many scholars, the presence of 'Al-Qaeda women' is difficult to comprehend. Even in the organisation itself, there is no consensus regarding the role of women. Older leaders adopt a more conservative position and believe that women should only offer support to jihad as mothers and wives, while younger leaders argue that women should be recruited and actively participate in operations.[163] The increased visibility of women in Al-Qaeda is highly related to the use of the internet as a recruitment tool and its exploitation by women.[164] Political scientist Karla Cunningham states that 'women's use of, and influence over, technology has the potential to affect female standing within groups and their overall operational roles'.[165] Even though these are non-violent activities, these pathways are known to lead to militancy for male members and sources for propaganda, recruitment and fund-raising. A frequently used tactic by Al-Qaeda is to recruit women who have 'lost loved ones and find themselves marginalised in the society and especially vulnerable to predation'.[166] As in the Chechen and Palestinian case, we see that the vulnerability of women is answered by the group as it offers them an answer to their marginalisation.

[159] Bloom, *Bombshell*, 128.
[160] Stone, Pattillo, 'Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq', 164.
[161] Ibidem, 164-165.
[162] Cunningham, 'Countering Female Terrorism',120-121.
[163] Stone, Pattillo, 'Al-Qaeda's Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq', 170.
[164] Bizovi, 'Deviant Women' 38.
[165] Cunningham, 'Countering Female Terrorism', 115.
[166] Mia Bloom, 'Women and Terrorism' (version January 2017) http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-124 (15 April 2018).

1.4 Remarks

Based on the above, it is not possible to make general conclusions on the changed position of women in terrorism. However, the increase of women's participation points to an awareness within groups of the tactical and strategic benefits of employing women. No evidence could be found which explains the increase of female participation as a precursor to long-term social change within the terrorist groups. It appears that only in cases of operational necessity, women are attributed with a visible and violent role.

Furthermore, this chapter found that limited understanding of female radicalisation reinforces gendered notions. In line with Ponzanesi, these cases illustrate that the phenomenon of female involvement in terrorist organisations is often treated as a psychological and involuntary process, rather than a political and agential process. Therefore, this chapter argues that examining female participation in terrorist organisations cannot go unaccompanied with a critical understanding of the public/private divide. This relation has not yet been explored in the field of terrorism studies.[167] Moreover, reducing women to gendered stereotypes not only takes away their agency, but also the credibility that they pose a serious security threat. Terrorist groups exploit these gendered presuppositions for the purpose of recruitment.

In all three cases, gender-based oppression appears to serve as an incentive for women to join a terrorist group. Women were (partially) motivated by an attempt to overcome gender marginalisation. The terrorist group offers them a chance to restore their honour. This suggests that female subordination is linked to female participation in terrorist organisations.[168]

It can therefore be concluded that the search for emancipation or empowerment can be an important incentive to join a terrorist organisation. This notion however becomes challenged in the light of the most contemporary jihadist group: IS. Keeping the above findings in mind, how can we make sense of the Western females who join IS, migrating from countries that promote women's rights and emancipation, to join an organisation that – from a Western perspective – openly oppresses women's rights? Is it useful at all to analyse this through a gendered lens and feminist theory? To answer these questions, the subsequent two chapters are concerned with comprehending the way IS puts forward its message to appeal to Western women.

[167] There has been a renewed interest in the role of emotion as both a site of political knowledge and as a contributing dynamic to political institutions leading to phenomena such as terrorism. Still, the relation between the private and public, personal and political remains largely underexplored in terrorism studies. See: David Wright-Neville and Debra Smith, 'Political rage: terrorism and the politics of emotion', *Global Change, Peace and Security* 21 (2009) 1, 85-98.
[168] Von Knop, 'The Female Jihad', 400.

Chapter 2. Cornerstones of the Caliphate

Compared to the analysed jihadist organisations, IS appears to be even more aware of the importance of recruiting women. Since the declaration of the caliphate, IS's propaganda became increasingly female-oriented. To comprehend how IS has constructed its articulated message towards women, this chapter is concerned with analysing one of its most important propaganda outputs: the online magazine, *Dabiq*. The magazine's content has been produced online in several languages and specifically targets Western audiences.[169] It serves many purposes, such as generating fear amongst its opponents and asserting legitimacy to its cause. The following chapter will focus on the magazine's main goal: to target and attract potential recruits.

Many scholars have been concerned with deconstructing the frames of IS's narrative after the first publication of *Dabiq* on 5 July 2014.[170] Less is known about the narratives put forward in *Dabiq*'s female-targeted section *To Our Sisters*,[171] first released in issue seven on 12 February 2015. In *To Our Sisters*, three dominant narratives could be distinguished: (1) *the religious duty narrative*, (2) *the identity narrative* and (3) *the gendered jihad narrative*. It must first be emphasised that the distinctions between these narratives are theoretical and not clear-cut. Rather, the narratives influence and complement each other. Taken together, they communicate a clear message to Western women. This chapter analyses the way these narratives are framed in order to comprehend the appeal IS makes to Western women.

2.1 The religious duty narrative

First, in the *religious duty narrative*, two main religious obligations are communicated with the audience: (1) to perform *hijrah* and (2) to learn more about religion. Performing *hijrah* is defined in *Dabiq* as 'migrating from the places of shirk and sin to the land of Islam and obedience'.[172] The land of Islam and obedience is described as the place where the majority of the population is Muslim and where Sharia law is executed.[173] The duty to perform *hijrah* is the move to 'join the sides of the Muslims, support them, strengthen their forces, and wage jihad against the enemies of Allah and their enemies' and it 'will not cease as long as there is repentance, and repentance will not cease until the sun rises from the West'.[174] IS herewith

[169] Haroro J. Ingram, 'An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40 (2017) 5, 357-375, there 364.
[170] Ingram, 'An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq', 357-375.
[171] In issue 9 and 10, the section is referred to *From Our Sisters*, instead of *To Our Sisters.*
[172] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 32-37, there 32.
[173] Idem.
[174] Ibidem, 32-34.

frames the performance of *hijrah* as the religious duty for all Muslims to leave their lives in the 'West' in order to join IS.

Indeed, the ruling to join IS is described as 'an obligation upon women just as it is upon men'.[175] In this narrative, no distinction between applying religious duties to men or women is made. Accompanied by personal stories of women who have performed *hijrah,* a strong appeal is made to the feeling of redemption: 'I feel at ease now that I have carried out this obligation'.[176] Not only is this obligation described as a pressing responsibility all Muslims should live up to, it is also framed as an adventurous and romanticised journey that one experiences when joining IS:

> 'I would never forget the moment our feet treaded upon the good lands of Islam (…). Our hearts were cooled after having seen the idols fluttering in the skies of darul-kufr for so long! (…) We saw them here with our eyes while tears from our eyes poured forth generously and our tongues pronounced the takbir silently'.[177]

Women are encouraged to migrate to IS-territory where they will be welcomed with open arms. They are promised a life that leads them 'from darkness to light, from caves of darkness to a welcoming green land'.[178] Women get offered with the opportunity to break the chains of their old life and start a more meaningful life in IS-territory. Joining IS is hence framed as a personal quest for significance. Many stories of women who have performed *hijrah* are discussed as examples that Muslim women should live up to.[179] Within this frame, emphasis is placed on the importance of being a role model for other women:

> 'Do not wait for other women (…) to make hijrah before you. Rather, be a model and an example for them all, and what a great honor it would be to be the first'.[180]

The emphasis on liberation is also illustrated by the appeal to act independently: 'She should not wait for anyone but should escape with her religion and reach the land where Islam and its people are honoured'.[181] The *hijrah* is henceforth framed as a challenging and adventurous

[175] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 33.
[176] To Our Sisters, 'A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah', *Dabiq* 7 (2015), 50-51, there 50.
[177] Ibidem, 36.
[178] Idem.
[179] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 32-34.
[180] From Our Sisters, 'They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another', *Dabiq* 10 (2015), 42-48, there 48.
[181] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 35.

migration that will lead to a better life. Women should pass 'over the obstacle of family' and go on the 'long journey that is also exciting and full of memories'.[182] Framing the family as an obstacle illustrates that migrating to IS-territory is a way for women to empower themselves.

The second religious duty women have to fulfil, according to *Dabiq,* is to learn more about their religion and share this knowledge with others.

> 'Do not waste your time and energy in play, futility, and what does not concern you. Learn your religion! Learn your religion! Read the Qur'an, reflect upon it, and practice it.'[183]

Furthermore, it is stressed that this obligation also applies to both men and women:

> '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 Shari'ah sciences. So shake off the dust of laziness and procrastination and come forth, free yourself from ignorance and learn the matters of your religion.'[184]

The importance of educating one's self on religion is herewith also framed as a liberating move: by learning about her religion, a woman frees herself from ignorance and can develop herself. This could be considered as a promise of empowerment. Moreover, IS frames its territory as a society where women can enjoy the right to education about their religion. The need for women to educate themselves is herewith stressed. This notion is also demonstrated by Saltman and Smith, who argue that female migrants who join IS not only reject the Western culture they live in, they are also embracing a new worldview based on the building of a utopian society.[185] Highlighting the importance of education about religion fits into this new worldview. It illustrates the long-term vision of IS as well as the emphasis on personally fulfilling religious duties. As such, the role of women as *recruiters* for the caliphate is emphasized.

2.2 The identity narrative

Within the identity narrative, a *collective*- and *individual identity narrative* can be distinguished. The *collective identity narrative* involves the emphasis IS places on the

[182] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 35.
[183] To Our Sisters, 'A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah', *Dabiq* 7 (2015), 51.
[184] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015) 40-45, there 44.
[185] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 14.

community of shared beliefs. It is constructed in a way that suggests strong feelings of belonging, solidarity and unity as a fundament for its society. Saltman and Smith conclude that many Muslim women living in Western societies experience a natural process of questioning their identities. Being part of an ethnic minority or wearing religious symbols such as a niqab tends to provide them a feeling of exclusion.[186] IS appears to be aware of the importance of addressing this feeling. Thus, a powerful feature of the narrative is the effective framing of a social status, sense of belonging to the group, as well as an explanation of *why* one feels alienated in one's home society.[187]

The narrative is further strengthened by constructing 'IS-society' in opposition to 'the West'. In doing so, the magazine creates a rigid us-versus-them dichotomy, leaving no room for middle ground:

> 'And it is known to every impartial person with vision that those who fight as proxies on behalf of the dog of the White House and his puppets (…) may Allah destroy them.'[188]

The aim of this message is to position IS as being oppressed by the West and to create the image of the West as the enemy. This ideologically constructed message might in particular resonate with women who feel left out, marginalised or excluded of Western society. Moreover, IS makes the urgent claim for women to take matters in their own hands. Not actively supporting IS means opposing it: the narrative condemns passivity and demands full commitment.

Moreover, by joining IS, women are promised to lead a life in unity. First, this is emphasised by the importance of *sisterhood.* The reader is frequently addressed as 'sister'[189], therewith facilitating in feelings of solidarity:

> Therefore, I write this article for my Muslim sister, the wife of a mujahid and the mother of lion cubs'.[190]

[186] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 15.
[187] Alex P. Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review' (ICCT Research Paper 2013) 3.
[188] From Our Sisters, 'They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another', *Dabiq* 10 (2015), 42.
[189] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 34-36; To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 42-45.
[190] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 41.

Second, this sense of unity is framed by emphasising the importance of shared belief as a basis for the IS-society:

> 'Their colors and tongues are different, but their hearts are united upon 'there is no god but Allah'.[191]

Third, in line with the above, an appeal is made to the importance of friendship. It is described as something 'pure', rather than superficial friendships that are framed to exist in the West:

> 'These gatherings should be free of gossip, backbiting, and other sins (…) These occasional gatherings ought to serve a purpose such as worship, learning the religion, or keeping family ties'.[192]

Moreover, women are called to safeguard these feelings of community, in which they are encouraged to perform as recruiters:

> 'I call on you to be concerned about the condition of the Ummah in the world, to act in accordance to such while following the Qur'an and Sunnah'.[193]

Besides recruiting others to join IS, women are called to perform as general *caretakers* for the Muslim community. The emphasis in this narrative is thus not on brutal violence or heroic acts, but rather on friendship, sisterhood and security, in which women are called to play a profound role.[194] This creates the impression that there are strong feelings of solidarity in the caliphate and allows the reader to identify with these women.

In accordance with the collective identity and religious duty narrative, the *individual identity narrative* focuses more on the personal obligations women have to fulfil. It ties into the characteristics a woman should possess by framing the ideal female as brave, honourable and strong:

> 'Be firm, my dear sister, be patient, and await your reward. Be wary, be wary of thinking of going back to the lands of the tawāghīt. Know that you have sisters who have been afflicted

[191] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 33.
[192] To Our Sisters, 'Advice on Ihdad', *Dabiq* 13 (2016), 24-26, there 25.
[193] To Our Sisters, 'A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah', *Dabiq* 7 (2015), 51.
[194] Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (Quilliam Foundation 2015), 23.

> with great afflictions. Some of their husbands were killed, some were amputated, some were paralyzed, and some were imprisoned, but their wives were firm like the firmest of mountains.'[195]

The woman addressed here is not a victim, but a resilient woman who serves as a basis for support and safety. It is often addressed that a woman's patience will be rewarded in her afterlife: 'My sister in religion, remember the statement of Allah {Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account}'.[196] Women performing *hijrah* affirm this notion:

> 'The opponents often repeat that those who perform *hijrah* to the Islamic State belong to a marginalized class in their former lands, living in difficult conditions between unemployment, poverty, family problems, and psychological disorders. But I saw something contrary! I saw sisters who divorced the Dunyā and came to their Lord, striving. I saw sisters who abstained from a life of luxury and abundant wealth. I saw sisters who abandoned a beautiful home and luxurious car and ran for the cause of their Lord.[197]

The quote above highlights that the women who perform *hijrah* were searching for significance to their lives rather than 'luxury and abundant wealth', therewith reinforcing the anti-Western frame. Moreover, the *hijrah* is herewith again framed as the most important expression of a woman's identity.[198] By fulfilling this obligation, a woman solves her own identity struggle and contributes to building the caliphate for her fellow Muslims.

2.3 The gendered jihad narrative

Complementary to the above narratives, a third narrative that can be found in *Dabiq* is the *gendered jihad narrative*. In this narrative, a gender-specific interpretation of jihad is put forward. It explains that 'the absence of an obligation of jihad and war upon the Muslim women (…) does not overturn her role in building the Ummah, producing men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle':[199]

[195] From Our Sisters, 'They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another', *Dabiq* 10 (2015), 37.
[196] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 42.
[197] To Our Sisters, 'The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin', *Dabiq* 8 (2015), 34.
[198] Kiriloi M. Ingram 'More Than 'Jihadi Brides' and 'Eye Candy': How Dabiq Appeals to Western Women (version 12 August 2016), https://icct.nl/publication/more-than-jihadi-brides-and-eye-candy-how-dabiq-appeals-to-western-women/ (10 April 2018).
[199] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 41.

> 'Indeed, you are in jihad when you await the return of your husband patiently, anticipating Allah's reward, and making du'ā' for him and those with him to attain victory and consolidation. You are in jihad when you uphold your loyalty to him in absence. You are in jihad when you teach his children the difference between the truth and falsehood, between right and wrong.[200]

This frames women as empowering themselves through jihad, by fulfilling the duty of a devout *mother* and *wife*:

> 'My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujāhidah, and if the weapon of the men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of the women is good behaviour and knowledge.'[201]

In other words, women's activism to enter a male-dominated sphere becomes accepted when she fulfils her female-specific duty, which will lead to rewards in the afterlife. Moreover, this quote illustrates the equal importance of men and women in contributing to the caliphate. By no means is this an appeal to gender equality, but it does point that women are encouraged to play a significant role in the struggle. This gendered interpretation of jihad leads to two promises of a better future. First, women are entitled to a romanticised experience of providing support to their husbands:

> 'My sisters, be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Be advisors to them. They should find comfort and peace with you. Do not make things difficult for them. Facilitate all matters for them. Be strong and brave'.[202]

Women are framed as powerful actors of the caliphate: their support and advice are seen as fundamental principles in the life in IS-territory. With regards to marriage, the magazine explains that women cannot marry a non-Muslim man. This is the only circumstance under which women are allowed to get a divorce.[203] Other than this exception, a woman should always support her husband, especially when her husband is in 'jihad'.[204]

[200] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 41.
[201] Ibidem, 44-45.
[202] To Our Sisters, 'A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah', *Dabiq* 7 (2015), 51.
[203] From Our Sisters, 'They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another', *Dabiq* 10 (2015), 43.
[204] Ibidem.

> 'Why do we find some of the mujahidin's wives complaining about their lives? If she hears of an imminent battle that he will be in, she gets angry. If she sees him putting on war armor, she gets upset. If he goes out for ribat, she gets in a bad mood. If he returns late, she complains. O my sister, who deluded you and told you that the life of jihad is one of comfort and ease?' [205]

This paragraph highlights that the life of a jihadi wife is not a luxurious life and that she cannot complain. At the same time, the unspecified reward promised to her in the afterlife is framed as unimaginable and worth everything. [206] This frames the duty of women as a heavy burden, but if they act accordingly, they will get rewarded, raising their status to a higher level and making their lives more significant.

The second promise that is offered is the opportunity of being a mother in the caliphate which is described as a heavy burden:

> 'As for you, O mother of lion cubs… And what will make you know what the mother of lion cubs is? She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men (…) So have you understood, my Muslim sister, the enormity of the responsibility that you carry? O sister in religion, indeed, I see the Ummah of ours as a body made of many parts, but the part that works most towards and is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother.'[207]

This responsibility is described as the duty to 'build a generation capable of bearing a trust that the heavens, the hearth and the mountains have all declined to bear'.[208] By representing the woman as the cornerstone of the caliphate, the impression is created that women share an equally pressing responsibility as their male counterparts. Indeed, Saltman and Smith underline that IS values women 'not as sexual objects but as mothers of the next generation'.[209] This frame implies that the success of IS is heavily dependent on women to fulfil their obligation. Women must raise their children in the caliphate according to Sharia laws. Institutions, education, kindergarten and training are framed as aspects that IS takes care of.[210] Women play a central role in making sure that their children get educated properly about religion, and that in

[205] From Our Sisters, 'They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another', *Dabiq* 10 (2015), 43-45.
[206] Idem.
[207] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 44.
[208] Ibidem.
[209] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 18.
[210] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 43-45.

safeguarding the importance of preparing their children for the caliphate: 'first comes knowledge, then the weapon'.[211] Hence, women are framed in a manner that suggests they play a critical, if not indispensable role, to the growth and survival of the caliphate.[212]

A recurring theme which prevails through all narratives is the strong sense of *empowerment*. This is achieved by (1) acknowledging the wrongs done to Muslims in the West and then (2) offering women a solution to their crises. Joining IS and fulfilling religious and personal obligations are framed as rational decisions. By joining IS, *Dabiq* frames women's decisions not only as strengthening their own lives but simultaneously weakening the enemy.

2.4 Remarks

The narratives extracted in this chapter together frame the image of a potential female recruit to IS. From the analysis, it can be concluded that IS strategically frames the contribution of women as essential to the caliphate therewith constructing *female agency*. The 'West', family, or personal relations are presented as potential obstacles in this search for identity and belonging. The identification of the fight against a common enemy - the Western society, and the values associated with it – strengthens this frame. This might particularly appeal to women who share this rejection and feel marginalised or excluded.

By following the instructions of *Dabiq*, women are encouraged to empower themselves through the promises IS puts forward. Becoming part of this group is framed by a clear sense of belonging and characterised by unity, in contrast to the Western, more individualised identity. The ultimate way to become part of this identity is to perform the gendered interpretation of jihad. This might lead women to perceive themselves as irreplaceable, due to their gender connected abilities.

The magazine strongly appeals to gendered female characteristics. Women's roles as *recruiters*, *caretakers*, *mothers*, and *wives* are emphasized. Women are not, however, addressed as passive victims. On the contrary, women who join IS are framed as active, agential beings. The question that remains is how to comprehend this construction of agency and autonomy. Moreover, it is important to understand how this appeal to gender corresponds with the envisioned female roles who live inside the caliphate. Put differently, how does IS present its perception of women in the caliphate? Answering this question will provide a more thorough understanding of the message IS communicates to women. Moreover, as *Dabiq* is not the only

[211] To Our Sisters, 'A Jihad Without Fighting', *Dabiq* 11 (2015), 43-45.
[212] Khelghat-Doost, 'Women of the Islamic State', 21.

relevant tool IS uses to target women, the next chapter is concerned with analysing the frames put forward in its female-targeted manifesto.

Chapter 3. Life in the Caliphate

In the previous chapter, three narratives intended to recruit Western females to IS were analysed. The following chapter will deal with how women are perceived in IS-territory by examining the Al-Khanssaa Brigade manifesto (23 January 2015) through a gendered lens. The Brigade is an all-women group of IS that is also known as the moral police. The group operates in Raqqa and Mosul and was formed in early 2014. One IS-official said in 2014 that the Brigade was founded 'to raise awareness of our religion among women, and to punish women who do not abide by the law'.[213] The group is responsible for enforcing strict Shariah laws on women and is notorious for its brutal attacks, such as an acid attack on 15 women for not wearing a niqab.[214] It is unclear how active the group exactly is.

The Al-Khanssaa manifesto deals with the way women should develop, behave, dress and act in the caliphate.[215] The document expresses the most authentic IS attitudes toward women and is therefore useful in analysing the perception of women within IS.[216] The Quilliam Foundation, a British think tank which translated the document, notes that it is a 'piece of propaganda aimed at busting myths and recruiting supporters'.[217] It must be noted that the manifesto was initially only published in Arabic, which illustrates that the target audience is Arabic-speaking. Still, it provides excellent insights into how IS positions women in the caliphate and how it communicates the envisioned society. Moreover, since the document has been distributed extensively online, it can serve as an important online tool for possible radicalisation.[218] The document is divided into three sections: the first deals with a condemnation of Western civilization and feminism, the second presents the life of women in IS and the third compares life of Arab women in non-IS territory to women living in IS-territory.

[213] News Deeply, 'In Raqqa, an All-Female ISIS Brigade Cracks Down on Local Women' (version 15 July 2014), https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/07/15/in-raqqa-an-all-female-isis-brigade-cracks-down-on-local-women (10 May 2018).
[214] Peresin, Alberto, 'The Western Muhajirat of ISIS', 502.
[215] Charlie Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade' (Quilliam Foundation 2015) 6.
[216] Peresin, Alberto, 'The Western Muhajirat of ISIS', 502.
[217] Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade', 6.
[218] Idem.

3.1 The Gender Unequal Society

The central argument put forward in the manifesto is based on *gender inequality*, which is framed as the basis for the success of the caliphate. The document argues that this notion ensures a better, stable and structured life in the caliphate:

> 'Woman was created to populate the Earth just as man was. But, as God wanted it to be, 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'.[219]

Rather than being *equal*, women must be *complementary* to their male counterparts. This is framed as the fundament of IS-society. Furthermore, the manifesto declares that (Muslim) women around the world are currently not fulfilling their fundamental role, one that is 'consistent with their deepest nature'.[220] The argument put forward is an appeal to turn to traditional sex and gender differences between men and women. Even Western society used to be 'pure' before it became corrupted: 'This is how humanity has operated for a long time and this is how it always was, even in 'liberal' states and for today's 'free' societies'.[221] In accordance with the previous extracted narratives, the best way for a woman to fulfil her 'female duty' is to bear children for the caliphate, which is described as the 'purpose of her existence'.[222] If a woman fulfils this task, she is promised rewards in the afterlife.

To strengthen this gender unequal frame, the manifesto frames IS-society again in contrast with the West. The failure of the Western model is argued to be the 'minute that women were 'liberated' from their cell in the house'.[223] The 'Western programme for women', referencing to feminism, is described as the root cause of the problems in the Western world. This resulted in societies in which emasculated men are no longer the patriarchs.[224] In accordance with the extracted narratives, pointing out this 'failure' might particularly resonate with Western women who feel excluded or left out of Western society.

Henceforth, IS aims to realise a society in which these traditional gendered roles are restored and amplified. According to the manifesto, gender inequality is at the heart of a state's

[219] Charlie Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade' (Quilliam Foundation 2015), 17.
[220] Ibidem.
[221] Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade', 18.
[222] Ibidem.
[223] Ibidem, 19.
[224] Ibem.

success. 'Blurring gender differences' has led people to forget how to worship God properly.[225] The consequence of this, is an individualised, infidel and egocentric society opposed to the collectivised, structured and stable society IS presents itself to be. In IS-territory medical services, schools, and other institutions are claimed to be pure since men and women are kept strictly separated:

> 'The state [IS] tries to stop men and women mixing and works to prevent it as much as it is possible and, thus, it has become the first and only place in which full government healthcare is given without mixing in modern hospitals. Hence, the quality of public services has been bettered. The streets of Mosul are clean, empty of waste, the lights shine at night and life is refreshed'.[226]

With this frame, IS portrays life in the caliphate better than life elsewhere, due to the 'uniqueness' of gender separation. Strict gender separation is framed as a precondition for a better society. Henceforth, women in the state are protected to ensure their pureness and sacredness.

3.2 Pure Practice

One part of the manifesto is devoted to ideology in practice. In this section, four guidelines are distinguished by which women should live their lives: *sedentariness*, *work*, *knowledge*, and *aesthetics*.[227]

First, a woman's sedentary lifestyle is glorified. She is expected to stay inside her house and can only leave under special circumstances. It is argued that a woman needs to be protected by men at all times, which is supported by the claim that her duty to bear children is the greatest one for the future of the caliphate.[228] To live a sedentary lifestyle, is a 'divinely appointed right'.[229] In other words, staying in the private sphere is framed not as a punishment, but as a privilege. This way, she is able to perform her duties as a devout Muslima.

Working is only allowed for a woman if it is not possible for her to do the work from inside her home. She cannot work more than three days a week, the work must not be too difficult for her, she must have holidays and she must be given two years maternity leave at

[225] Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade', 7.
[226] Ibidem, 33.
[227] Idem.
[228] Ibidem, 20.
[229] Ibidem, 7.

least. Again, gender equality with regards to work is again framed as a great evil. The manifesto declares that because of gender equality, women have to work 'even though they have monthly complications and pregnancies and so on'.[230] This is framed as disrespectful towards women. Moreover, three other circumstances are declared in which a woman is permitted to leave the house: if she is going to study theology, if she is a women's doctor or teacher, and 'if it has been ruled by fatwa that she must fight, engage in jihad because the situation of the ummah has become desperate, as the women of Iraq and Chechnya did, with great sadness'.[231]

Third, education for women is allowed and encouraged, as long as the education strictly separates males and females. Moreover, the focus of study is limited to what IS defines as relevant topics. Women are stimulated to learn everything about Sharia and IS takes care of the institutions to enjoy this education.[232] The manifesto puts forward a curriculum which determines the path for girls. Ideally, education lasts from girls aged seven until the age of fifteen.[233] After that, they have reached the 'appropriate age' for marriage. Women are urged to watch out for the Western lifestyle, where women only study 'the brain cells of crows, grains of sand and the arteries of fish'.[234] Instead, they should be primarily concerned with the situation of the *Ummah* in the world. Thus, one of the most important jobs for a woman is to educate herself about her religion.[235] Similar to the previous mentioned narratives, women cannot be illiterate or ignorant. This way she cannot fulfil the role of a mother properly.

Finally, women are expected to cover themselves and they cannot change their looks (such as wearing makeup or accessories). They need to be as 'pure' as possible. Thus, wearing a niqab is described as 'the greatest of rights' because it allows women to protect themselves. The comparison is made to contemporary Western discussions about the prohibition of wearing the niqab. It is described as a privilege for a woman to be capable of travelling to Raqqa without having to show her face. The manifesto frames this religious symbol as a return to respect and decency. Therewith, the caliphate is represented as a place where Muslim women can 'cleanse themselves'.[236] Once again, the appeal is made to gender separation and the glorification of female pureness. This contributes to the construction of the 'ideal female recruit'. In accordance with the previous chapter, this frame corresponds with feelings of exclusion from Western

[230] Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade', 25.
[231] Ibidem, 8.
[232] Ibidem, 34-35.
[233] Ibidem, 7.
[234] Ibidem, 20-21.
[235] Idem.
[236] Ibidem, 28

societies of women who choose to wear the niqab.[237] Indeed, IS appears to be aware of this marginalisation: women are promised to 'belong', because of the decision to wear a symbol of faith, rather than to be excluded. Herewith, IS addresses the feelings of alienation Muslim females living in Western society might experience.

3.3 'Which picture is better?'

In the last section of the manifesto, a comparison is made between women from Arabic countries and women living in IS. First, women living in the Arab world are described as victims who are 'imprisoned just because they say the Lord is God'.[238] The promise is made to them that 'the armies of the Caliphate liberate them from torture and the trials of captivity'.[239] The women who join IS are entitled a justice system that listens to them and in which they are allowed to speak up and defend themselves.[240] Second, the Arab world is described as terrorised by Westernisation. The women's suffering because of this is depicted as 'barbarism and savagery'.[241] Several examples of this are pointed out: Arab women are allowed to appear in ID photographs and have to identify themselves, they are allowed to work alongside men and are 'not separated by even a thin sheet of paper'. Thus, the Arab world is under threat of Westernisation which pollutes the pureness of women living there, again reinforcing the us-versus-them divide as aforementioned. The third difference that is pointed out is poverty. Women in Arab states are the victims of an insufficient social security system. Women are framed as the first victims of poverty. Living under IS-authority promises women a more secure and stable life.[242] The last difference, related to the first one, is the criminal justice system. The manifesto argues that 'Of course, men suffer, too, but it is women's social issues that are among the most complicated and have the biggest impact on all families'.[243] Again, women who live in IS-territory promised to be protected by law. The criminal justice system is described as protecting women's rights even more than men's rights. The manifesto ends with the following statement: 'In short, this is the sorry situation of women in the Gulf. We have also given an idea of life for women in the state of the Caliphate. Which picture is better? Which is purer? And which abode is more worthy for living?'[244]

[237] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 10.
[238] Winter, 'Women of the Islamic State. A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade', 38.
[239] Idem.
[240] Idem.
[241] Idem.
[242] Ibidem, 39-40.
[243] Ibidem, 40.
[244] Idem.

3.4 Remarks

Unsurprisingly, the manifesto paints a romanticised version of women's lives in IS comforted by security, education and caretaking. No references are made of the atrocities committed towards women such as the enslavement of Yazidi women or the abuses against women by, for example, the Al-Khanssaa Brigade. Contrary to what is known about life in IS-territory, the manifesto constructs a different image: it frames IS as an organisation that protects women and ensures their rights such as social security, the rule of law and education.

In line with *Dabiq*, the manifesto praises women for their roles as recruiters, mothers, nurses and teachers. The magazine and manifesto differ on *how* the appeal to women is made. *Dabiq* frames the appeal as a promise of empowerment, adventure and quest for significance and belonging, while the appeal in the manifesto is constructed on themes such as security, safety and stability. It is possible this might be due to the differing target audiences: as aforementioned, *Dabiq* is written to recruit Western Muslims, whereas the manifesto was intended to target Arabic women (presumably from the region). In their appeal to women, both sources are highly gendered and founded on a rejection of gender equality and a promotion of what is framed as 'true womanhood'. Moreover, the manifesto similarly constructs a collective identity by framing IS-society in opposition to other states, appealing to Islamic unity. Likewise, the decision to join IS is framed as a rational decision. In addition, the dependence on women for its realisation and its success is hailed again.

To summarise, the narratives and appeals IS makes to Western women are largely founded on a rejection of gender equality and a promotion of what is framed as 'true womanhood', therewith constructing the fundaments of IS-society. Making use of gender as an analytical tool illuminates how IS constructs and communicates women's agency and how gendered roles are constructed as precondition for society. The question that remains is how this appeal can be comprehended with feminist theory. Is it even useful to categorise the narratives IS constructs through this framework?

Chapter 4. Jihadi Feminism: A Contradiction in Terms?

Jihadist terrorist organisations are increasingly aware of the importance of recruiting women. The first chapter illustrated that one motivating factor answered by these groups, is the gender-based oppression women face in society. The terrorist groups offer these women an alternative to their marginalisation: by joining the group, women find a way to express their agency and position themselves in a male-dominated sphere. However, if we look at Western women's subjectivity in the case of IS, this motivation does not seem to apply at first sight. The Western women who join IS are presumably not looking to achieve emancipatory goals. Indeed, the previous chapters demonstrate that a central theme found in analysing IS's appeal to women is the rejection of gender equality and feminism. Thus, as the title of this chapter suggests, labelling IS as an organisation that promotes feminist features seems, at best, contradictory. However, it is argued that a feminist interpretation of IS's narrative allows for a more thorough understanding of the motivations of Western women to join the organisation. This chapter will first briefly discuss the challenge of contemporary feminist theory and thereafter analyse how IS's appeal to Western women fits in this framework.

4.1 Feminist Theory: Tool or Trap?

For decades, feminist theory has praised difference and addressed inequality. It became known for its inclusive, diverse and flexible character and developed into an important tool to critically review relations of power, gender and oppression.[245] Feminists have actively been concerned with explaining how human agency resists structures of subordination and dominant male order.[246] The 'feminist project' is however far from finished. Contemporary feminist theory is confronted with challenges that, for instance, religious traditions pose around issues such as veiling, honour killings, female genital mutilation and women's roles in war.[247] This trend, feminist scholar Tami Amanda Jacoby notes, 'begs new understandings of what a feminist politics means today'.[248] Challenges as these confront feminists with the question: should feminist theory be limited to democracy and peace and are women whose desires are shaped by non-liberal traditions automatically excluded from the feminist scope?

[245] Tami Amanda Jacoby 'Jihadi brides at the intersection of contemporary feminism', *New Political Science* 37 (2015) 4, 525-542, there 526.
[246] Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival', *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001) 2, 201-236, there 205.
[247] Jacoby, 'Jihadi brides at the intersection of contemporary feminism', 532.
[248] Idem.

One of feminist theory's challenges is the focus on locating women's agency. Drawing from Judith Butler's work, the theorisation of agency is almost always derived from the articulation of resistance to social norms and the subordinating outcome of power.[249] In other words, agency is considered as one's capacity to undermine socially constructed norms and notions of subordination. The concept of agency made significant contributions to the oppressor/oppressed debate about gender in non-Western societies.[250] It provided a 'crucial corrective to the scholarship on the Middle East' that before often portrayed Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive who were shackled by structures of male authority.[251] Incorporating agency in the feminist debate allowed for women's absent voices to be restored, showing these women as active agents, contrary to what past narratives suggested.[252] The concept can thus be useful in examining women's roles in terrorism since they are often treated as inactive and passive.

Although this approach of agency has been productive, there are several arguments to make against such conceptualisation. One of the traps of categorising agency as such is the redefinition of women's agency in terms of resistance and subordination, which tends to exclude those whose motivations are not necessarily phrased in these terms.[253] The universality of the desire to resist and subvert social structures or male domination is seldom problematised – even by feminists themselves.[254] In other words, in this theorisation, there is a tendency to exclude women who do not strive for emancipation or gender equality from the scope of agency.

Moreover, this approach tends to define women's actions in a strict agent/victim dichotomy, whereas agents actively oppose (male) domination and patriarchy and victims are subordinated under male domination and gender exploitation.[255] As such, agency is often treated as the attribute that marks entrance into a legitimate community. Political scientist Jessica Auchter identifies that feminists often approach agency as if it is a 'matter of common sense, rather than questioning how it has come to frame our perception of certain issues'.[256] This tends to ignore questions such as 'who assigns agency to whom?' and 'who determines these standards?'. It neglects the process by which norms of resistance, agency and

[249] Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent', 211.
[250] Ibidem, 205.
[251] Ibidem.
[252] Idem.
[253] Ibidem, 209.
[254] Ibidem, 206.
[255] Abeda Sultana, 'Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis', *Arts Faculty Journal* 4 (2011), 1-18, there 14.
[256] Auchter, 'Gendering Terror', 121.

subordination are defined and created.[257] As Auchter notes, the consequence of this logic, is that agency is often presented to the reader as the 'force and prize of women's emancipation from male domination', rather than questioning the concept of agency itself.[258] By writing agency to someone means that one represents resistance against social and gender norms. The problem however is that scholars who do so, appeal to patriarchal discourses themselves in which the significance of agency is defined.[259] Put differently, agency is politically and socially constructed. Consequently, from this perspective, it becomes difficult to assign agency to the actions of individuals who operate within power structures that do not necessarily fit in this understanding.

In order to bridge this gap, anthropologist Saba Mahmood suggests a reconceptualization of agency in which we think of agency 'not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as the capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create'.[260] Mahmood challenges the approach feminists often take on to define one as 'passive' from a progressive point of view, while it may very well be a form of agency.[261] The consequence of this reconceptualization is that the scope of agency could also involve acts of individuals whose motivations and desires are not necessarily aimed at pursuing emancipatory goals.[262] Moreover, it entails that motivation and desire is socially constructed.

4.2 Islamic State's Appeal to Feminism

Bearing this in mind, how can the appeal IS constructs to target Western women be understood in the framework of feminism? On the one hand, IS's narrative consists of a dominant *rejection* of feminism. As aforementioned, the seemingly incomprehensible aspect of Western women who join IS often leads academics and the media to essentialise the considerations of these women to gender stereotypes, reducing them to jihadi brides or sex slaves who are lured into terrorism by men.[263] Increasingly, scholars deconstruct these gendered notions to uncover women's motivations. One of the factors found in women's motivation to join IS, but less acknowledged in academia, is the opposition of these women to Western feminism. Findings on female push factors suggest that many women who support IS are motivated not *despite*, but

[257] Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent', 212.
[258] Auchter, 'Gendering Terror', 133.
[259] Ibidem, 133-134.
[260] Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent', 202.
[261] Ibidem, 212.
[262] Idem.
[263] Katz, 'Where do the women fit in?',10.

because of IS's conservative and male-dominated worldview.[264] Anthropologist Scott Atran hence describes the women who join IS as 'post-feminist and post-adolescent'.[265] He argues that 'they are tired of a seemingly endless, genderless, culturally indistinct coming of age. The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda provide clear red lines: Men are men, and women are women'.[266] The search for these red lines is answered by IS's narrative: the plea for a society that prescribes traditional male and female roles. Religious studies scholar Geraldine Casutt confirms this notion, stating that 'these women do not wish to emancipate themselves in the sense of feminism': their goal is not to achieve gender *equality* but to be *complementary* to men.[267] For female migrants, Western feminism may be found unfulfilling or disappointing and jihadi groups in turn provide an alternative.[268] This alternative is highly visible in the case of IS, in which a fundamental rejection of feminism is constructed.

On the other hand, it is argued that IS's appeal embraces a *promotion* of feminist features. It is hard to deny the clear frame IS constructs to empowering women and encouraging them to step out of the constraints of the patriarchal society they live in. Saltman and Smith's study confirms that Western women are attracted to the increasingly present promise of empowerment IS puts forward.[269] IS effectively communicates: 'the West tells you to have a career and not have children. But we won't shame you for the decision to stay at home (…) It's empowering in such a warped, pseudo-feminist way'.[270] The women Saltman and Smith researched also state that they refer to themselves as 'lionesses with their cubs, the strong family centre part.[271] Feminism, from this point of view, is most likely seen by the women who join IS as the strong belief to actively contribute to the establishment of a new society.[272] In fact, the women do *challenge* the gender roles within their home society by joining an organisation such as IS. Comprehending their decision through the framework of feminist theory allows to see their move as a form of rebellion against the Western world. It can be seen as the agential

[264] Foreign Policy, 'What ISIS Women Want' (version 17 May 2016), http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/17/what-isis-women-want-gendered-jihad/ (1 May 2018).
[265] Idem.
[266] Idem.
[267] Kneip, 'Female Jihad – Women in the ISIS', 97.
[268] Farahnaz Ispahani, 'Women and Islamist Extremism: Gender Rights Under the Shadow of Jihad', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14 (2016) 2, 101-104, there 102.
[269] The Telegraph, 'AK47s, Heart Emoji and Feminism: How Jihadi Brides Are Luring British Girls to Join ISIL' (version 28 May 2015), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/11635643/How-Isil-jihadi-brides-lure-British-girls-AK47s-emoji-and-feminism.html (1 May 2018).
[270] Ibidem.
[271] Idem.
[272] Maren Hald Bjørgum, 'Jihadi Brides: Why do Western Muslim Girls Join ISIS?', *Global Politics Review* 2 (2016) 2, 91-102, there 99.

decision to avoid oppression or discrimination. IS, in turn, provides an alternative to their marginalisation.[273]

Hence, there are several interpretations when understanding the appeal IS makes to women through the lens of feminism involving (1) the rejection of feminism by IS which could lead women coming from societies that promote feminism to feel attracted to this message and (2) the promotion of feminist features which might lead women to perceive themselves as crucial and fundamental to not only the physical survival of the caliphate, but also to the ideological contribution of IS.

4.3 Female Jihad

It has become clear by now that the women who join IS pose an uncomfortable challenge to feminists: they pursue practices and ideals that feminists might label subordinate and submissive. By joining IS, these women unsettle one of the key assumptions made by feminists: that all women *want* gender equality.[274] They provoke the understanding that feminism is a theory *by* and *for* all women. Moreover, the case of Western women joining IS illustrate the challenge of categorising individuals in the binary distinction of either active agent or passive victim.

In the narrow conceptualization of agency, it is difficult to attribute the acts of these women with agency. Namely, this definition quickly denotes them with labels such as jihadi brides or sex slaves. Reducing them to such downplays the political considerations of these women. Categorising the narrative IS constructs as merely oppressive because it relegates women to the private neglects the desires and obstacles women face and overcome. Moreover, it ignores the likelihood that women who autonomously choose a role in the 'private' can still be political. It is therefore argued that attempts made by scholars to assign agency to Western women joining IS cannot go unaccompanied with a reconceptualization and rethinking of the concept of agency.

The alternative approach suggested above illustrates that those who perform acts that some might consider passive should not automatically be defined as non-agents. Understanding IS's narrative through this approach shows that IS appears to be aware of the importance of promoting feminist features and making an appeal to female agency. As the narratives illustrated, the often-assumed roles of women in IS as passive 'sex slaves' or 'jihadi brides' is

[273] Asma Mansoor, '" Marginalization" in third world feminism: problematics and theoretical reconfiguration', *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016), 1-9, there 1-3.
[274] Jacoby 'Jihadi brides at the intersection of contemporary feminism', 527.

not communicated. On the contrary, the narrative is constructed as valuing women as active and essential contributors to the caliphate, promising them an indispensable role as 'lionesses of their cubs'.[275] Moreover, the narrative is constructed in a way that encourages women to challenge the gender hierarchy of 'the West'. It could hence be argued that IS promotes a type of 'anti-feminist feminism': by framing the 'West' as the dominant, oppressing structure, women are called overcome their marginalisation and empower themselves by joining IS.

To summarise, the suggestion is to engage with a more hybrid conceptualisation of agency. Not all acts of agency have to be made by reference to arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority *alone.* This approach can be valuable in assessing women's decisions for jihadist terrorist organisations. This chapter demonstrated that women who engage in practices or perform acts that some might label as oppressive, should not automatically be defined as non-agents.[276] Broadening the scope of what resistance, agency and domination is and how it is constructed, allows for a better understanding of cases that might not necessarily fit in the feminist way of thinking. Moreover, it allows to comprehend the narrative of IS as an appeal to female agency.

[275] Saltman and Smith, 'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part', 31.
[276] Kayleigh Tervooren, 'Redefining female agency' (version 19 October 2016), http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/10/19/redefining-female-agency/ (10 May 2018).

Conclusion

Historical overview

The historical analysis of three contemporary jihadist terrorist groups explored how gender plays a role in the increasing number of women participating in terrorist activities. The participation of women leads to gendered representations of their motivations and actions. Consequently, these representations tend to deprive women of their agency and fail to explore the political and ideological motivations for women to engage in terrorism. Moreover, terrorist groups appear to be more aware of the tactical and strategic benefits of recruiting women for their purpose. Terrorist groups increasingly exploit gendered assumptions about women in terrorism for recruitment efforts and for their terrorist activities. As a result, it is likely that terrorist groups in the future will continue to exploit this deficiency. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated how gender-based oppression experienced by women can serve as an incentive to join a terrorist organisation. The group, in turn, provides an answer to their marginalisation.

Narratives

The terrorist group that has been most successful in recruiting women is IS. Intensified online recruitment by and for women, female targeted sections in its online magazine and its manifesto aimed towards women are illustrative of IS's appreciation of female recruitment. This thesis used gender analysis and feminist constructivism to illuminate how IS frames its female-targeted narrative. It can be concluded that the narratives of IS are highly gendered. By framing socially constituted behavioural expectations and constructing characteristics that a person biologically classified as female is expected to have, IS frames the image of 'true womanhood', or rather, the ideal female recruit. In turn, IS promises women *respect* (by claiming feelings of belonging and community in the Muslim sisterhood and IS-community), *structure* (by emphasising gender separation) and *significance* (by stressing the crucial contribution of women to the future of IS). Gender is therewith used as both a *construct* and an *appeal* in the narratives.

This appeal can be found particularly powerful if it resonates with women who feel excluded or marginalised elsewhere and reject 'Western' notions such as gender equality and feminism. Hence, using gender as an analytical tool helps uncover socially defined roles and attitudes which are ascribed as appropriate or desirable by an institution or organisation. Moreover, it sheds a light on underlying aspects of the pull factors in the female radicalisation process.

Academic debate

From a feminist constructivist perspective, female participation in terrorist organisations can be seen as a way to proclaim their agency through resistance to gender norms. Even though agency is highly productive in examining gender and politics, it must be emphasised that defining agency in relation to gender norms limits our understanding of what it means to be an active agent. The narrow conception of agency is frequently used by scholars to emancipate women by inscribing agency into their subjectivities. This thesis examined that the case of Western women joining IS challenges this presumption. It is not argued here that the concept of agency should be dismissed altogether. Rather, when examining women and terrorism, it is important to keep in mind that agency is politically and socially constructed within a patriarchal discourse. Rethinking the concept of agency thus allows to critically assess acts that are not necessarily aimed at emancipation or resistance to male authority alone.

Analysing the narrative IS constructs provides grounds on which it is possibly to re-evaluate the scope of agency. By categorising the narrative of IS as merely oppressive deprives those who become radicalised by it from their agency and consequently defines them as passive non-agents. Moreover, a narrow conception of agency leads to obscure the fact that there are politics in the private. Indeed, understanding the narrative of IS as an appeal to empower women allows to view the acts of those drawn to it as politically motivated. From this perspective, women who choose supporting or private roles in a society that does not reflect emancipatory or gender equal values, can still be considered agents. This approach can open up room for discussion about the female radicalisation process.

Final remarks

This research remains explorative. The relation between gender and terrorism is largely unexplored in terrorism research. In order to fully establish to what extent gender plays a role in terrorist organisations, more research on other case studies and archival records of the narratives of other terrorist organisations would be useful. In addition, to thoroughly comprehend how the narratives of IS resonate with potential recruits, interviewing those that IS successfully appealed to with its narratives would provide important insights. Moreover, it must be emphasised that individuals are neither radicalised nor recruited by narratives only. Radicalisation is a multifaceted and complex process. IS's recruitment strategy catalyses the individual pull factors, but there are preconditions necessary for the narratives to resonate.

Even though women play crucial roles in terrorist organisations, literature on female

radicalisation remains limited. This thesis aims to have deepened the understanding of the role of gender in female radicalisation and how terrorist organisations make use of and exploit gender for the purpose of recruitment. IS's ability to recruit more women than any other jihadist organisation in the past hinges on its ability to tell a convincing story. By using gender analysis, this thesis shed a light on the underlying frames of the narratives IS constructs. Therefore, incorporating gender in the framework of terrorism could have important implications for counter-extremism efforts. Research on how gender can be used, not just by the terrorist organisation, but also as a tool for countering radicalisation could illuminate our thinking on female radicalisation.

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Appendix

I. Glossary

Du'ā'	the Nizari Isma'ili prayer, three times a day
Dunyā	the temporal world
Hijab	modesty
Hijrah	emigration, refers to the journey of Muhammed from Mecca to Medina, also migration to Islamic State
Jihad	literally translates as 'to struggle', often used to refer to armed struggle
Kufr	a person who disbelieves or rejects God according to the teachings of Muhammed
Mujahid/*mujahidin*	fighter engaged in jihad, struggler
Niqab	garment of clothing that covers the face that is worn by some Muslim women as part of a particular interpretation of hijab
Ribat	defense of Islam, also used in reference to those who fought to defend Islam in jihad
Tawāghīt	unbelievers
Umm	mother
Ummah	global community of Muslims

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II. List of abbreviations

CVE	*Counter Violent Extremism*
IS	*Islamic State*
ISIS	*Islamic State Iraq and Syria*
ISIL	*Islamic State Iraq and the Levant*
PLO	*Palestinian Liberation Organisation*
US	*United States*
UN	*United Nations*