

Journal of Vincentian Social Action

Volume 4
Issue 2 *WARS, CONFLICTS, AND THE
MARGINALIZATION OF DISSENT*

Article 7

September 2019

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Recommended Citation

German, Kathleen and Pennington, Rosemary (2019) "SISTERS OF THE CALIPHATE: MEDIA AND THE WOMEN OF ISIS," *Journal of Vincentian Social Action*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol4/iss2/7>

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SISTERS OF THE CALIPHATE: MEDIA AND THE WOMEN OF ISIS

Kathleen German

Rosemary Pennington

Women have long been viewed as the “weaker sex”—more peace-loving and passive than men. However, clashes in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland have shown that women are both willing and able to participate in violent conflict (Alison, 2004; Cheldelin & Eliatamby, 2011). In some Muslim communities, women have historically been excluded from combat through religious sanctions as David Cook (2005) notes: “Classical Islamic sources are fairly negative about the role of women in jihad” (p. 383). Even so, Muslim women are increasingly finding their way to battlefields and combat zones. This trend first became apparent in conflicts in more secular Muslim societies such as Chechnya and Palestine, but even highly conservative Al Qaeda (Cook, 2005) and the Islamic State (Mironova, 2019, February 20) have begun to embrace the idea of the female fighter.

Katherine Kniep (2016) posits that women who are drawn to jihad view the calling as emancipatory in nature. Miranda Alison (2003) confirms this conclusion in her study of the Tamil Tigers, noting that some women joined the group as a way to fight back against their oppression at the hands of Sri Lankan authorities. The promise of gender equality was one reason women joined rebel forces in the Eritrean fight for independence (Bernal, 2000), while Katarina von Knop (2007) suggests that for some female terrorists, engaging violence is an exercise of power, a way to escape an oppressive society. Escaping oppression may motivate women who join ISIS. Rafia Zakaria (2015) writes that:

“Though the experience of women during conflict has increasingly become an area of focus for scholars, these studies often consider women only through the lens of victimhood, obscuring their experiences as agents, perpetrators, or even active participants.”

The “liberation” offered by ISIS can seem like an escape from both the ghettoized status of Islam in the West as well as the restrictive cultural mores of many Muslim countries; just as crucially, it can also seem like a legitimate response to being victimized by U.S.-led wars that promise female empowerment but deliver widespread destruction. (p. 125)

The perception that Islam itself is under threat also serves to motivate some women to join terrorist groups (Ali, 2006). Though Western news stories about female recruits to ISIS often frame them as naive individuals duped by deceptive recruiters, scholars such as Kniep (2016) and Zakaria (2015) argue that, in order to understand how women are recruited to ISIS, researchers must consider how the choice to join might seem like a reasonable political option for these women. Scholars must consider the appeal of expanded opportunities to women who participate in the Islamic State.

Though the experience of women during conflict has increasingly become an area of focus for scholars, these studies often consider women only through the lens of victimhood, obscuring their experiences as agents, perpetrators, or even active participants. Considering the range of women’s participation as suicide bombers, front-line soldiers, propagandists, and home-front supporters, more nuanced approaches should be taken to the study of the varied roles of women in conflict. This essay

specifically examines the recruitment to and roles of women in the Islamic State. It does so through an examination of the scholarship on female fighters in order to contextualize the women of ISIS. To understand how ISIS targets women, we conducted a close textual reading of internet recruitment material which provides a basis for understanding the ways ISIS has worked to convince women to join the Islamic State.¹ This essay ends with a suggestion that scholars and others interested in the experience of women in conflict move away from overly simplistic framings which suggest women have little to no agency. Our essay, and the work of other scholars, suggests the opposite.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ISIS

The departure of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 introduced instability in the country that allowed political corruption and sectarian violence to emerge. Taking advantage of the Syrian civil war, the group that came to be known as ISIS filled the void created by the lack of a viable central government or security infrastructure in the region (Engel, 2015, February 11; Ghosh, 2014, August 14; Wood, 2015, March). In 2014 ISIS declared its territory a caliphate and fielded approximately 40,000 fighters, including as many as 30,000 foreign troops from North Africa, Europe, and the United States. By early 2019, ISIS had been driven out of a large percentage of its territory, including crucial cities like Tikrit, Ramadi, Mosul, and Hajin by a coalition of American, European, and Arab nations working with the Iraqi army. Analysts warn, however, that even with its loss of physical territory “...the Islamic State is likely to remain a powerful terrorist force” using its vast cyber networks to recruit supporters and surge forces as needed (Callimachi, 2018, September 12). In fact, the Islamic State’s attacks from the areas it had seemingly been pushed from actually increased in 2018 (Giglio, 2018, October 31). However, the group’s future does seem a bit murkier. As of this writing, reports have begun circulating that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’s ailing leader, has handed over control of the Islamic State to a successor

(Siegel, 2019, August 22). Whether this new leader can sustain a resurgence of the group’s power and retake territory remains to be seen.

In the past, as ISIS fighting forces have dwindled, recruitment increased, especially through internet forums (Hanoush, 2015, November 21; Klausen, 2015; Melhern, 2015, November/December). Women were especially targeted as mothers, wives, medical professionals, business operators, farmers, and online recruiters spreading the message of jihad (Auerbach, 2014). They not have, until recently, been used extensively in combat as the Qur’an exempts women from the duty to participate in armed jihad (Hasan, 2004); women have also been prohibited from joining front-line fighting by Ayman al-Zawahiri, once Al-Qaeda’s second in command and Yussufal-Ayyiri, leader of the Saudi organization (Buriil, 2017; Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2010, February 26). However, there has been a resurgence in women’s involvement in international terrorist activities in some parts of the world (Ali, 2006; Cook, 2005; von Knop, 2007). Some speculated that the current, more desperate position of the caliphate will lead to a greater reliance on women in active combat roles (Al-Saleh, 2014, January 5; Buriil, 2017; Speckhard, 2013, September 24). The women who might fill those roles have often been recruited to the Islamic State via ISIS’s extensive media infrastructure.

ISIS MEDIA PRACTICES

In its short but dramatic history, ISIS has made newsworthy use of social media for a variety of purposes from soliciting financing, recruiting fighters, establishing legitimacy, and instilling fear in its adversaries. The group has produced professional promotional media that are distributed in a wide variety of formats including online magazines, blogs, internet forums, and YouTube videos. And these messages reverberate across the internet, spawning others such as the “one billion campaign” which calls on Muslims to post messages, photos and videos on Twitter, Instagram and YouTube in support of ISIS.

They also use more informal, but still highly orchestrated social media such as initiating a Twitter hashtag in Arabic which translates as #theFridayofsupportingISIS in which supporters wave ISIS flags and upload videos. At its height it is estimated that there were some 45,000 active ISIS Twitter accounts (Brookings Institution's Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, 2016). The largest number of followers who access ISIS through Twitter are located in Syria and Iraq, although one in five ISIS supporters selected English as their primary language (Berger & Morgan, 2015; Smith, 2015). Free internet applications like *The Dawn of Glad Tidings* automatically post approved tweets to the accounts of subscribed users, with as many as 40,000 daily tweets sent on some occasions "presumably to create fear among its enemies and win the admiration of other radical groups" (Irshaid, 2014).

"The overall goal of ISIS is to manipulate public sentiment and coalesce political-military power via sophisticated media that form an important part of its strategy of warfare."

In order to compete effectively for the attention of viewers who are bombarded with hundreds of other messages, ISIS videos were shortened from 53 minutes to an average of 20 minutes suggesting a sensitivity to a generation of consumers fluent in digital technologies and impatient with lengthy visuals (Bolt, 2012). Videos also mimic popular video games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* by using first person point-of-view and rapid editing to create immersion in alternative reality. The video images are ambiguous and fluid, allowing disparate and diverse receivers to construct their own identities around them (Bolt, 2012; Graber, 2011). At the same time, as receivers reinterpret the images, they incorporate them into their own hierarchy of thinking (Garin, 2015, June 11; Pepitone 2014, June 16; Stern & Berger, 2015). These videos often feature demonstrations of strength such as the swift justice meted out to enemies through graphic executions which are juxtaposed with material communicating ISIS's compassion for the elderly and children. These

messages position ISIS as a real agent of change grounded in social justice that avenges the long-suffering faithful. To date, counter-messages have largely been ineffective because they do not address ISIS's fundamental appeal to justice (Cohen, 2009; Mazzetti & Gordon, 2015, June 12; Sorenson, 2014; Stevens & Neumann, 2009).

Although some ISIS online media is generated spontaneously by individuals, most messages are well-conceptualized productions that sometimes strategically mimic poor production quality to imply grass roots origins (Krona, 2019; Siboni, Cohen, & Koren, 2015). The mediated messages are purposeful, well-financed, and carefully choreographed. Footage is obtained from ISIS soldiers going into battle equipped with GoPro cameras strapped to their helmets and remotely-operated drones flying above the armed clashes. Compared to other social movements, Julianne Pepitone (2014) concludes: "The scale

and relative professionalism of ISIS' management of social media and other PR platforms has been far superior..." The footage is designed to work equally well across multiple media formats suggesting pre-production planning, professional quality production, and post-production sophistication with an understanding of the confluence of multiple media channels. The overall goal of ISIS is to manipulate public sentiment and coalesce political-military power via sophisticated media that form an important part of its strategy of warfare (Conway, 2012; Gates & Podder, 2015; Greene, 2015; Huey, 2015, May 25; Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007; Siboni, Cohen, & Koren, 2015).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNET IMAGES

If seeing is believing, then the internet is an archive of belief. Internet communication technologies privilege images because they are immediate, able to simultaneously communicate multiple meanings, and function effectively to

generate common themes that resonate through a fragmented media landscape. Visual texts are more effective than other message forms in communicating ideas (Lester, 2003) and images are more likely than other modes of communication to result in persuasion as Neville Bolt (2012) concludes: “And increasingly it is pictures, images triggering crystallised messages that resonate with popular memories of grievance and injustice. In today’s overcrowded marketplace of ideas and communications, they offer clarity... {acting} as a lightning rod for collective memory” (p. 7).

The contemporary turn to the visual by proponents of marginalized ideas is enhanced by information and communication technologies that offer the possibility of immediate, relatively unimpeded digital sharing with potentially millions of participants (Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007). The unique feature of information and communication technologies is that they easily conform to multiple contexts. This technological adaptability accounts, in part, for the rapid rise of ISIS and its continuing threat to established governments. As Emerson T. Brooking and P. W. Singer (2016, November) claim, “The principles that have guided the Islamic State’s viral success are the same ones used to publicize a new Taylor Swift album or the latest Star Wars movie” (p. 76). Information and communication technology are cheap and readily available. They lend themselves to theatrical displays that appeal to younger audiences.

The use of visual images as a strategy of contemporary conflict is rooted in the experiences of twentieth century world war combatants like filmmakers Frank Capra and Leni Reifenstahl who exploited the power of visual propaganda to communicate national ideologies. More recently ‘netwar,’ as observers have labeled it, has weaponized digital media and widened the battlefield to include the internet. Images of conflict, especially those of death, still transfix viewers, further illustrating the power of the visual image. Such images are characterized by fragmentation as well as immediacy. The real power of shared images lies in their ability to reduce ideas to a single instantly recognized

experience as Neville Bolt (2012) claims, “it is the uncluttered simplicity of the images, stripping out any extraneous distraction that might complicate the intended message. As reality is transformed into iconographic representation, the greater chance of prolonging its life and freezing the moment forever” (p. 115). Just as images anchor public memory and form the cornerstone of historical experience, they can also influence an individual’s understanding of personal experience, providing a cultural way to interpret events in the realm of one’s own life. For women, these messages are often related to gendered roles as sisters, lovers, and mothers.

Images condense the arguments and beliefs of abstract ideologies into a single, compelling force that functions to convey them as mediated spectacles (McGee, 1980; Graber, 2011; Gronbeck, 2013). As spectacle, images circulated via the internet invite participation because of the nature of the medium as participants actively choose to view, post, re-post, and otherwise interact online. These resources engage respondents that are more important to revolutionary groups than their physical resources because they encourage individuals to identify with the ideologies of the group (McGee, 1983). For this reason, images are a critical element in recruiting and maintaining adherents. The shared visual image becomes a common denominator in persuasion, condensing and transmitting ideological positions. The online presence of ISIS illustrates the power of images in the successful recruitment of individuals to the caliphate and its jihad (Shamieh & Szenes, 2015; Walker, 2015; Zelin, 2015).

ISIS RECRUITMENT OF WOMEN

More than 41,000 Westerners reported to have joined the Islamic State, with more than 4,700 of them being women (Ulas, 2019, August 15). Stories of individuals traveling to join the caliphate form the basis of speculation about recruitment but often there is little other evidence of why recruitment succeeded (van San, 2017). Because Western governments have become more active in pursuing and shutting down online

recruitment sites, it is also more difficult to trace what media are accessed and how frequently viewers participate in those media. In particular, ISIS works to produce what are known as “swarmcasts,” which are multi-platformed, multi-modal, multi-sourced social media events that are difficult to counter. Swarmcasts have stretched traditional definitions of media as Ali Fisher (2015) observes: “It marks a shift from the hierarchical and broadcast models of communication during conflict to a new dispersed and resilient form which embraces the strength of emergent behaviour” (p. 8).

At the height of its online power, ISIS had at least a vast media operation pumping out video, audio, and written material (Krona, 2019). Many of these were clearly produced by sources familiar with Western language and culture. It is probable that Western women were partially involved in the creation of materials aimed at girls and women because of the colloquial content as well as the strict gender segregation within ISIS organizations. Materials targeting these women, sometimes feature fighters with kittens or other homey images designed to make them seem approachable and reinforce the idea that ISIS fighters are fueled not only by righteousness but also by compassion. These impressions are then used to craft romantic appeals to female recruits, suggesting ISIS will protect them and defend them against injustices

The recruitment of teen girls, in particular, serves several purposes. First, it is less likely that girls will be apprehended as they travel to the Islamic State because they raise fewer suspicions; second, these girls are expected to marry ISIS fighters and raise a new generation of caliphate members; and, finally, Western girls can be used to stage terrorist attacks in their own countries. The original call for girls to migrate to the caliphate was highly effective as Sash Havlicek, chief executive of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, observes: “We’re seeing young women from across Western countries both expressing their support for and migrating to Syria now in totally unprecedented numbers. And I would say this is the result really of an extremely sophisticated propaganda recruitment

machinery that’s targeting young women very specifically” (Quoted in Perrucci, 2015). At the height of its recruitment, it is estimated that 10% of foreigners voluntarily entering the Islamic State were women as ISIS actively increased its appeal to young, computer literate women (Khelghat-Doost, 2017). The caliphate offered a utopian political vision with centralized Islamic rule that resonated with youthful religious idealism and desire to escape the frustrations of daily life in the West (Perrucci, 2015). Young recruits were assured by ISIS bloggers that the caliphate was determined to help its citizens. ISIS publications such as *Dabiq* emphasized the caliphate’s commitment to producing a just civil society. The caliphate was framed as an idyllic alternative to marginalized young people living in countries where they were often subjected to Islamophobic harassment.

ISIS messages gain potency because they are disseminated via social media that mimic personal interaction (Shane & Hubbard, 2014, August 30; Speckhard, Yayla, & Shajkovci, 2016). As Shahed Amanullah, a former senior adviser at the State Department, notes, “It’s from the audience that it is going after. These young people understand youth frustration, they understand the fascination with violence, they understand that imagery and graphics that you see in Hollywood will attract these people.” Compared to counter-narratives posted in an attempt to undermine ISIS, the government messages “...don’t percolate through the Internet in the same way a beheading video does” (Walker, 2015). The ISIS messages court the undecided by displaying the heroic nature of the fighters, strengthen recruit resolve by situating the fighting as a defense of daily life, and threaten the West by revealing the consequences of resisting ISIS’s authority (Garin, 2015, June 11). It is clear to Lint Watts of the Foreign Policy Institute that social media “accelerate the radicalization of recruitment” partially through video imagery, immersing potential recruits in an engaging way, and through repetition as video messages pop up in many places across multiple platforms—something ISIS has done more successfully than any other group (Farwell, 2014; Simon, 2014,

September 6; Stern & Berger, 2015).

Women are usually recruited to ISIS by other women through internet contacts. Part of the appeal is that women can join jihad within their traditional religious roles as supporters of the movement. They are fully prepared for the struggle to advance the cause within the prescribed religious boundaries that offer women an important way to confront the enemy within their gender expectations (Lahoud, 2010, February 26; Von Knop, 2007; Zamkane, 2008). There are a variety of levels of women's involvement in recruitment, from the creation of pamphlets to online training to articles in publications like ISIS's Arabic magazine *al-Naba*. Some ISIS women, such as Iman Mustafa al-Bugha and Umayma al-Zawahiri, have gained prestige through their social media contributions (Lahoud, 2010, February 26).

While the reasons women are attracted to jihad are as varied as the women themselves, it appears that, unlike men, women's reasons tend to be personal (Grier, 2010, March 10; Weinberg & Eubank, 2011). New forms of internet communication have facilitated more intimate connections between individual women and jihadist organizations (Weinberg & Eubank, 2011). In fact, specific attention has been directed at women by recruiting organizations using personal appeals (Gonzalez-Perez, 2011). The global nature of the internet makes it easy to communicate to a vast reservoir of individuals who might otherwise not be tapped by traditional media, particularly those targeting men. As Margaret Gonzalez-Perez (2011) concludes: "Thousands of Al Qaeda's authors and postings appeal specifically to women, disseminating propaganda, gathering strategic intelligence, and mobilizing female operatives" (p. 61). Many of these postings are ephemeral, located and shut down quickly, but just as quickly, interested women shift to other sites and continue to connect with others who promote jihad.

The ISIS materials aimed at young women and teenage girls skirt the more violent realities of life in a jihadist culture by establishing strong interpersonal contacts. They engage in one-on-

one conversations with recruiters from the same country who are similar in age and interests. They engage in small talk and colloquialisms through internet conversations (Speckhard, 2013, September 24). This is a strategy dating from the early 2000's. Humera Khan (2004), executive director of Muflehun which specializes in counter-terrorism, says of extremists online "they're talking about everyday issues, what life is like. It's very warm and fuzzy stuff. Only a tiny percent has anything to do with religious ideology and a tiny percent has anything to do with violence" (p. 63). The overall content of such online interaction mixes homey "girltalk" with only subtle undercurrents of jihadist messages. This is likely not an accident as Debangana Chatterjee (2016) has pointed out how this seemingly "warm and fuzzy" girltalk masks the violent, oppressive, and abusive reality experienced by many women living in Islamic State territory. Also obscuring the violence of life in ISIS are the romantic relationships used to recruit women to the Islamic State.

ROMANCING THE CALIPHATE

The images of Islamic State fighters holding kittens or caring for the elderly are not only used to suggest to the viewer that the caliphate cares about the lives of its residents, but they also hint at the romantic relationships that await female recruits. A number of ISIS bloggers create fantasy narratives to attract women with suggestive storylines, gauzy images, and hidden romances. A celebrity culture has even emerged around some ISIS fighters popularly called "jihotties" such as the French recruit known as "Guitone" and some sites offer an online speed dating service for fighters looking for jihadi brides (Smith, 2015). This attention to finding a romantic partner for female ISIS recruits is an attempt to tap into a centuries-old romantic tradition that exists in some Middle Eastern and Central Eurasian cultures.

Most famous, perhaps, is the strand of romance found in Persian poetry, which models the relationship between men and women, stressing both modest traditional relationships and warning

that willful women are the source of social disruption (Ispahani, 2016; Newsom-Rascoe, 2006). Its foundational narratives give centrality to women's roles as symbols in the creation of romantic bonds while simultaneously establishing women as objects of desire. The centrality of women within the romance has recently been used for contradictory ends, for the expansion of women's power within Islam and, in direct contrast, the restriction of women exclusively to family. The source of these narratives springs from society and social relationships rooted in religion. It is largely religion that modulates women's identity within many Muslim cultures, solidifying her place of belonging and suggesting parameters of action and attitudes (Cooke, 2001). Her role is fraught with unsatisfied longing that is deeply rooted in religious-secular court culture and spirituality. The bond between the lover and the beloved is at once laden with physical yearning and mystical devotion that mimics the relationship of the devoted to God (Curtis & Canby, 2006). This sort of romance, or the history of it, seems at times to have inspired the social media posts of ISIS "fangirls" – often young Western Muslims – in Tumblr and Twitter who have used their spaces to sell a narrative of adventure and belonging in relation to the Islamic State (Ben-Israel, 2019).

Romance is also an important genre in many Western countries. In the United States, for example, romance makes up 29%-34% of fiction sales, offering up to readers idealized imaginings of the relationship between men and women (Nielsen, 2016, May 26; Romance Writers of America, n.d.).

While the genre can be liberating, some critics claim that it reinforces unrealistic and racially biased notions of human relationships (The Ripped Bodice, n.d.). ISIS media have exploited these popular romantic traditions as it has crafted recruitment materials aimed at young women, offering the possibility of an exciting, but chaste

"ISIS media have exploited ... popular romantic traditions as it has crafted recruitment materials aimed at young women, offering the possibility of an exciting, but chaste romance between the viewer and an ISIS fighter..."

romance between the viewer and an ISIS fighter (real or imagined) featured in an image or described in a post. In particular, the "romance of the veil" appears with some frequency. One such text showed two imagined lovers engaged in an innocent flirtation where a woman plays with a wispy veil, eventually pulling it aside for her lover, a jihadi fighter, to see her face in full. That is the entirety of the interaction. There is nothing overtly sexual, although the passage offers intimacy. Such encounters may appeal to young women who respond to traditional gender roles envisioned in popular romances and for whom strict gender segregation affords limited interaction with men (Saul, 2014, October 31).

A number of other messages targeting women, including video sermons on the role of women in the caliphate, feature feminine touches such as roses that decorate the title screens. Graphics for other videos and printed material for women also feature various colors such

as pink or purple that may lend a softer, more romantic touch to the text. Such subtle appeals to women may reinforce a life of romance, of love, and of purpose as viewers fantasize about their lives as brides of ISIS fighters. After harsh social exclusion in the West, women may be tempted by the inclusion offered by romantic and familial love.

In addition to a focus on romantic love, ISIS media also have produced messages which romanticize the role of women as jihadi fighters. These are not women who need saving by the West (Abu-Lughod, 2002), but who will, instead, save their sisters from Western imperialism. Clad in long black niqab and wielding automatic rifles, these women support their husbands and sons in jihad by offering their own lives to protect their homes and communities. No longer is it the lone woman who might take up violent means in support of a political group, as in the case of Roshonara Choudhry who killed a local politician after listening to the sermons of a radical cleric

(Pearson, 2015); increasingly, ISIS is producing visual material showing female fighters working together. The message which accompanies such images often urges women to take up arms to defend the caliphate (Dearden, 2017, October 6). ISIS, in essence, has empowered its female members to join the physical fight.

This framing of women as empowered female fighters is similar to videos produced by the Khayr Ummah Foundation, associated with Al Qaeda. In one video entitled *Empowered Women*, a group of women in black niqab hold automatic rifles, point them into the air, and shoot at distant targets. The women cheer one another and shout “Allahu Akbar.” The video is meant to juxtapose Al Qaeda’s idea of female empowerment with Western female empowerment. Al Qaeda’s empowered women are armed and ready to defend their culture and their families from outside threats – who needs a sexual revolution when you have an automatic rifle?

Both the ISIS and Al Qaeda visuals show groups of women fighting together in worlds circumscribed by their relationships with other members of their respective groups. Religious messages often build on the need for interpersonal reinforcement of a romanticized ideal that promises the righting of injustices by armed female fighters. The justice wrought by such violence is sanctioned by jihad and possibly appeals to Western Muslim women who have suffered personal oppression (Van San, 2018). The fighting women of ISIS (and Al Qaeda) offer a romanticized vision of conflict showing potential recruits the camaraderie of sisters in the shadow of the Black Banner as they defend the state and all it stands for. This type of framing hides the patriarchal organization which sits at the core of Islamic State, as well as the violence inherent to it (Chatterjee, 2016; Peresin & Cervone, 2015) in order to sell an alternative idea of empowerment to women who have sometimes felt like they have had little say over the course of their lives.

CONCLUSION

While the fortunes of the Islamic State have recently been challenged on the battlefield and the final outcome of the struggle is uncertain at the time of this writing, ISIS still maintains a vigorous media presence and influences periodic ‘lone wolf’ attacks (Arango, 2017, March 28; Hubbard & Gordon, 2017, March 29). Instead of encouraging the physical journey, known as “hijrah” (the Arabic reference to Prophet Muhammad’s journey to escape persecution) it now offers adherents the opportunity to serve Islam by striking at the enemy in situ. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani tells followers: “If the tyrants have closed in your faces the door of hijrah, then open in their face the door of jihad” (Callimachi, 2017). In at least 10 suicide bombings, recruits were in direct contact with their online coaches until the final minutes of the attack. Experts who have examined plots carried out in the name of ISIS conclude that for the past three years, “enabled attacks” facilitated by online applications, such as ChatSecure, Pidgin, Tutanota, and the Tails operating system, have grown as ISIS recruiters can hide safely among billions of social media accounts worldwide, using skillfully crafted messages as “clickbait” to lure future recruits (Almuhktar, 2015, May 19; Callimachi, 2017).

As ISIS vows to export the fight to other nations, the internet has served as an invaluable tool in the radicalization of supporters (Stern & Berger, 2015). The focus on influencing terrorist attacks has altered the dynamics of recruitment as Frank Cilluffo (2014), director of the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute, explains, “At the end of the day, they don’t need big numbers. They’re trying to appeal to small numbers, which unfortunately in the terrorism business is all it takes” (p. 6). Instead of more generic appeals, ISIS recruiters can establish personal relationships with online contacts, providing the motivation and information necessary to encourage local acts of terrorism. Tina S. Kaidanow, top counterterrorism official for the U.S. State Department, concluded that “the Islamic State’s unprecedented ability to recruit and to radicalize followers over the Internet and on

social media” will continue that trend (Schmitt & Senguptasept, 2015, September 27, p. A1).

In predicting the future of conflict, Peter W. Singer, director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, drew this comparison: “Just as the Crimea War was the first war reported by telegraph and Vietnam the first TV war, we are now seeing wars in places like Syria and Iraq, just like the broader use of media technology, playing out online” (Ajbaili, 2014, June 24). And, just as the introduction of the new technologies of the telegraph and television altered the way audiences participated in warfare, the latest information and communication technologies have once again changed the relationship of audiences to war. In the future, critics must analyze the emerging technologies of netwar to fully understand the shifting contexts of conflicts. The images that swirl across digital forums have become an important part of twenty-first century conflict, allowing recruiters to target women and girls by bringing revolution directly into their lives, often playing on their desire for sisterhood and romance while obscuring all the ways they might become victims of violence should they decide to join the Islamic State.

The question, of course, is how to counter ISIS’s messaging targeted at women. What narratives of inclusion can the West offer young women who are marked as “other” through experiences of racism or Islamophobia in their daily lives? This is a particularly potent question as the idea of multiculturalism in Europe has largely been deemed a failure and as the recent political climate in the United States makes Muslims a target for extremists. If ISIS offers a way to escape oppression as well as find romance, it may be time to ask why the Muslim women who choose to join the Islamic State cannot find personal fulfillment in the West.

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NOTES

¹ Much of the ISIS and Al Qaeda material we base our essay on has been archived at the website Jihadology.net. Run by scholar Aaron Y. Zelin, the site serves as a clearinghouse of jihadi produced material and features uploads of videos as well as the text of particular recruitment messages and sometimes PDFs of recruitment materials. One example of this is the posting of PDFs of issues of the Al Qaeda affiliated women's magazine

Your Home, including this one posted September 1, 2019: <https://jihadology.net/2019/09/01/new-magazine-issue-released-your-home-20/>. Other material was found circulating in social media, but the links to particular posts have been lost as accounts have been shut down – either by site administrators working to curb extremist material or by individuals who, for one reason or another, decide to disengage from publicly disseminating ISIS material.

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