

Western women in jihad, *triumph of conservatism or export of sexual revolution?*

According to a recent study from the Cease Fire Center For The Human Rights, a NGO supported by the European Union, more than 14000 women have been killed in Iraq since 2003. While far from being the sole perpetrator of violence against women, the organization of the Islamic state (the former Al Qaeda in Iraq) has been particularly active in oppressing them, first in Iraq where it started operating in 2004, then in Syria in the context of the uprising against the regime of Bashar Al Assad. Uncountable acts of violence: sexual assaults, abductions, rapes, trafficking in women and girls, have been perpetrated by this organization as a tactic of terror in coherence with its strategy of waging a total war against society (Peritz and Maller, 2015). ISIS attempts to create a new, pure, Sunni society across Syria and Iraq in « *the Bilad a-cham* ». It is realized through a strategy of ethnic cleansing targeting Shia and non-Islamic communities, as well as many Sunni opponents. Women have paid a very heavy toll with the recent highly advertised reintroduction of slavery for Yazidi women, thus symbolizing the brutality of ISIS' regime against women.

An unprecedented flow of foreign fighters, including from Western countries, are converging into Syria (and to a lesser extent Iraq) to join ISIS and other jihadist formations since 2012. The proclamation of the caliphate by the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in July 2014 has even further accentuated the trend. Most surprisingly, many women have joined the movement. They may account for 10% of the total flow of Western migrants (Hoyle and al, 2015). In some countries like France, the percentage is much higher. It is very tempting to categorize as totally irrational such departures from Western countries where gender equality, if not totally achieved, is openly promoted, to join a group responsible for atrocities against women. Such a categorization would imply that this phenomenon is only relevant for the field of psychology. While not denying the necessity of the psychological approach, especially in the radicalization process, understanding why thousands of individuals from our societies, including women are so fascinated by ISIS to the point of migrating into warzones call for a more transversal approach. It may start by questioning deeply rooted representations in our societies that tend to essentialize women as pacific, non-violent creatures, openly or secretly receptive to Western-like gender equality. At least up to a certain extent, female jihadists have to be considered as voluntary political actors, with a specific agenda. In spite of the impression provided by today's massive media coverage, women's, including Westerners, participation in jihadist movements is not something completely new. With the notion of Jihad having been continuously revisited since the 1980s towards an extensive understanding of its mandatory nature for Muslims, many women have claimed their will

to take their part, and many of them have been playing an active role on the ground, from Afghanistan to Chechnya and Palestine. This implication of women on the ground has led many prominent jihadist ideologues to clarify their perception of women's place in their ideal Islamic society and of their role in helping to achieve this society, by giving their opinion on key questions such as the modality of travelling to jihad zones, the participation to the fight, the realization of suicide attacks. Beyond the general narrative of the "true" liberation that Islam offers to women (in opposition to the "depraved" Western version) advocated by most Islamists, the jihadist discourse on women participation in Jihad must be analyzed and its contradictions pointed out if one wants to elaborate a pertinent counter-narrative.

Jihadist discourse is one thing, its endorsement by women, including from Western societies is another, especially at such a large and unprecedented scale. The extent to which there is a convergence between jihadist scholars' perception of the role of women, and these same women's own incentives for migrating to Syria or Iraq in order to take part in the jihadist project is a determinant question if one wants to understand the potential impact of this phenomenon on groups like ISIS. One may wonder if Western educated women (and beyond them, Syrian, Iraqi and other immigrant women) will comply with the very limited, traditional role assigned to them in the emerging "caliphate"...

Methodology

Women participation in violent movements, Islamist or not, has received little attention until the 2000's. Since then, a growing number of academic works has been published on both the Islamist theoretical framework regarding women role in Jihad and case studies of women involvement on the ground. This proved highly useful to put the phenomenon into historical perspective and to assess what is new with ISIS. The analysis of jihadist groups' publications such as *Inspire* for Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP), *Dabiq*, *Dar Al Islam* (the French version of *Dabiq*) and the manifesto of the Al Khansaa female brigade for ISIS was also interesting to apprehend the importance given to woman affairs in these groups official communication, and how it has evolved. Finally, unofficial sources provided by women themselves, through blogs and social network pages represent a huge amount of material offering an access to their motivations, strategies and roles. If a few academic works have started analyzing social media material through quantitative approaches, the time available for this essay makes such an approach unrealistic. It is then, to a large extent, a qualitative work. A small gallery of pictures is proposed in annex. It is largely composed of social account profile pictures that illustrate the symbolic and the aspirations of ISIS female supporters.

At least two biases must be taken into account. Firstly, online materials such as social network pages can never be completely certified as authentic. It is very difficult to ascertain that a woman claiming to be in Syria is really there, and whether what she asserts is really her experience or if it was extracted from other sources. Even in cases when her presence on the ground is very likely, it is not sure to what

extent the content is dictated by ISIS officials for propaganda purposes or if it is the genuine view of the author. This is particularly the case for example with Umm Layth (Alias Aqsa Mahmood) blog: "diary of a Muhajirah". Nevertheless, propaganda analysis in itself remains highly interesting and indicative of ISIS discourse on women. The second bias is more geographical. This essay focuses on Western women because only they communicate to such a systematic extent on the Internet. Yet they represent a tiny minority of women involved in ISIS. Further work will have to focus on local women, but also on migrants from the Arab world (the biggest contingent of ISIS foreign fighters are Saudis and Tunisians¹) who also represent a very important target for ISIS recruitment. It is highly probable that the dynamics behind these women's involvement considerably differ from that of their Western counterparts.

I The discourse on women in Jihad

Women hold a central position in the jihadist project for several reasons: first as the symbol of Muslim oppression by their enemies, be they Western countries, Arab regimes or communities regarded as non-Islamic like the Shia, second as an essential part of the project: as mothers, wives and widow, and sometimes as participants in the struggle itself.

Women as victims

Jihadist groups' attempts to mobilize support are based, to a large extent, on the idea of a global war being waged against Islam (Kepel, 2014; Van San, 2015, Lacroix, 2015). Muslims are depicted as being slaughtered all over the world, in Palestine, in the Centrafrican Republic, in Myanmar...and obviously in Syria and Iraq. In Western countries, their oppression is considered more insidious, being carried out by preventing Muslims to freely practice the pure Islam (including *Sharia* enforcement) and by discriminating against them. Muslim women are key figures of this global oppression. Very few calls for Muslim mobilization toward Jihad do not include references to "Sisters" or "mothers" being harassed, humiliated, and assaulted. The Muslim women is undoubtedly the most recurrent figure in the jihadist discourse on victimization. Recent legislations in Western countries such as France, which banned the wearing of the Hijab in public spaces, are virulently contested as an insult to the honour of Muslim women (Van San, 2015; Zakaria, 2015). More generally, in accordance with a more "mainstream" Islamist narrative, the jihadist discourse rejects gender equality and Western sexual

¹According to a Soufan group survey in June 2014, only 2500 of the 12000 foreign fighters in Syria were of Western origin. By comparison, the Tunisian authorities estimated at 3000 the number of its citizen fighting in Syria and the Saudi authorities at 2500. In both cases, many observers denounced largely underestimated figures.

liberation as biased and perverted. In their view, the consequences have been growing violence toward women, and them being treated as sexual objects in addition to a loss of reference detrimental to society and family harmony. One of the most recent and elaborated ISIS statement on the question of women, the "manifesto on women by the Al Khansaa brigade" published in January 2015, does not even feel it necessary to insist on that point:

Here, we are not going to present a list of the negatives that are caused in communities from the "women's emancipation" narrative. These are apparent, unhidden from the distant observer, let alone the close observer.

In warzones like the Centrafrican republic or Syria, women are regarded as mere victims of the barbaric behavior of Islam's enemies because they are too weak to defend themselves. This idea that women can only be the victims of conflict is not the monopoly of the jihadist discourse. It is actually a classical and deeply rooted gender stereotype essentializing women as vulnerable, sweet and pacific creatures (Herman, 2010). It is interesting how such representations also structure counter-discourses in the Iraq-Syria case. The rumor on the "Jihad al Nikkah" (sexual Jihad, literally "Jihad of marriage") that spread like wildfire in Tunisia in 2013 is one significant example. In August 2013, a 17 years old Tunisian girl coming back from Syria declared having been used to provide sexual comfort to Jabhat al Nusra (JAN) fighters. According to her testimony, she was "temporarily married" to about one hundred successive fighters against her will. The story quickly spread in the media, and among Maghreb countries, politicians upheld this as the evidence of women candidates to jihad being systematically sexually abused by Islamist groups. Many reports emerged, estimating in the hundreds and even the thousands the number of victims. Finally, rigorous journalistic investigations showed a different picture: all the testimonies were in fact copies of the first one, which proved unreliable. According to some sources, the Tunisian authorities themselves could have created the whole story, with the ambition of discrediting mainstream Islamist formations like Enhadda (Daniel, 2013). In the same vein, several hoax have been debunked since the beginning of the conflict that systematically presented ISIS as imposing barbaric treatment to women. Among the many example available, a photo of an ISIS fighter allegedly marrying a very young, crying girl that became viral on the social networks in 2014 and finally proved being completely inaccurate:



Figure 1 The Fake wedding

Even more surprising, an alleged ISIS fatwa imposing women excision emerged on the Internet in 2014 and was treated as authentic in an official declaration from the UN representative for Humanitarian question in Iraq, Jacqueline Badcock on July 24. Immediately after, the fatwa hit the headlines of most mainstream media. Yet, it quickly appeared to be a hoax. These two examples prove how prone opponents to these groups are, at the most official levels, to succumb to their own representations. The perverse effect is double: it raises illegitimate doubts on seriously verified crimes against women perpetrated by these groups, and it gives space to the plot theory based rhetoric that characterizes their communication: that a coalition of opposed forces (an explosive mixture of Jews, Americans and Iranian Shia) are waging a media war to discredit the Caliphate. Finally it is very telling of the Western double discourse on women participation in the Syrian conflict. While condemning in the strongest terms women involvement, even passive, into jihadist groups, other female figures like the PKK female soldiers have been treated with the highest enthusiasm and probably with exaggeration as heroin of democracy and the struggle for human decency. Among them, a young women named Rehana was reported by The New York Daily News and many other media as having killed a hundred ISIS soldier (Zakaria, 2015), whereas her participation even to a single combat remained unclear until now.

In a complete reversal of the role, jihadist discourse valorizes the movement as the only one truly defending women. It is for instance illustrated by the recurrent demands for the release of detained women, when the groups enter in negotiation processes. The trend is general but several highly symbolic figures have emerged in the recent years. Perhaps the most famous is Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist jailed for 86 years in Texas after being convicted of attempt murder of US federal agents (Zakaria, 2015). Her name was the only one mentioned by ISIS in an alleged exchange proposal made to the US against James Foley in August 2014. In January 2015 ISIS also asked for the release of Sajida Mubarak Al Rishawi, an Iraqi woman arrested in Jordan in 2005 after a failed attempt to commit a suicide attack (Von Knop, 2007), in exchange with a Jordanian military pilot captured by the organization. After the pilot's barbaric assassination, the Jordanians executed Rishawi. In November 2014, JAN threatened to execute a Lebanese policemen held hostage at the Syrian Border if a woman, Joumana Hmayyed was not liberated (she was arrested in February in the town of Ersal, in a vehicle filled with explosives). The hostage was finally executed and JAN reiterated its threats (the group still holds about 20 other hostages belonging to the Lebanese security forces), this time by asking for the release of two other women including Saja Al Dulaïmi who might be an ex-wife of the ISIS leader himself. Dulaïmi had already been freed (with 150 other women and children) during negotiations with JAN for the liberation in March 2014 of 13 orthodox nuns kidnapped in Syria. She was arrested again in November 2014 while smuggling an important sum of money across the Lebanese-Syrian border. According to the UK press, she has become a superstar among pro-jihadist, especially in female circles. In the same vein, JAN has also offered the liberation of each Lebanese soldier held hostage, in exchange for a significant number of women jailed in Syria. One last example is Hayla Al Qasir, alias Umm al Rabab, a Saudi woman involved in raising funds for jihadist movements and in the training of women. After her arrest by the Saudi authorities in 2010, Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP) launched a huge mobilization campaign to secure her release, including direct threats to the security services involved in her capture (Lahoud, 2014).

These various examples show how important getting the liberation of these women is in the legitimization process (sometimes highly competitive) of jihadist movements. It solidifies their claims of acting as the true defender of Muslim women honour that is, according to them, necessarily jeopardized when they are jailed. This has led to the emergence within supportive circles of heroic figures of imprisoned women, a particularly efficient symbol for catalyzing mobilization (Lahoud, 2014).

The ambiguities of the discourse on women role in Jihad

The second aspect of the jihadist discourse on women is the place dedicated to them in the advent of the jihadist project itself

In most cases, women must remain at home

There is a consensus among jihadist scholars on first and foremost valorizing women as mothers and wives (Von Knop 2007; Haq, 2007; Hoyle and al, 2015). Before anything else, women are given the role of raising children in the respect of proper Islam and to provide support, both material and spiritual, to their husbands' mujahedeen. As stated by Ayman al Zawahiri quoted by Nelly Lahoud:

the Majaheedat are doing an heroic job watching over their home and their children

Women are largely regarded as the real pillar of the Ummah in the private sphere whose everyday commitment toward children will help more than anything else in advancing the cause of Jihad. Because ISIS' strategy (much more than Al Qaeda) is based on the effective control and ruling of large territories, this aspect of women's role has been reinforced: they embody the group's capacity to effectively sustain this society. Attracting Muslim women from all over the world, providing them with a home and whatever is necessary for their living, including security, is determinant in that sense. It is strikingly important for ISIS to give the impression that life within its newly established state is "normal" and women presence represents a decisive argument for that. According to some sources, the logic is pushed to the extreme, with the group physically forbidding women under 45 years old to leave the Syrian town of Raqqa. In the same vein, it seems that fewer women return from Syria and Iraq than their male counterparts, possibly because of the strong reluctance from the jihadist groups to let them go, and the difficulty to escape with young children since many of them rapidly give birth to children (Bouzar and Thomson, 2014).

Another essential female figure in the jihadist narrative, in the logical continuity of women as mujahedeen's mothers or wives, is the figure of the widow. The "mother of Shaheed" is the object of a sometimes much institutionalized cult within the Jihad sphere. This is especially the case in Pakistan where meetings are organized by the Laskar I Tayyabia movement which gives a significant importance to the testimony of these women (Haq, 2007). The emphasis is mostly placed on the mother's (or wife's) tremendous pride of her son's or husband's total engagement on the path of Allah. The jihadist

narrative is full of exemplar figures of these widows, like Umm Suraaquah who lost a son during the first Afghan war. When informed by Abdullah Azzam, she surprised him by immediately commanding her second son to join the fight. Jihadist group's interest in promoting such "heroic" figures is double. Firstly it strengthens the legitimacy of the sacrifice for the cause by including the closest relatives in a process therefore no longer limited to the *Shaheed* himself, thus symbolizing the strong commitment of the whole society. Secondly, the well-publicized treatment reserved to the widow and her children who receive material and financial assistance reassures the potential candidates as to the consequence of their death for the condition of their relatives.

Exceptions may yet arise

ISIS vision of the perfect Islamic society is in the continuity of its predecessors within the Jihad family. Lands of Jihad in Northern Africa, Middle East, or Central Asia are also lands where societies are traditionally highly patriarchal and jihadist ideologues never showed interest in contesting such an established pattern. The project is not progressive, it is intrinsically conservative and even backward-looking (Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2014). The valorization of women's role in the familial sphere is therefore an indirect way to deprive them of an access to the public sphere, always regarded with suspicion by leaders. However, a relative consensus exists among scholars on allowing women to perform logistical and communicational functions in support of the Jihad, such as treating the wounded, raising funds, and advertising for the cause. Anwar al Awlaqi for example opened the possibility for "Internet Mujahedat" (Lahoud, 2014). But most of them acknowledge that such an involvement should remain the exception rather than the rule, and that the normal place of women is at home, as clearly stated in the Al khansaa manifesto.

[...] there are other causes for which it is permissible for certain women to leave their home in order to serve society that we will recount below, God permitting (besides things that she customarily needs to do like traveling, on visits or hospitalized and so on). This is only in exceptional circumstances, not continually, as is the case with men.

Rare women morale figures like Ayman Al Zawahiri's wife, Umayma Al Zawahiri, do not statue differently, the latter emphasizing women's importance in supporting male fighters with "prayers and money" (Lahoud, 2014)

A sensitive issue concerns the possibility for women to join alone the land of Jihad (meaning without a *Mahram*, a male relative responsible for guarantying her security...and her honour). Here appears an important dilemma for these radical ideologues: can women still be effectively controlled if they are granted freedom of movement? The question is not limited to the jihadist sphere as shown by the boiling debate within Saudi society on allowing or not women to drive. Abdallah Azzam himself opened the possibility for "the wife to go [to Afghanistan] without the permission of her husband" regarding the exceptional circumstances that Jihad embodies. This reading is actually in accordance with the classical doctrine that allows Muslims to take up Jihad without waiting for the permission of usual authorities, should they be the familial ones (Lahoud, 2014). Yet, ISIS emphasis on the importance for women to perform the *Hijra* with a *Mahram*, while at the same time insisting on the individual

obligation for every Muslim to perform this same *Hijra* at all cost, demonstrates both the absence of consensus on this aspect and the contradiction in the discourse. Having said that, many Western women have been travelling alone to Syria since 2012 and it does not seem that they were penalized in any way for that (Hoyle and al, 2015). Beyond the discourse, pragmatism and adaptability remain the rule within jihadist movements.

The delicate issue of taking up arms

Regarding what is probably the most delicate question of women involvement in Jihad, namely their participation in violent actions like fighting or suicide bombings, ambiguity is what best describes the Jihad ideologues' discourse. There again, no consensus exists besides the clear fact that even for scholars opening the possibility for *Mujaheddat* (female combatant), it should remained absolute exceptions, made necessary only by extraordinary circumstances (Cook, 2005). These ideologues are caught between their plea for a more inclusive Jihad, since it is no longer only a collective duty (*fard al kifaya*) but an individual duty (*fard al Ayn*) for every Muslims (Lacroix, 2015) on the one hand, and their opposition to consider men and women on an equal basis on the other hand. This leads to interesting contradictions: according to Abdullah Azzam there is no legal formal prohibition for women to fight in Jihad but at the same time such a prospect may account for "a great evil". The main reason is practical: it is almost impossible to assure a strict separation between men and women in combat and gender mixing is regarded with the highest reprobation (Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2014). Osama Bin Laden himself was quite elusive: women's role is enthusiastically promoted in the 1996 fatwa "Declaration of War against the infidel against the Americans occupying the Land of the two Holy Places" but women were mentioned only once, and only as victims of the enemies of Islam in his 1998 fatwa which became the theoretical reference for global Jihad "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, World Islamic Front" (Von knop, 2007). Becoming an Al Qaeda member has always been a difficult process because of the elitist nature of the group (something in which ISIS differs significantly today). To our knowledge, no woman was ever granted this status (Gonzalez-Perez, 2010). Other ideologues, like Dr Fadl (alias Abd al Qadir ibn Abd al Aziz) plead for women to receive a basic military training but only to be used in the limited framework of self-defense if their own houses are attacked. Apart from these specific circumstances, Fadl reasserts the classical interpretation that the real Jihad for women is to perform the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage), the argument traditionally opposed to women participation in combat (Cook, 2005). According to the Al Khansaa manifesto, today's ISIS doctrine on women fighting is situated roughly at this level:

Women may go out to serve the community in a number of situations, the most important being:

1) Jihad (by appointment) if the enemy is attacking her country and the men are not enough to protect it and the imams give a fatwa for it, as the blessed women of Iraq and Chechnya did, with great sadness [...]

The tone is clear, only a desperate situation may legitimize women taking up arms, such last resort option is synonym of "great sadness"...

Others ideologues and leaders, like Muhammad Khayr Haykal, Nawaf al Takruri or Abu Musab al Zarqawi, went further. Haykal for example opened the way for women to be enrolled in the regular army of an Islamic state (Cook, 2005). Al Zarqawi provocatively called for women to wage the war against the enemy of Islam, since the men seem to lack the manhood for it (Lahoud, 2014). Al Takruri focused more on the suicide bombing issue. He cites six fatwas allowing women to participate in such operations, one from the famous Egyptian cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi, three from al Azhar university scholars, one from the Dublin based Faysal al Mawlawi, and one from a Palestinian scholar, Nizar Abd al Qadir Riyyan. Interestingly these fatwas are associated with clerics originated from the most progressive parts of the Muslims world, namely Palestine or Egypt (Cook, 2005; Von Knop, 2007; Lahoud, 2014). More conservative areas like Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan are not represented. *At contrario*, in theaters like Chechnya and more generally the Caucasus, where women were particularly active in fighting and performing suicide attacks, only quite conservative theoretical works on the subject were produced (Cook, 2005). Al Zarqawi's position is demonstrative of a pragmatic use of women fighters by male leaders to incite more male to enroll, by pride. There again the tactic is not limited to jihadist movements and has been used in different contexts like the Sri Lanka civil war in which the LTTE black tiger women were responsible for a third of the group's suicide attacks (Van Knop, 2007). Like the Iraqi context shows, the lack of male candidates for operating suicide attacks can lead groups to rely on women. Al Qaeda in Iraq carried out 15 women-led suicide attacks between 2005 and 2007, 30 in 2008 alone at the civil war's peak (Site, 2009; Sassine, 2015). Today, the flow of candidates willing to become *Shaheed* under ISIS' banner seems to have closed the possibility for women to carry out such attacks. However, the "shaming tactic" is now massively used by the group to increase the number of Muslim travelling to Iraq and Syria by reporting the case of feeble, old, or pregnant women performing this *Hijra* successfully.

The last but not the least of the narrative's contradictions regarding women involvement in Jihad are the examples of female figures, which illustrate the discourse. Many of them are Coranic figures including wives of the prophet like Khadija or Aisha bint Abou Bakr depicted as women superior in virtue and wisdom, regularly consulted by men on religious matters and consequently far from being passive actors relegated to the strictly private sphere. Classical examples of women fighting in the Jihad are quoted (and have become omnipresent in the social network conversations). Aisha herself is told to have been leading the battle of the Camel while the prophet granddaughter Zaynab fought in the battle of Kerbala (Von knop, 2007). As to his aunt, Saffiya bint Abd Al Mutalib, she is praised as the ideal *muslima* in the "jihadosphere" for having cut the head of a Jew in the battle of Khandaq (627) during the siege of Medina (Cook, 2005; Von Knop, 2007). Another woman, Nusayba bint Kab, fought with four other women during the battle of Uhud (626), one of Muhammad's worst defeat. She received many wounds by moving herself in front of the prophet whose life was directly threatened (Cook, 2005; Von knop, 2007; Zakaria, 2015). Tumadir Bint 'Amr, alias Al Khansaa, who gave her name to both an Al Qaeda female magazine and an ISIS female brigade, is emphasized as the ideal figure of the Muslim widow. But at the same time, she was a very free-minded woman who refused a marriage proposal, got married to another man she disliked and got divorced. One of her sons even fought against the Caliph Abou Bakr during the battle of Aqaba in 633 (Oseni, 2010). Finally, Aafia Siddiqui

herself, even if not a classical figure, is worth mentioning. She used to be described in the press as "the most wanted woman in the world" or "Lady Al Qaeda" and has become extremely popular in the Muslim world, embodying the figure of the "heroic fighting women". Nevertheless her first husband constantly accused her of not taking good care of their children. She stood up to a prominent Pakistani mufti on the question of Jihad, she got divorced to remarry with a nephew of Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the planner of the 9/11 attacks and finally became the leader of the female wing of a Pakistani militia, *Jaisch Muhammed* (Daniel, 2014; Kakaria, 2015). How paradoxical is the jihadist discourse: on the one hand it makes into heroes and legitimizes these free-minded (one could said liberated) women who always refused to live under the domination of men, with some of them being highly educated (Siddiqui was a neuroscientist), some being poor housewives, and others being active and efficient fighters holding responsibilities in organizations! On the other hand it offers a far different, much more traditional, model of living for its "common" female supporters. The Al Khansaa manifesto advances much less controversial figure as ISIS "ideal model for Muslim Women" namely Assia (the wife of Pharaoh) and Mariam "daughter of Imran" (Mary in the Christian tradition). Both are praised for their devotion and chastity, far from the figure of the "Islamic Amazon" ISIS seems less than ever inclined to promote:

In the last of the Surat al-Tahrim related from God the Almighty, in which is given examples of the two believers Asia and Mariam, two ideal women, the two qualities most celebrated were religion and chastity: "And [the example of] Mariam, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garments] through Our Angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient" (Quran 66:12).

Case study: *Inspire* and *Dabiq* magazines

An interesting and concrete manifestation of the limited access to the public sphere granted to women by the current two most prominent jihadist groups lies in their official online magazines. This is all the more interesting that these media are dedicated to the Western audience of these groups, which can reasonably be considered as the most "open-minded". *Inspire* is an AQAP magazine published since the summer of 2010. 12 issues have been diffused, the last one dating from the summer of 2014. *Dabiq* is the ISIS version, 8 of them have been issued more or less on a monthly basis since July 2014. While the first combines news of the war against America and its allies and practical advices to commit terrorist attacks in the West, the second focus more on the achievements of the so-called Caliphate.

Inspire is highly visual, with an important number of pictures, but none of them represent women, even veiled. *Inspire* n°1 includes an article dealing with women affairs, namely the "war on Niqab" waged by Western countries. Then women-related topics disappear completely until *Inspire* n°6 with an ode to the prisoners of Guantanamo written by an Umm Rashasha. Marriage is evoked in *Inspire* n°8, quite ambiguously since the author emphasizes the practical difficulties it could impose to the

Mujaheed. A certain Umm Ahmed writes an article on Anwar al Awlaki in Inspire n°9. Inspire n°10 inaugurates a "sister corner" with a very interesting poem entitled "if only I was a Mujaheed". It lists all the glorious tasks (reserved for man), such as carrying a rocket launcher and taking part into battle, the author would be glad to perform. It ends with the following sentence:

"but this cannot be, for a lion-hearted Mujaheed warrior I'm not, in fact... I am a fragile woman"

The poem is very much telling of the frustration experienced by some women regarding the gender-based separated role they are assigned, and at the same time its interiorization, perhaps the manifestation of the author pragmatism: another tone would probably have been vetoed. Finally Inspire n°12 provides another article by a certain Umm Yahya glorifying in a much less revolutionary way, the role of the *Mujaheedah* as wife of the Mujaheed above all. Al Qaeda program for women is summarized: counter-propaganda, diffusion of the true Islam, children rising and moral support of the husband. Interestingly men are depicted as weaker and as more prone to demoralization in case of defeat than women. The latter role of reinforcing her husband's faith, especially in period of doubt, is consequently made crucial.

The analysis of the *Dabiq* does not tell a different story. Out of the 8 numbers already published, women are totally absent from number 1, 2 and 5. They are slightly evocated in number 3, 6 and 7 as victims of the war on Islam. Number n°4 (October 2014) is the first to dedicate an article to them...and quite ironically, its purpose is to justify through Islam the right to enslave non-Muslim women considered as common *Ghanima* (spoil of war). *Dabiq* n°7 (February 2015) is the first one to give voice to a woman, in the person of Hayat Boumedienne, the French widow of one of those responsible for the Paris attacks in January 2015. The article itself, in addition to the recurrent call for *Hijra*, provides a traditional view on the role of women in the Caliphate: to be a moral support for the Mujahedeen. *Dabiq* n°8 (March 2015) is the first to be redacted by a woman, "Umm Sumayyah al Muhajirah", in which she also insists on the mandatory nature of *Hijra*, and provides examples of old or pregnant women who performed it, with a tone aiming at shaming reluctant Muslims. Finally, and perhaps more strikingly than with *Inspire*, not a single woman is present on the magazine pictures including on those depicting public scenes of everyday life in the town and villages "liberated" by ISIS, and scenes of attacks claimed by ISIS in Western countries where the presence of Women at least in the background is most likely. By comparison, men are represented about 430 times. This is telling of ISIS' obsession with women being completely driven away from the public area, to an extent close to denial. ISIS' two female brigades (Al Khansaa and Umm Al Rayan) are never mentioned which is indicative of ISIS reluctance to promote too openly these initiatives. Such a minimization of women's active involvement in the general struggle for the advent of the Caliphate, let alone in the fighting, is demonstrative of today's ISIS being much more conservative on the subject than its founding father, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. The role of women within ISIS ranks is most certainly a step below what it used to be in the 2005-2008 period.

Let us conclude this first part on discourse analysis by wondering why such a resistance from the jihadist leaders to the involvement of women in most aspect of the Jihad, including the violent ones.

Pragmatically speaking, such an involvement is not without tactical interest. Based on the universal representation of war being men's business, women are less suspect of carrying attacks. They are consequently less likely to be monitored by intelligence services, or to be searched by the security services, especially in conservative Muslim countries where men cannot inspect a veiled woman that easily (Lahoud, 2014). The very same representation offers an additional publicity to women-led attacks, something jihadist groups are very much looking for. The terror effect of such attacks is most likely enhanced compared with the similar operations being carried on by men (Von Knopp, 2007; Gonzalez Perez, 2010; Bloom, 2011). But jihadist groups are probably also aware of possible negative side effects. Theological issues may arise including the question of reward for the *Shaheeda* (the female Shaheed), indeed, what about the *Houris* (the virgins) offered in paradise to their male counterparts? The issue was closed quite abruptly by Al Takruri (and also by Hamas leaders): not surprisingly, women are deprived from these *Houris* (Cook, 2005), but then an endless debate is opened on the equality among *Shaheed*. The cultural aspect must also be taken into account: jihadist leaders may be afraid to go against the cultural norms that cement the societies where they are evolving, deeply patriarchal and conservative in most cases. Indeed the promotion of non-socially endorsed norms like women fighters may erode the support of the population, vital in the context of asymmetric warfare conducted by most of these groups. Even for ISIS, which has transformed into something closer to a "proto-state", the matter remains sensitive. The alleged tensions between the group's foreign and local fighters regarding possible discriminatory treatments are very representative of the threat. Yet the cultural argument should not be given an essentialized strength. Indeed, jihadist groups have not hesitated in the past to overcome deeply rooted cultural features like parental consent by allowing young people to join Jihad without the approval of their parents (Lahoud, 2014). Knowing its importance in many Muslim societies, one could wonder if jihadist ideologues may not in the future cross the Rubicon of women fighting. Nelly Lahoud offers a last explanation based on the possible fear by these leaders of the potential for sexual revolution that allowing women to take part into fight may bring about, with potentially serious consequences on these leaders' own control over the movements, largely based on gender inequalities. To be sure, Lahoud's argument does not lack credibility, especially with ISIS, which must now absorb hundreds of Western educated women, many of them showing enthusiasm in taking an active part into the consolidation of the Caliphate.

II Beyond the discourse: Women involvement in Jihad

As previously noted, Jihad ideology is based on a highly conservative social vision structured by gender inequality, with women being confined as much as possible within the private sphere. Jihadist discourse is one of men, delivered by men, and mainly for men. But the reality of the women involvement on the jihadist ground demonstrates the limits of such a conservative narrative. As already mentioned, women have been fighting within jihadist groups especially (but not only) by performing

suicide attacks. Examples of such total involvement can be traced back at least to the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. It is nevertheless true that the phenomenon remained relatively rare and more or less on an individual basis until recently. With the Syrian revolution progressively evolving into a total civil war, a novel pattern of massive women convergence to a land of Jihad has emerged. Women originated from Western countries are probably the tip of the iceberg in that process, but thanks to the extensive online material they provide willingly, they represent the most accessible population for academic work on the phenomenon. The following pages first offer a brief historical perspective of women's involvement in the 1990s and 2000s. Second, some element of answers will be provided regarding the motivations for Western women to engage in the Jihad in Syria (and to a much lesser extent in Iraq) since 2012-2013. The impact of these women on the ground, notably with the recent creation of ISIS female brigades will finally be evaluated. It is a large and relatively untouched academic field. Much more will remain to be done, especially on women originated from the Arab World (and beyond) should they be Syrian, Iraqi or immigrants.

Historical perspective

The last two decades of Jihad struggles have seen women being part of the fight. During the Algerian Civil war, the Islamic Salvation Front, and then the "Groupes Islamiques Armés" created female brigades that progressively shifted from logistical missions to direct armed operations. In the region of Medea for instance these brigades took part in mass slaughtering (Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2014). Women were involved in suicide attacks in Palestine as early as 2002 (even if mostly under the banner of nationalist groups like *Al Fatah*), in Ouzbekistan (starting in 2004 with a 19 years old women detonating her suicide vest, killing 47 people on a market in Tachkent), in Chechnya, in Jordan, in Pakistan, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq where the first women-led terrorist attack² was carried out in 2005 in Talafa (Von Knop, 2007; Site, 2009; Herman, 2010; Gonzalez-Perez, 2010). In Egypt two women opened fire on a tourist bus in 2005, with the responsibility of the attack being claimed by an Al Qaeda affiliated group, the Abdallah Azzam brigades (Von Knop, 2007). Many more followed notably in Iraq where women were also involved in recruitment and training networks (Site, 2009). The first Western originated woman involved in a jihadist violent action was Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert who carried out a vehicular suicide attack in Baqouba (Iraq) in November 2006, claimed by Al Qaeda in Iraq (Von Knop, 2007, Guidere, 2010). Other failed in their attempts like US originated Collen LaRose alias "jihadi Jane" who was arrested in 2009 for her alleged participation in a plot to kill the Dutch Caricaturist Lars Vilks (Guidere, 2010) or Roshonara Choudhry, a British female citizen originated from Bangladesh who stabbed a British member of Parliament in 2010 (only wounding him) and claimed having been motivated by Anwar Al Awlaki speeches in *Inspire* (Lahoud, 2014). Finally, Western women

² The first to be claimed by a jihadist organization, namely the Al Qaeda affiliated Malik suicidal brigades. Most interestingly, the first women led suicide attack carried out against the coalition in Iraq was operated by Saddam Hussein's security forces in April 2003, see Von Knop, 2007.

were involved in jihadist logistical and training networks. This was the case for Collen LaRose, Robyn Huntchinson (an Australian women converted to Islam who got married to the leader of an Indonesian jihadist group and opened a hospital for women in Afghanistan), or Malika al Aroud, the Belgian wife of one of the Commandant Massoud's assassins (Guidere, 2010; Thomson, 2014).

Most jihadist leaders demonstrated embarrassment especially regarding women-led suicide bombing. A fatwa published in the immediate aftermath of a Chechen women suicide attack in 2000 made no mention of women participation in Jihad and the spiritual leader of Hamas disagreed in 2002 with this kind of operation (Cook, 2005; Hernan, 2010). At most, the operations are blessed with hindsight and women are not admitted as strictly speaking members of the groups, which claim responsibility for the attacks (Gonzalez-Perez, 2010; Lahoud, 2014).

The Syria/Iraq conflict: a game changer

It is very difficult to quantitatively assess the importance of women's direct involvement in this "preliminary phase", perhaps with the exception of Iraq where the number of suicide-led attacks by women is relatively well known. At least regarding Western women involvement, it can be said that the phenomenon remained limited to a few individuals who consequently gained a noticeable media visibility. The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011 as a pacific upsurge against the Bashar al Assad authoritarian regime and turned progressively into a bloody civil war, was a game changer. In 2012, with the growing importance of radical Islamist groups like JAN and the subsequently growing sectarianization of a conflict emphasized as a Jihad by an increasing number of actors within the insurrection, the flow of foreign fighters converging to Syria began to soar. The pace accelerated tremendously with ISIS open presence in Syria since 2013 and its affirmation as the most powerful opposition group by mid-2014 when its forces considerably expanded the territory under control in Syria and Iraq. The movement reached a peak in July 2014 when its leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi proclaimed the re-establishment of the Caliphate with himself as the new Caliph. In January 2015, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSRP) estimated at 20,000 the number of foreign fighters that had joined Sunni militant organizations in the Syria/Iraq conflict. The number may be much higher regarding official declarations, including one by the French Premier on March 19th 2015, revealing that about half of the French candidates to Jihad make their way to Syria or Iraq completely under the scope of the authorities' radar (Le Monde, march 19th. 2015). The Westerners accounted for about 4,000 in the ICSRП survey. Among them is a significant number of women who may represent between 10% and 15% of the total (The Telegraph, 2014; Thomson, 2014). Because most Western countries do not communicate precisely on the phenomenon, only fragmented data are available and are summarized in figure 2. These figures are definitely far from the reality and are only indicative of the cases 100% identified and published in the media, with two noticeable exceptions: France, where in-depth statistics have been recently published, and the United Kingdom, where the press follows attentively the phenomenon. In France, the proportion of women jihadist is

considerably higher than the Western average. According to November 2014 statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior, 35% of the profiles identified as "radicalized" are women and they account for 28% (119 out of 413) of the identified departures to Syria/Iraq (Le Monde, November 11th. 2014 and March 26th. 2015). If assessed³, the singularity of the French case will have to be explained. Intuitively, the strongly promoted French model of secularism, embodied in recent legislation forbidding the wearing of Niqab in public areas, and of any veil in the administration or in schools, might play a role.

Table 1 Western women departure in Syria/Iraq. Compiled sources

Country	Date of the figures	Total involved ⁴	Total on the ground...	...including women
France	March 2014	1500	413	119
United Kingdom	April 2015		500 to 700	about 60
Germany	February 2015	600		100
Austria	September 2014		150	14
Netherlands	March 2014		100	20
Belgium	November 2014		438	35
Denmark	October 2014		115	15
Sweden	October 2014		75 to 80	at least 6
Finland	May 2014		35	8
Australia	February 2015		90	40
Canada	March 2015		35 to 60	5 to 7

The absence of profile

If the number of Western women involved in jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq remains unclear (with the figure of 550 regularly evoked in the past months), the same can be said of these women's profiles. When one attempts to dress such a profile, very few common patterns emerge. It can only be said that under 25 years old women are over-represented (including a significant part of minors) and that most of them turned into a radical practice of Islam only shortly before their departure: a few months, sometimes a few weeks (Bouzar and Thomson, 2014; Thomson, 2014; Van San, 2015). Several studies on the European jihadist profile from the years 2001-2006 showed clear common denominators like the over-representation of popular classes, of people originated from North Africa, with many of them having a criminal record (Van San 2015)⁵. Such a picture does not fit with women nowadays leaving for Syria and Iraq... According to a 2014 report from a French association⁶ specialized

³ The lack of consolidated data in other Western countries forbids any certitude on an overrepresentation of women within French foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq

⁴ Including people currently on the ground, who died there, who have returned in their country of origin or who are currently on their way to Syria/Iraq

⁵ Women only represented a tiny minority in these years as previously stated.

⁶ The "center for the prevention against sectarian excesses related to Islam" (CPDSI) led by the French anthropologist Dounia Bouzar.

in deradicalization programs, only 40 % of the 325 cases studied had grandparents of foreign origins. Popular classes seem under-represented, only 30% of the total (CPDSI, 2014). The survey was accused of bias because based on voluntary calls from concerned families: as the association was closely related with the authorities, mostly middle and upper class families might have felt confident enough to call (Thomson and Bouzar, 2014). But other journalistic and academic works also emphasized the significant share of converts outside "the population of Muslim culture" among the women who left Europe (Kern, 2014; Van San, 2015). It seems that the proportion of convert is higher among women than men. In contradiction with previous profiling attempts, an overwhelmingly share of these women had never experienced judiciary problems. On the contrary many of them, like Aqsa Mahmood, a 20 years old student in medicine from Glasgow who is now a top member in the ISIS Al Khansaa female brigade, were well integrated in Western society with a shining future ahead of them (Kern, 2014; Sherwood and al, 2014).

Interiorization or contestation of the discourse?

The online material provided by these women demonstrates two diverging patterns. On the one hand, many aspects in the discourse and the visual contents show a level of interiorization of the jihadist narrative regarding women's role in the Islamic society. On the other hand, many elements indicate a desire for some of them to go beyond the assigned functions and a frustration regarding the obstacles to a more active, violent involvement. The contradiction is blatant and synonym of potential instability within this emerging "perfect society". This may explain ISIS' initiatives to channel this enthusiasm into tolerated and controlled form of active militancy, such as "recruiting sergeants" (Hoyle and al, 2015) or "vice squads" members like the Al Khansaa brigade in the Syrian town of Raqqa.

Why becoming a female jihadist?

The motivations to join the Jihad can be summarized along three main axes. The first axis is the commitment toward an ideological and religious duty. The second is the research for belonging to a group. The desire to give a sense to their existence may be consider the third axis (Sassine 2015; Taub, 2015). These are notably the same incentives as for their male relatives, but the concretization differs.

Female supporters of groups like ISIS or JAN demonstrate a strong adhesion to the official discourse that migrating to the holy land of Cham is a religious duty. Only those who faced the perils of the *Hijra* (similar to what the prophet and his followers endured when they were expelled from Mecca and traveled to Medina in 622) are true Muslims. In the jihadist ideology, the land of *Cham* bears a significant importance: it is the place for resurrection at the judgment day, the place of the final battle, a land of knowledge, faith and truth... (Ansar al Haqq; Thomson, 2014; Lacroix, 2015). Moreover, at a time when Muslims are being oppressed on a global scale by a total war against Islam, it is a political duty to resist. With Syria and Iraq considered lands of Islam under attack, women, like men, must converge and take part in the struggle to repel the aggressors. This narrative of Muslim defensive

actions against multiple enemies is omnipresent in women conversations and posts online. At *contrario*, life in Western countries or *bilad al Kufr* (land of the unbelievers) is rejected as places where women are constantly humiliated by anti-religious laws such as the interdiction of wearing the Niqab ». Western democracy is rejected as a moral disaster with symbols like gay marriage or the caricatures of the prophet systematically pointed out (Thomson, 2014). Examples of the general violence against Muslim women are continuously posted in a totally indiscriminate fashion. “Genocide” against the Rohingyas in Burma and the Muslim populations in the Centrafrican Republic, the gazing of civilian populations by Alawis in Syria, the assassination of three US Muslim students in Chapel Hill (North Carolina) in February 2015 or the racist tagging of French mosque and the harassment of veiled women in the streets of Western countries are looked through the same lens. Consequently, only by migrating to the true land of Islam and by enjoying there the protection of righteous believers, namely the Caliphate soldiers, can the Muslim women live plainly in accordance with their religion. In a complete reversal of values, emigration is emphasized as the true women liberation. The reasoning is a frontal attack on strongly rooted representations that women are nowhere enjoying more rights and freedom than in Western societies. While obviously true, some very specific situations may lead to the need for a bit of nuance: in Norway, the over-representation of girls from the Somali immigrant community in the ranks of candidates for Jihad may find an explanation in the highly conservative nature of this very inward-looking community. Some women may then really be experiencing the departure as liberation, for in *Cham*, they may at least be able to choose their husband (Ranstorp, 2014)... This quite paradoxical perspective must be kept in mind for future works addressing the question of women from the Arab gulf for instance. An intuitive hypothesis would be that Saudi women may also be attracted by migrating where they might enjoy more freedom. Only by comparing the share of women within these countries’ contingents with the share of their counterpart in the West may provide answers. Lastly, the perspective of death is regularly mentioned and looked upon positively because the life in the aftermath, *al Akhira*, is regarded as much more invaluable than the physical life, *al Dunya* (Knobel 2014; Van San, 2015). Dying in such a holy place is then synonym with an almost guaranteed entry into paradise for both oneself and members of one's family. This last aspect is often opposed by today jihadist women in Syria to the call for return made by their relatives in Western countries.

The second axis is the search for group belonging. In the context of social atomization and rising individualism often pointed out in Western societies, the jihadist narrative offers the feeling of belonging to the universal community of the Islamic *Ummah*. The argument is attractive because it has real and immediate manifestations. In the tremendous majority of cases, the first step in the radicalization process takes place online (Carvalho, 2014; Bouzar and Thomson, 2014; Thomson, 2014), through the integration of the virtual jihadist community. In a (relative) respect with the principle of not mixing between genders, women enter virtual sisterhoods that suddenly provide relatives, highly ritualized daily activities and a ready-to-use narrative, which offers simple answers to so many existential questions (Carvalho, 2014). It offers the exciting feeling of belonging to an elite of true believers in an ocean of silliness and cowardice. It offers a new identity, with all the women taking a virtual name known as *kunya* (war name) in addition to a new language, or at least a new vocabulary since many of the women are not Arabic speakers but demonstrate a certain appetite for learning and

immediately use generic terms like *Ukhtys* (sisters). Finally, many stories indicate that this virtual socialization along jihadist lines led to close relations between individuals, which is determinant in the self-motivation process. In several cases, online *Ukhtys* who barely, or even never met before join and undertake the *Hijra* journey together (Thomson, 2014).

Finally, the will to be part of something bigger, historical, and meaningful seems a strong incentive for these women's radicalization. The recent establishment of the Caliphate by ISIS has considerably strengthened the appeal. Often describing their earlier existence as boring and meaningless, women joining jihadist organizations express a great enthusiasm based on the search for adventure and thrills and/or the will to help endangered Muslim populations (Knobel, 2014). To put down a political order experienced as the symbol of Western domination on Islam and to help securing this new, successful and yet threatened experience of the Caliphate, is a deeply attractive project for would-be jihadist, male or female. Women's vision of the war in Iraq and Syria is heavily romanticized, often (but not totally) minimizing the worst aspects, while revering jihadist warriors like pop stars (Hoyle and al, 2015; Diehl and al, 2015). Marriage is not the least idealized aspect of this new meaningful existence. The future husband, because a jihadist fighter, is meant to be the perfect, brave and loving companion, with the metaphoric imagery of the lion and the lioness being omnipresent (see annex 2 and 3). There lies perhaps the greatest success in the jihadist effort to have their discourse interiorized by women. Contestation of the necessity to get married as soon as possible after (if possible even before, through online procedure) arriving in Syria or Iraq, is never expressed openly by women, even by those most interested in taking up arms (Thomson, 2014). The interest is at least double for a group like ISIS: it enhances the attractiveness of Jihad for male fighters, who can reasonably expect to be able to found a family (before being *Shahid*...) and it acts as an effective way of controlling potentially too free-minded, educated Western women.

A will to go beyond the assigned role

But the reality may be more complex. There are several indicators that the traditional vision of the women role in Jihad promoted by ISIS leaders and their predecessors spreads only partially within today Western female candidates to Jihad in Syria and Iraq.

The frustration toward a too narrowed role granted by jihadist leader is not new. Al Zawahiri's position of refusing any woman as Al Qaeda members was met with strong disappointment among some female circles, sometimes publicly stated (Lahoud, 2014). We have already seen how certain articles from *Inspire* magazine illustrate such a frustration.

At least two contradictions in the women discourse are observable in the Syria/Iraq context. First is the fact that these women only superficially integrate the local society. ISIS jihadist women remain most of the time with each other and their mixing with the Syrian, and to a larger extent Iraqi, societies

remains minimal⁷. Very few examples of wedding between Western female migrants and local ISIS fighters have been observed, the large majority of it being between Westerners themselves (L'Orient le Jour, 2014; Stoter, 2014; Hoyle and al, 2015). The language barrier is often pointed out by women to explain why there are so few links. But other reports pointed to the cold welcome provided by locals to these new incomers in a context of growing resentment toward ISIS, consequence of the enforcement of a very conservative lecture of Sharia as well as tensions between local and foreign fighters (Leigh, 2014; Sly, 2015). Another explanation may be that the cultural gap is simply too large for being easily crossed. Western ISIS women remained first and foremost Western women, raised in the West and who will not give up all their habits nor their cultural references...nor (quite paradoxically) a certain chauvinism, as shown by the common choice of a particle in the kunya indicative of the country of origin: *Al Hollandia*, *Al Faransia*... The importance given in these women's discourse to the possibility to live in Cham almost like in the West may prove another indicator beyond the strict propaganda interest for ISIS to demonstrate a kind of "normality" in the new established "Islamic State" (see Annex 1).

The second and most important contradiction is the deep attraction for violent actions, demonstrated by some of these women. There again, women being sweet and pacific figures condemned to a role of victim of the men's war remains a stereotyped vision, present both in Western representations and in the jihadist discourse. Terrorist actions by the groups, including the most barbaric ones like the killing of little girls by Mohammed Merah in 2012 in southern France or the execution of a captured Jordanian pilot by burning him alive are met with great enthusiasm by ISIS female Western supporters, be they in Western countries or already on the ground. For the latter, a step in the acquisition of a tolerance to violence has been passed, with several pictures of UK female jihadist holding the heads of beheaded ISIS enemies and demonstrating wishes to be the next beheaders or calling for new attacks in the West (Kern, 2014). The omnipresence of weapon in these women's visual contents, sometimes inserted in familial scenes, demonstrates their desire to appear as more than just passive mothers and wives. The message is clear: at any time, they may transform into coldblooded *Mujaheedat* (see annex 5). The profile pictures on their social media accounts often represent them in highly martial attitudes (see annex 6), often depicting their training sessions among sisters. Some of them express openly their will to take part into the fights as soon as possible with the figure of "Mulan", the Disney character of the female fighter dressed up as a man being sometimes used (Thomson, 2014; Hoyle and al, 2015).

A case study: "Diary of a Muhajirah"

The contradictions are particularly striking in one of the most popular blog by a Western female ISIS jihadist. "Diary of Muhajirah" is a Tumblr blog created by Aqsa Mahmood alias "Umm Layth" or "Bird of Jannah". Its main purpose is to recruit other Western women for ISIS ranks. Table 2 provides a repartition of the topics covered by the blog.

⁷ While actively advocating for emigration to Syria, ISIS shows much more reluctance to appeal for a similar move to its real homeland, Iraq. If cases of suicide attacks led by foreign fighters have been observed in Iraq, the vast majority of the women are located in Syria, mostly in the towns of Raqqa, Manbij, Al Bab and Tabqa.

Table 2 Repartition of the topics covered in "Diary of a Muhajirah"

Topics	number of posts	percentage of the total
Religious and spiritual message	26	25
everyday life anecdotes	19	18
practical advises regarding hijra or explicit recruitment	21	20
political statements, critics of Western countries	25	24
women role in ISIS activities	4	4
Others	8	8
Total	103	100

In accordance with the jihadist narrative, a significant part of the posts (43%) are related to either religious or private affairs, including her marriage with a perfect *Mujaheed*. The first contradiction can be found in posts related to performing *Hijra* (20%). While at the same time glorifying the idea of emigrating to the Caliphate for both religious and ideological reasons, and emphasizing the sweetness of the life there, Mahmood informs incidentally on what she is deeply lacking by asking for new comers to bring her as much medicine and other products as possible.

Far from rejecting Western modernity altogether, Mahmood, a former student in medicine, advises would-be new comers to have as many vaccinations as possible and to complete a medical check-up before leaving. The paradox becomes all the more obvious when she explains that she might have never supported her life in Syria, especially the first months, without Disney movies (Aladdin and Jasmine in priority⁸), Naruto mangas and Jane Austen novels she brought from the UK! Mahmood makes explicit on several occasion that direct fighting is not for women and the share of posts related to practical activities for women in ISIS is tiny, in accordance with the ISIS obsession to keep women at home. But there lies a second paradox for Mahmood is known to be deeply involved in the Al Khansaa female brigade which carried on armed patrols in Raqqa (Kern, 2014; Peretz and Maller, 2014). Of these activities, not a single mention is made on the blog, a good revelator of ISIS' malaise regarding the promotion of such controversial engagements.

⁸ Pictures of the movie are popular among jihadist girls as symbolic of the perfect "oriental" couple

ISIS and the question of female fighters

One considerable challenge ahead for ISIS will be to channel the enthusiasm of these foreign Western women. Confining them to an Afghan or Saudi way of life does not seem realistic regarding the cultural environment in which they have been evolving all their lives. Here lies a potential source of contestation from this female base, which may damage the narrative of an ideal, homogenous and serene community. Internal dissenting voices, should they be from women, can have disproportionate negative effects on ISIS' communication strategy based on providing the (fake) impression of a unanimous, or at least massive, support within the Sunni Muslim world. On the other hand, allowing them to join men's realm of war on an equal footing may trigger considerable social destabilization within ISIS ranks themselves (mainly composed of Syrian, Iraqi and other Arabs, including many Saudis and Northern Africans deeply rooted in the Salafist background) and in the local communities.

Since about a year ago, ISIS seems to have opted for an intermediate solution to solve the dilemma. Western women have been granted an important role as online "recruiting sergeant". Many blogs and social network accounts have emerged and diffuse massively the ISIS narrative to mobilize more support. The tone is often familiar and based on a disturbing mixture of insignificant details aiming at reassuring potential female candidates on the "normality" of life in the Caliphate and extremely violent material describing the terrible fate awaiting ISIS enemies. The fiction of the female fighter (notably through the omnipresence of images of armed women) coincides with the weak, victimized pictures to create a very efficient propaganda machine. This triggers a dynamic of identification frequently assumed by ISIS Western female supporters: "if she did it, then why not me?" but also by men: "if she did it, it would be shameful if I do not do it too" (Thomson, 2014; Knobel, 2014). The mission is self-valorizing for women and has the convenient interest for ISIS to be extremely time consuming. It may also offer compensation to both the feeling of loneliness expressed by many of the Western women on the ground and their sense of enclosure (even if not openly expressed) since they are largely denied a physical access to public space, by allowing them a virtual opening on the rest of the world, including interferences with men⁹. Propagating the cause of Jihad justifies a slight infringement of the rule...

In addition to that, a minority of Western women has been enrolled in the two ISIS brigades created in 2014, Al Khansaa and Umm al Rayan brigades. Both of them may be composed of 50 to 100 women, in a majority of Western origin¹⁰ (Sassine, 2015). In addition to the recruitment mission, these women

⁹ Indeed, the necessity to avoid gender mixing seems less strictly enforced in the online area, with limits: consulting a male social media account is permitted for women. But having direct chat or becoming "Facebook friend" is prohibited. Having said that, many jihadist Facebook and twitter accounts, male or female have "friends" from the opposite sex in reality.

¹⁰ The term is obviously vague. Several sources for example insists on the strong representation of Somali women, even if many of them indeed spend a part of their life in Western societies, in the UK or in Scandinavian countries

officially allowed to carry weapons act as "vice squads" aiming at disciplining women in the ISIS-controlled city of Raqqa (Zakaria, 2015). ISIS then empowers a minority of indoctrinated women, and commissions them to enforce gender segregation that is the very essence of the group's ideology, based on women subordination. Here again, the process is not new and has for instance been observed in Pakistan, with several Islamist militias having formed female wings (Zakaria, 2015). In reaction to the Western ideology of gender equality, ISIS, like many other Islamist movements including Muslim feminists, promote an alternative ideology of "gender complementarity" (Chafiq, 2010; Zakaria, 2015). Another recent ISIS initiative is worth mentioning, it a forward-looking perspective: the group decision to create the *Al Zawra* school dedicated to the training of women in suicide attack techniques among other things. There is no clear indication of how many women have been involved in the "program" but it illustrates the opportunistic nature of ISIS (and more generally of jihadist groups): limited mixing seems allowed in the *Al Zawra* school and the initiative may indicate ISIS's anticipation of a less shining future, in which the use of female soldiers may prove necessary.

Will these initiatives be sufficient to channel women jihadist's desire to go beyond the narrow vision of gender complementarity which until now prohibits them to take part in the war? The question is worth asking in the light of the very recent (April 2015) apparition on Twitter of a new female group. In a 5 minute movie, a group of 45 "women from *Al Cham*" wearing a full Niqab is shown training at the use of arms in the region of Aleppo (see figure 2). A speech pronounced by what appears to be their leader emphasizes women as being the equal of men. Both the discourse and the visual symbolism of the group link it with the Jihad world¹¹, but it claims no affiliation with already existing jihadist organizations like JAN or ISIS, indirectly denounced for their sexism. As limited as the initiative may be (45 is a small number and the possibility to efficiently fight while wearing a Niqab is at least doubtful), it is of a great symbolic importance. It embodies the contradictions of the jihadist discourse on women and shows how women within the Jihad sphere itself may turn into protesters against ISIS' patriarchal project.

¹¹ Which makes of this group the first of its kind in Syria. Female fighting brigades already existed on the ground, for instance *Oumana Aïcha* and *Banat Al Walid* in Homs and Aleppo, but they are affiliated to the non-jihadist Free Syrian Army, see Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2014.



Figure 2. A new jihadist female brigade? Source: Charlie Winter tweeter account, 10th of April. 2015

Conclusion

Women have a tremendous importance in the discourse on Jihad. They embody the suffering endured by the Muslims in the global war on Islam waged by its enemies, from the Tyrants of the Arab countries to the Zionists and their allies within Europe and the United States. This essentialization of women as the victims of war is a common pattern of jihadist groups (and beyond) and has proven efficient in catalyzing mobilization for the cause all across the globe. As for women's participation in the Jihad itself, the ideology emphasizes first and foremost their importance as mother, wives and widows, whose place lies within the private sphere. They are responsible for the glorious tasks of enhancing Majaheedin's moral, firming up their commitment, and raising the next generation in the cult of Jihad. Western authorities must not underestimate this last aspect. A generation of Western originated children are currently being raised by indoctrinated mothers and fathers in the hatred of Western society and its values, in a war environment that deeply affect their relationship with violence. This may prove an unprecedented threat in the coming years. Women may be offered more active roles in Jihad depending on the context. If performing logistical or medical tasks do not trigger significant protests, taking part into suicide attacks or direct fighting is met with much more defiance by ideologues and leaders, because waging the war is considered as men's business first. While this essay focus on women supportive of Jihad, it must not be forgotten that the vast majority of women present in land of Jihad do terribly suffer from the groups' exactions. In Iraq and Syria, women, especially from religious minorities, are enduring treatments that may account for crimes against humanity as stated

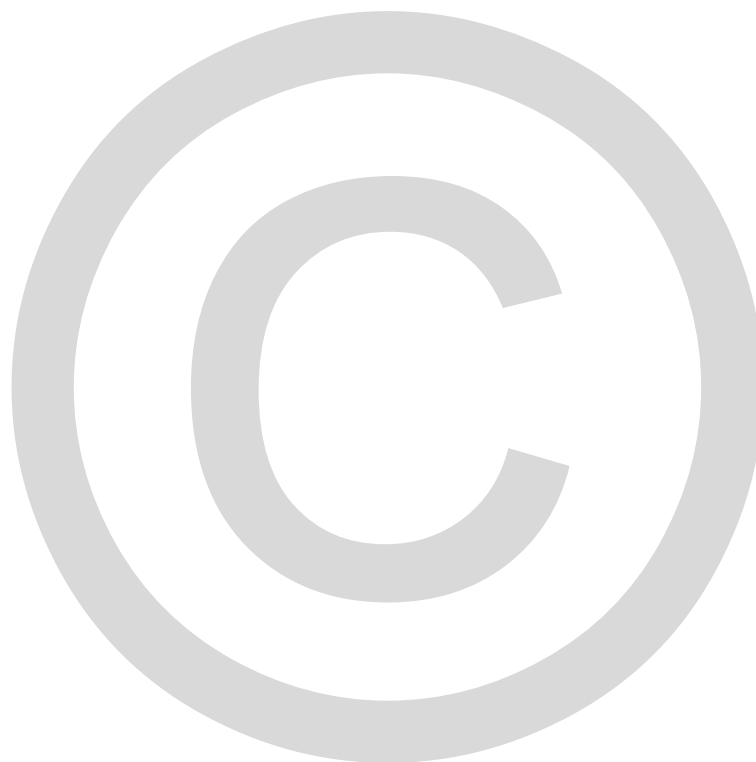
by the International Court of Justice in April 2015. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram jihadist group has led operations that blur the lines between fighting and victimized women, with suicide attacks led by very young girls (an attack was perpetrated on February 22th 2015 by a 7 years old girl). Regarding their age, it is most likely that these girls were forced into perpetrating the attacks. Some of them may be Christian abducted girls according to certain sources, but such assertions remain unchecked. With such tactics, Boko Haram has nevertheless undoubtedly crossed a significant threshold in the war it is waging against civil society.

Apart from this very heterodox situation¹², women's voluntary engagement in violent jihad is a pattern observed at least since the 1990s, that took place against a more or less established consensus, even if such involvement was always ambiguously welcomed and instrumentalized by the groups for instance to shame reluctant males. In a desperate need of candidates for suicide attacks, Al Qaeda in Iraq expressed no remorse in endorsing women led attacks in the 2005-2008 years. As its direct successor, ISIS currently shows a clear opposition to such "extremities", mainly because it doesn't have the need for it: its waiting list of male would-be *shahid* seems endless. Women involvement in jihad remained quantitatively limited in the 1990s and the 2000s but the Syrian/Iraqi context has deeply scaled up the phenomenon. Just the Western-originated women represent hundreds of individuals that have already immigrated in "the holy land of *Cham*". No precise profile of the Western jihadist women has emerged yet: women of all ages, social classes and origins are represented. Their motivations don't seem different from their male counterparts, mainly a sense of religious and ideological duty, the feeling to belong to a universal community, and the appeal offered by a travel in "Muslim utopia" (Taub, 2015). The very short amount of time that elapses between the adhesion to a radical lecture of Islam (sometimes immediately after a conversion) and the departure for Syria in many cases is one of the many signs that give ground to the classification of the process as a new form of sectarian indoctrination, but the assumed political agenda of many of these western candidates for Jihad must also be taken into account.

To what extent does the jihadist discourse on gender get internalized by women is the key question for evaluating the potential impact of this massive flow of foreign women to the jihadist groups on the ground. If some aspects, such as the importance of marriage, do not face significant questioning, the prohibition of taking up arms and actively participating in the fight generates a visible, perhaps growing, frustration. The figure of the armed and veiled fighting women as the representation of the modern perfect Muslim women is omnipresent in social media. Such an enthusiasm obviously diverges from the groups' interests, intrinsically related to male domination, out of fear of both losing social support among traditional, conservative Muslim societies and of triggering a sexual liberation that may endanger their power. The emergence of ISIS female brigades may then appear as a quest for a *modus Vivendi*. It allows for the relative empowerment for a highly committed and potentially less controllable minority of women, but this empowerment is dedicated to the enforcement of highly patriarchal, sometimes barbaric rules for the majority, including the stoning of couples found guilty of

¹² Including in Nigeria where the first attack of this kind is very recent: it occurred on June 8th 2014, see France 24, February 24th 2015.

adultery or the sexual enslavement of women within non-Muslim communities¹³. This *modus Vivendi* based on gender complementarity, as opposed to gender equality, may not be sustainable in the future. The recent apparition of a female jihadist group claiming equality between men and women could announce a new era of *Jihadi girl power*.



¹³ ISIS women may be involved in the management of brothels for ISIS fighters (Kern, 2014).

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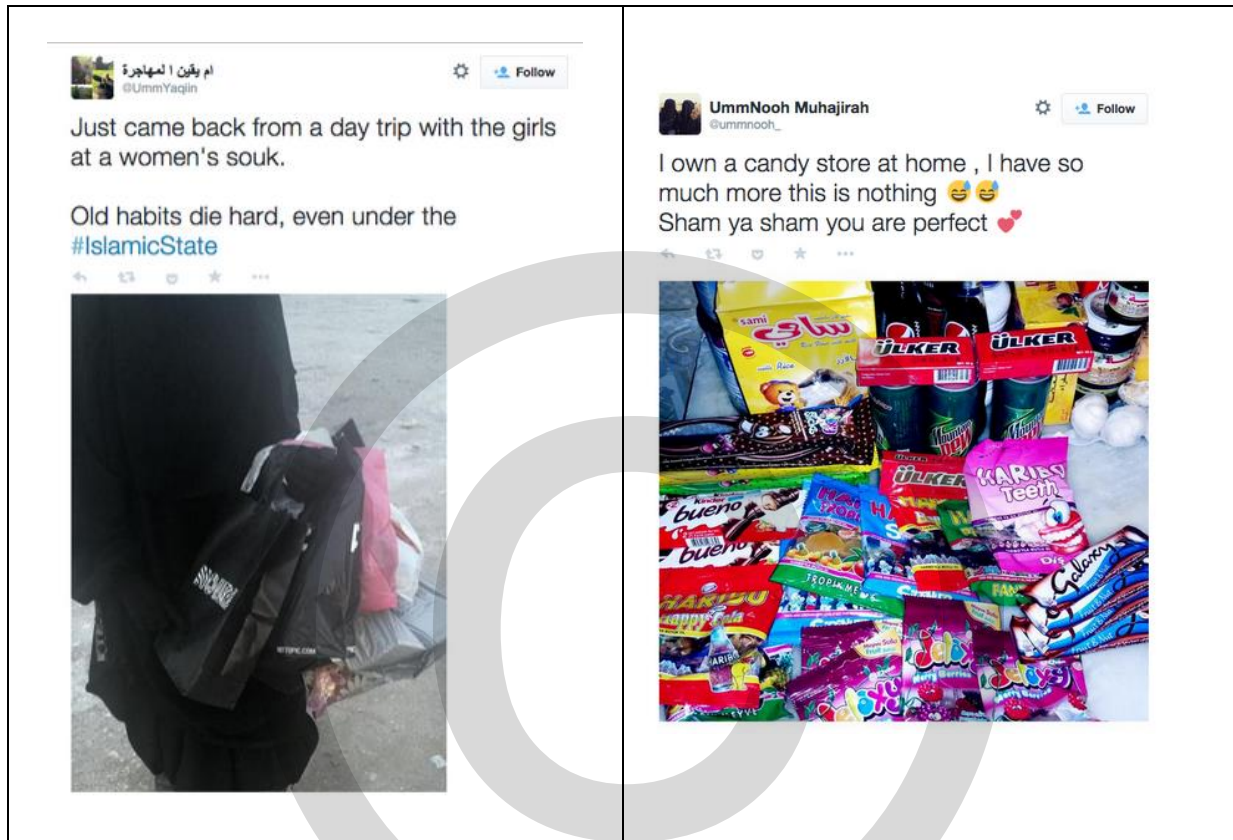
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Annexes






Annex 1: Life is normal in the Caliphate



Annex 2: Marriage idealization








Annex 3: The lion and the Lioness

<p>Bent Dawla a Retweeté</p> <p>أبو @GensDeLaSunna - 23 févr.</p> <p>"Une femme fidèle dont le cœur est pris, c'est un jardin sous clef, une fontaine close."</p> <p>[Henri-Frédéric Amiel]</p>  <p>7 13 ... Voir plus de photos et vidéos</p>	 <p>bint Abdullah @Bint_AbdullahAm</p> <p>Then fight in the cause of Allah, and know that Allah Heareth and knoweth all things. Brothers pls do not follow or message jazakallah</p> <p>Dar ul-kufr</p>
 <p>Oum Gharibâh @OumGhurabaah</p>	 <p>Yasmine Djz  @LylouArabya</p>

Annex 5: Weapons are omnipresent



Annex 6: Staging the readiness for fighting

<p> أم وقاص @_UmmWaqqas · 3 janv. The Crew</p> <p>Taking over the streets of Raqqah</p> <p>#alKhanssaBrigade</p>  <p>9 16</p>	 <p>أميرة الجزائرية. @BentKhelifa_dz</p> <p>Dis à ceux qui ne croient pas Vous serez vaincus bientôt; et vous serez rassemblés vers l'Enfer. Et quel mauvais endroit pour se reposer! 3.12</p> <p>سطينف</p>
 <p>Ûmm Assiyâh @_UmmAssiyah</p> <p>Ûmm Assiyâh wa Ibrahim (Pasd'homme)</p>	 <p>umm suleyman @umsuleyman</p> <p>Que Dieu renforce et facilite nos frères 3 DAWLATU ISLAM ????? BAQUIYA !!!!!</p> <p>Ar Raqqa -Syrie (incha Allah)</p>