IS's Appeal to Western Women: Policy Implications

IS's proven ability to appeal to Western women to support jihadist activities and travel to the self-proclaimed Caliphate has sparked debate on why women support politically-motivated violent movements. Much of this discourse is dominated by studies that focus on social media accounts to understand what motivates female support. This Policy Brief seeks to offer nuanced insight into how IS recruits Western women by analysing IS propaganda appeals to female audiences. It does so by applying a detailed qualitative narrative analysis to the contents of all fifteen issues of *Dabiq* magazine, an official English language magazine of Al Hayat Media Centre. Based on these findings, it offers three strategic recommendations for policy practitioners. It argues that it is essential for counter-terrorism strategic communications to be paired and synchronised with community-based initiatives. They must seek to challenge IS's legitimacy, address negative grievances and identity appeals which resonate with IS's audience and empower, not trivialise, women.

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About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the Islamic State's (IS) Western *muhājirat* (female émigrés) has gained significant attention in mainstream media, which has resulted in the circulation of often simplistic understandings of female radicalisation and recruitment. Regrettably, one such manifestation of this trend is the notion of the "jihadi bride": the idea that females are motivated to join IS solely for romantic and sexual motives. This gendered assumption is commonly a product of analysis on social media profiles. While there is value in social media analysis, as I have previously argued, these women's online profiles should not be treated as wholly representative of reality.[1] Indeed, although the Internet's role further enables radicalisation by providing access to information and networks, its causational significance should not be overemphasised:[2] it is the messaging and content consumed by these women which catalyse radicalisation, not the medium.

If we are to comprehensively understand the strategies employed by IS to recruit Western women and, thence, formulate effective counter strategies to thwart its appeal, conducting empirical research on IS's propaganda will be critical. This Policy Brief seeks to outline how IS targets Western women in its propaganda campaigns and examines how women are portrayed in the presentation of this material. This is achieved by applying a qualitative narrative analysis to the contents of all fifteen issues of IS's English-language magazine, *Dabiq.* This paper concludes with a suite of recommendations grounded in these findings for policy development and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts.

Trends in Female Islamist Militancy

The efficacy of IS's efforts to recruit Western women to perform *hijrah* to its self-proclaimed Caliphate is hard to overlook. In October 2014, it was estimated that over 550 Western *muhājirat* had travelled to join IS.[3] These numbers increased significantly over the past two years. ICCT estimated in 2016 that between 663 and 883 women and young girls, such as three British schoolgirls Amira Abase, Shamima Begum and Khadiz Sultana all aged between 15 and 16, had travelled to join IS.[4] Since the establishment of the Caliphate, IS's efforts to recruit Western women has manifested in their propaganda campaigns. The narratives of *Dabiq,* first released in July 2014, sought to

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[1] Kiriloi M. Ingram, "More Than "Jihadi Brides" and "Eye Candy": How Dabiq Appeals to Western Women*," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 12 August 2016, https://icct.nl/publication/more-than-jihadi-brides-and-eye-candy-how-dabiq-appeals-to-western-women/; Also see: Grant Blank, "The Digital Divide Among Twitter Users and Its Implications for Social Research," *Social Science Computer Review* (2016): 1-19, who argues that the unrepresentativeness of Twitter renders is unsuitable for research seeking to gain insight into sentiments, beliefs and attitudes.
[2] Ines von Behr et al., *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.readonline.html.
[3] Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford and Ross Grenett, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf. http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf.
[4] Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann eds., "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats and Policies," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 2 (2016), doi: 10.19165/2016.1.02.

persuade Western women to perform *hijrah* to its territories and portrays women to be as essential as men to the establishment and longevity of the Caliphate.

IS's mounting politico-military losses and the crumbling of its Caliphate have not deterred its propaganda campaigns from reaching out to potential communities of female support, nor have they alleviated the threat of Western women supporting and engaging in militant Islamist activities. IS's new English-language magazine, *Rumiyah,* first released in September 2016, commends the San Bernardino and Mombasa female operatives.[5] Its latest issue, released in September 2017, features an article supposedly written by Australian *muhājirat,* Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah, detailing the onerous but worthwhile trials and tribulations she endured on her journey to the Caliphate.[6] The latter half of 2016 also witnessed an emergence of female terrorism in the West, with three terrorist operations by women in France thwarted in July alone. The emergence of female terrorism, paralleled with devastating resource, territorial and political losses and a shift in propaganda tactics and appeals, signals a shift in IS's politico-military strategies.[7] As IS concentrates on remaining and surviving as resources, personnel and territory become scarce, do not expect the call to Western women to silence. As Winter and Clarke assert, "[…] the Islamic State will survive – if not thrive – in the virtual realm."[8]

Of course, propaganda alone is insufficient to understand what motivates Western *muhājirat* to support IS and engage in political violence. However, propaganda is arguably the central means by which IS reaches out to and mobilises support. Its role is even more important for potential recruits based outside of areas of physical control, such as Western audiences. Therefore, examining how IS's media campaigns strategically target and appeal to females is vital for a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. As this Policy Brief demonstrates, the findings retrieved from this empirical study redresses many of the gendered stereotypes that permeate sensationalist media and a number of social media studies.

The War for Western Women: How *Dabiq* Appeals to Female Audiences

1. Identity Appeals

The tactics employed by *Dabiq's* propagandists to appeal to its female audiences mirror the overarching strategy of IS's media campaign. This is to shape audience perceptions of reality and motivate them to become active supporters.[9] *Dabiq* achieves this in two ways, firstly, by promoting IS's politico-military and alternative social agenda; secondly,

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[5] "A Message from East Africa" in *Rumiyah* 2, (2016).

[6] Umm Sulaym Al-Muhajirah, "The Hijrah," *Rumiyah* 13, (2017).

[7] IS's new video, "You must fight them o muwahhid," reflects a transition in IS's politico-military strategies. For more see Haroro Ingram, "'How to Slaughter the Disbelievers': Insights into IS' Instructional Video," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 29 November 2016, https://icct.nl/publication/how-to-slaughter-the-disbelievers-insights-into-is-instructional-video/.

[8] Charlie Winter and Colin P. Clarke, "The Islamic State May Be Failing, but its Strategic Communications Legacy is Here to Stay," *War on the Rocks,* 17 August, 2017. https://warontherocks.com2017/08/the-islamic-state-may-be-failing-but-its-strategic-communications-legacy-is-here-to-stay/.

[9] Haroro Ingram, "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), doi: 10.19165/2016.2.06.

by seeking to shape female readers' identities by offering them an alternative frame through which to interpret the world. This lens, as constructed by IS, champions the in-group identity (IS-aligned Sunni Muslims), that holds divinely ordained solutions to all negative grievances inflicted upon Muslims and demonises all others as out-groups who are the direct cause of these crises. This effectively reinforces a Manichean perception of reality between "good" and "evil."

Dabiq further breaks down these in-group and out-group identities by portraying women in five key ways: as "supporter", "mother/sister/wife", "fighter", "victim", and "corruptor". Positive (e.g. chaste, strong, pious, brave) and negative (e.g. promiscuous, immoral, deceiving) traits and values that correspond to either being solutions to crises or causing crises are attached to these archetypes to distinguish each as part of either the in-group or the out-group. The objective of this strategy is to drive their female readers to develop their own identity in line with in-group archetypes ("supporter", "mother/sister/wife", "fighter") and denounce traits characteristic of out-group archetypes ("corruptor"). It is important to note that one's identity is not a fixed state but a process which can constantly evolve. Because of this, Dabiq assures its "corruptor" and "victim" archetypes that they can indeed redeem and save themselves through supporting IS and fulfilling "supporter" and "mother/sister/wife" roles. This identity construction process is depicted in the graphic below.
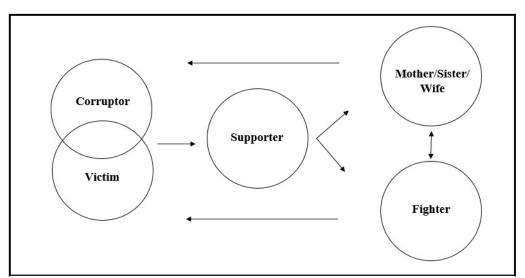

Figure 1. Female archetype identity progressions

Supporter

The most significant portrayal of women in *Dabiq* is the "supporter" archetype. This archetype symbolises to Western readers what a "true" Muslim woman must do to save herself from her own individual and collective Muslim crises, which *Dabiq* frames as caused by the West. Women can become a "supporter" by performing two duties: firstly, by recognising that living in the West and associating with *kufr* (disbelief) is a major contributing factor to Muslims' crises. Thus, their second obligatory duty is to abandon friends and family in *darul-kufr* (land of disbelief) and perform *hijrah* to *darul-Islam* (land of Islam). This archetype is used in *Dabiq's* narratives to perpetuate readers' perceptions of individual and Muslim crises,[10] increase animosity towards the out-group and intensify feelings of anxiety and acrimony while living in the West to

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[10] Ingram, *A "Linkage-Based" Approach*, 5.

consequently increase the necessity to leave and seek refuge in the Caliphate. Therefore, in effect, *hijrah* is framed as the smart, safe and morally just option for Western female Muslims.

Mother, Sister, Wife

Dabiq assures its readers that IS recognises Muslim women residing in the West are victims of a range of grievances including feelings of marginalisation, alienation and discrimination. To address this, Dabiq appeals to "supporters" to perform hijrah by framing the Caliphate as being representative of the ideal moral, legal and religious values which constitute the in-group identity and "mother", "sister" and "wife" archetypes. Hence, after "supporters" perform hijrah, they are promised purpose, belonging and stability in their life given they fulfil powerful roles as "mothers" and "wives" to uphold the Caliphate, alongside fellow "sisters" in an everlasting "sisterhood". The "wives" of the Caliphate are expected to be "bases of support and safety" for their husbands and encourage them to engage in jihad while raising her "lion cubs" and being the "teacher of generations and the producer of men."[11]

Fighter

The "fighter" archetype is the least prominent portrayal of women. *Dabiq* consistently discourages its female supporters from engaging in combat as jihad is a man's obligation. However, they have not refrained from praising "fighter" women such as Tashfeen Malik, the female shooter of the 2015 San Bernardino attack. In an attempt to address the matter of women who are "jealous and envious" of the obligation of jihad for men, *Dabiq* seeks to empower its female readers and reassures them that their role in the Caliphate as a "supporter," "mother," "sister" and "wife" is as significant as men's obligation in waging jihad. If a woman fails to fulfil these fundamental duties which make up her Muslim identity, then she not only fails to commit to the Caliphate but also to the *Ummah* (collective Muslim community) and Allah. Consequently, she qualifies as a "corruptor".

Corruptor

The construction and portrayal of these in-group female archetypes are augmented with narratives which attach perceptions of crises with the out-group identity "corruptor" archetype. For example, *Dabiq* frames the establishment of the Caliphate and subsequently resolving the *Ummah's* crises as only being possible when "supporters" perform *hijrah* and carry out "mother", "sister" and "wife" duties. If they fail to do so, *Dabiq* warns its female readers that they are undermining IS's prophetic methodology, exacerbating their own and the *Ummah's* crises and are thus becoming as malicious as IS's enemies. Therefore, this archetype is leveraged in *Dabiq's* narratives to elevate perceptions of crisis in the West in order to then mobilise Western female support, strengthen commitment to IS and motivate women to identify with in-group archetypes.

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[11] "A Brief Interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajira," *Dabiq* 7 (2014): 51, and Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, "A Jihad without Fighting," *Dabiq* 11 (2015): 44.

Victim

The "victim" archetype represents the disparity between in-group and out-group identities and is used by *Dabiq* to highlight the consequences of the evils committed by the out-group. Consequently, the "victim" is designed to increase anxiety among those living in the West and motivate IS's tacit supporters to become active in resolving crises by performing *hijrah*. *Dabiq* links "victim" to both in-group and solution narratives in order to demonstrate how IS's social agenda and politico-military apparatus will save these "victims" from the treacherous West and show "corruptors" a path to redemption. However, it also attaches this "victim" archetype to out-group and crisis constructs in order to demonstrate how IS's malevolent adversaries are the direct cause of Muslims' misfortunes

2. Empowerment

A recurring theme which prevails in *Dabiq's* "From Our Sisters" and "For Women" articles is the objective of generating a strong sense of empowerment for its female audience. A primary way in which *Dabiq* achieves this is by first acknowledging and assuring its readers that IS is aware of the ills imposed on Muslims by the West. In response, *Dabiq* offers these women a solution to their crises by framing *hijrah* as the rational choice as well as a movement which will not only empower and give their lives meaning but will also simultaneously strengthen IS and weaken the enemy. *Dabiq* seeks to further empower its female readers by portraying their "mother", "sister" and "wife" roles in the Caliphate as being as important and critical as male duties for the establishment and longevity of the Caliphate. Not only are these gendered constructs used to empower women, but they are also leveraged in *Dabiq's* narratives to shame men who refuse to migrate to *darul-Islam* and wage jihad. For example, the "From Our Sisters" article in Issue 8 states:

> [...] for he who wears the cloak of [...] dissuasion, I say [...] if there were any good in you, you would have worn clothes of war and come to guard the outskirts of Mosul to thereby protect your "sisters," but not in the least...May Allah disfigure the turbans of the PKK's women, yet they have more manhood than your likes![12]

In summary, *Dabiq* uses and prioritises gender constructs in the guise of female archetypes to create strong feelings of empowerment in their female readers to motivate them to move from being tacit supporters in the West and in effect undermining IS's "cause", to performing *hijrah* and supporting the Caliphate.

3. Are Jihadi Brides Waging a Sex Jihad?

Despite persistent claims in the media that "jihadi brides" are being "lured" online by attractive jihadist fighters, this analysis found no evidence to suggest that IS uses sex appeal in *Dabiq* to recruit Western women. In his analysis of internal IS documents, Aymenn al-Tamimi similarly found no evidence to support the notion of a "sex jihad"

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[12],Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah, "The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin," *Dabiq* 8 (2015): 37.

(*jihad al-nikah*).[13] Indeed, IS does encourage its women to marry a jihadist fighter and raise children. However, *Dabiq's* architects do not romantically outline these duties wrapped in love and lust. Rather, *Dabiq* seeks to appeal to its female audiences to be a "wife" and "mother" using pragmatic reasoning: women hold powerful roles which are essential for state-building efforts, guaranteeing the survival of the Caliphate and, importantly, supporting and encouraging men to wage jihad. Furthermore, *Dabiq* encourages IS's women to uphold certain values. For example, contrary to popular sexualised notions, "mothers" and "wives" must be patient and loyal to their husbands, and "sisters" must remain chaste.

Counter Strategic Communications and Policy Recommendations

Female (and male) radicalisation is complex, gradual and cannot be pinned down to one causation. Therefore, no one solution will effectively prevent recruitment to IS and other violent non-state movements. It is essential that policymakers acknowledge and address this. This paper does not seek to present definitive answers to the quandary of Western female jihadist recruitment. It can, however, present three strategic recommendations for policy practitioners based on the findings retrieved from this *Dabiq* analysis. This paper stresses that it is fundamental that counter-terrorism strategic communications are to be paired and synchronised with community-based initiatives. They must seek to obstruct IS's legitimacy, address negative grievances and identity appeals and empower, not trivialise, women.

1. Challenges in IS's Legitimacy

Counter-terrorism strategic communications efforts must present to their audiences an alternative narrative to IS's propaganda which challenges the group's credibility. Given the immense focus *Dabiq* devotes to persuading its Western women to perform *hijrah,* counter-messaging ought to refute the practicalities of performing *hijrah* and oppugn the validity of *Dabiq's* claims of a utopian life in the Caliphate. Using the voices of Muslim women who have escaped IS territories and *muhājirat* who have returned back to their home countries after experiencing the dire reality of life under IS control can be powerful real-world examples that can degrade IS's appeal and highlight the positive stories of Muslim women's lives in the West. By emphasising the disparity between IS's promises of idyllic living in its Caliphate and the reality of life for women, this messaging must seek to diminish the legitimacy of IS's alternative social agenda and politico-military apparatus.

2. Address Grievances and Identity Appeals

It is important for counter-messaging to acknowledge and address the negative grievances experienced by Muslims and the identity appeals which prevail in the echo chambers of social media and which are a leitmotif throughout *Dabiq.* Just as *Dabiq* offers solutions for their Western female audiences, counter-communications must

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[13] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Stories of the Mujahideen: Women of the Islamic State," *Jihadology* and *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi,* 17 October, 2016, http://www.aymennjawad.org/19291/the-archivist-stories-of-the-mujahideen-women.

refute the capabilities of IS to solve these women's problems and offer them alternative solutions including pathways to empowerment, belonging, security and stability. However, as Winter suggests, accessing encrypted social media networks and seeking to completely censor all IS propaganda while countering jihadist rhetoric with strategic communications alone will only have short-term results.[14]

Shutting down jihadist social media accounts will disable the medium but not the messages and issues which resonate with its audiences. Several root factors which precede recruitment and make individuals more susceptible to radicalisation must be first addressed, such as, the complex psychosocial influences and the grievances experienced by Muslims in their home societies.[15] Indeed, presenting attainable solutions to Muslim women's crises through strategic communications will help to promote support and commitment to these women's home governments and diminish the attraction to perform *hijrah.* However, this messaging will only be effective if it is augmented and legitimised through community-based initiatives which actively address these crises.

3. Messaging Must Empower, not Trivialise

Abandoning preconceived notions of "jihadi brides" travelling to IS to meet their "jihotties" will be critical to establishing effective counter-strategies. Indeed, some *muhājirat* themselves, such as Umm Waqqas, have even mocked the degrading "jihadi bride" concept: "Idiots that are tweeting this trend should realise that NO SISTER leaves the comfort of their homes just to marry some man."[16] It is important for policy makers to recognise that female (and male) jihadists are not solely driven by religion, sex or coercion and, furthermore, understand that radicalisation does not happen instantaneously. On the contrary, women are motivated to join IS by a combination of complex factors including personal experiences and a range of politico-historical and psychosocial factors such as an identity crisis, feelings of marginalisation, perceived international slaughter of Muslims and unjust persecution of Muslims. Falling into the trap of treating the supposed "romantic" and "overly emotional" nature of women as assumed *a priori* knowledge when dealing with female radicalisation and recruitment can have devastating counter-productive effects and play into the jihadists favour.

Undermining women's worth and value in society by pedalling these overly gendered assumptions can, in fact, exacerbate the aforementioned psychosocial factors and thus render these women more susceptible to recruitment. Perhaps we can learn something from our adversaries. *Dabiq's* propagandists devote much of the content from its "From Our Sisters" and "For Women" articles to generating strong feelings of empowerment, purpose and belonging for its devout women. At the very least, our policy responses and counter-messaging must abandon demeaning gendered rhetoric and seek to restore empowerment and worth in its female audiences.

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[14] Charlie Winter, *An Integrated Approach to Islamic State Recruitment* (Barton, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2016): 14, https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/an-integrated-approach-to-islamic-state-recruitment/SR88_IS-recruitment.pdf.

[15] For more on drivers of radicalisation see: Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 383, doi: 10.2307/421717; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Erin Saltman and Melanie Smith, *'Til Martyrdom Do Us Part* (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf.

[16] Simon Cottee, "What ISIS Women Want," *Foreign Policy,* 17 May, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/17/what-isis-women-want-gendered-jihad/.

Conclusion

This paper argued that *Dabiq* appeals to its female audiences by leveraging psychosocial, socio-political and religious factors in an attempt to influence its readership's construction of identity, motivating them to choose between identifying themselves with the righteous in-group or malevolent out-group. Furthermore, *Dabiq's* narratives manipulate gender constructs to forge social norms in line with IS's world view and alternative social agenda. The product of this is a breakdown of in-group and out-group identities into five female archetypes. *Dabiq's* presentation of women as in-group female archetypes aims to empower IS's Western Muslim supporters and motivate them to perform *hijrah* and seek refuge in the Caliphate, where the injustices they experienced in the West will be eliminated. That a significant aspect of *Dabiq's* strategy to appeal to females is to promise them that IS holds solutions to their grievances indicates that there are deeper causes of radicalisation that are antecedents of recruitment. It is critical these are addressed. If we are to thwart the flow of women performing *hijrah* to IS and supporting political violence, then policy practitioners must work towards addressing injustice felt widely by Muslims in the West by synchronising strategic-communications which obstruct IS's legitimacy and community-based efforts which empower and dignify Muslim women's status.

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