



ANALYSIS

# Behind the veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women have long played an important role in jihad, but the Islamic State has, since its inception, expanded both the potential and scope of those female roles. The caliphate may be no longer, but Islamic State's military defeats have not dampened the appeal of jihad in many quarters. In fact, conditions are already set for an IS resurgence. There is a global cohort of over 73 000 women and children (10 000 of them foreigners) in Kurdish camps who surrendered after the fall of Baghouz. The Islamic State considers this cohort, as well as other female supporters, a key part of its future survival. As Islamic State shifts from governance project to global terrorist movement, women will continue to play an important part of that transformation. Greater female participation in jihad will have a profound influence on the jihadist threat and counterterrorism efforts. In future, national security efforts will need to take this into account in countering terrorism and violent extremism, as well as in rehabilitation programs.

Momena Shoma is a 24-year-old woman from Bangladesh who came to Australia on a student visa in early 2018. She was placed in a homestay with the family of Roger Singaravelu. Two days into her stay, Singaravelu was awoken from a nap with his young daughter by a sharp pain in his neck. He found Shoma standing over him with a knife in her hand incanting praises to Allah. Singaravelu narrowly escaped with his and his daughter's life. Shoma was arrested and charged with engaging in a terrorist attack and attempted murder.<sup>1</sup> After her arrest, she pleaded guilty, reportedly telling detectives she attacked Singaravelu because of the "order of Islamic State [which was calling on] everyone, even the women. So I just felt obligated, and it was like a burden on me. Yeah, I just had to do it ... it could have been anyone, it's not specifically him ... I just felt like if I don't do it I will be sinful, I will be punished by Allah."<sup>2</sup>

While women have been implicated in terrorist plots in Australia as supporters, financiers, influencers and enablers, Shoma is the first woman in Australia to conduct a jihadist terrorist attack as a direct violent actor.<sup>3</sup> Yet Shoma is not unique and not the only woman to conspire to commit violence in Australia on behalf of Islamic State.<sup>4</sup> She is among a growing number of women responding to IS calls to attack its enemies wherever they may be,<sup>5</sup> but particularly in the West.

Women have long played an important role in jihad, even before the rise of Islamic State. However, the organisation has expanded the roles of women and children in jihad in significant ways. Since Islamic State was founded, we have seen the first female-only terrorist cells in Europe, the first female committing violence in the name of jihad in Australia, the first would-be lone actor female suicide bomber in Indonesia,<sup>6</sup> and the first propaganda video featuring female jihadists fighting alongside men on the battlefield.<sup>7</sup> The first nuclear family to jointly conduct a suicide attack in the name of jihad was in Indonesia in May 2018.<sup>8</sup> Islamic State has also become the first jihadist organisation to explicitly call women to the battlefield. Instead of framing women's participation in jihad in proscribed or defensive terms as other ideologues have in the past, Islamic State has called on women to engage in combat jihad on behalf of the cause, saying it is an "obligation".<sup>9</sup>

This Analysis will outline how female IS supporters have become vital players across the organisation, from birthing and indoctrinating the next generation of jihadists and maintaining networks and ties among IS supporters, to committing ultimate acts of violence in the name of their ideology. To appreciate just how much Islamic State has shifted the benchmark on women's involvement in jihad, it is important to first review the previous roles women have played within jihadist organisations and the ideological justifications for their role. It is also important to examine how previous jihadist conflicts pushed the boundaries, paving the way for

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Islamic State to fully embrace the participation of women in direct combat operations both in battlefield insurgencies and as part of terrorist operations conducted around the world.

The role of women in Islamic State has important ramifications for both the future of the organisation and jihad writ large. Islamic State may be stripped of territory and the caliphate defeated, but the organisation is not finished. It has money,<sup>10</sup> and it has people. There are over 73 000 former caliphate members (mostly women and children, and 10 000 of them foreigners) who are currently in Kurdish refugee camps.<sup>11</sup> Islamic State considers this cohort of women and children, as well as other female supporters, a key part of their future survival.<sup>12</sup> The 2019 Sri Lanka attacks were a potent signal of how women will contribute to the global terrorism operations of a resurgent Islamic State,<sup>13</sup> both as violent actors in their own right and as part of familial support networks in plotting and carrying out attacks on behalf of the jihadist group.<sup>14</sup>

## TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF JIHAD VS BATTLEFIELD REALITY

Although the jihadist landscape has been dominated by the imagery and savagery of men, women have been critical to the jihadist enterprise. The participation of women and families legitimises the entire project, portraying it not just as a violent male adventure but as a purposeful social revolution, a return to the true Islamic way of life and a means to a complete society.

Traditionally, women's roles in jihad were narrowly circumscribed. The Salafi jihadist world view has always been patriarchal, a function both of its particular interpretation of Islam and the societal norms from which many jihadist ideologues emerged. Jihadist groups were reluctant to mobilise women to fight and, according to previous jihadist ideological debates, women were only permitted to participate in combat jihad under very limited conditions, if at all.<sup>15</sup>

Women's duties in jihad were primarily supportive and domestic. Their role was to give birth to, raise and indoctrinate future generations of jihadists. They were expected to be religiously knowledgeable and guardians of their home. They were also expected to facilitate their husband's work, raise his children, keep his house and be encouragers and nurturers. If a woman did venture into other activities aside from supporting her husband, it was to educate herself and her children in jihadist ideology and perhaps to raise money for the cause. It was not a woman's role to participate in combat. In fact, they were prohibited from taking on combat roles — including recruiting, plotting, or participating in violent attacks.

However, this prohibition of women in combat was never absolute. There have been numerous instances of women involved in the kinetic side of jihad, most notably as suicide bombers.

The first female Palestinian suicide bombers in the early 2000s were Palestinian nationalists rather than jihadists.<sup>16</sup> However, noting the popularity of these female bombers, by 2003 groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad had reached the decision to use female suicide bombers as well, and began a public campaign to recruit women. Hamas, although initially reluctant, followed a year later. This helped them override intense Israeli security measures against Palestinian males.<sup>17</sup>

The Chechen conflict produced female suicide bombers, known as 'Black Widows', who sought vengeance for the deaths of their male relatives at the hands of Russian military forces. Some also wanted to restore the honour stripped from them by routine Russian brutality during the conflict such as rape.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to becoming suicide bombers, women have also been involved in militancy in Kashmir<sup>19</sup> and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistan-based extremist organisation, has long had a very active women's wing with their own regular meetings, publications and girls schools.<sup>20</sup> LeT mothers served an important function in indoctrinating and providing consent for their sons to fight and die for the cause.<sup>21</sup> While LeT has not used female suicide bombers,<sup>22</sup> other Pakistani groups such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) have recruited and deployed female suicide bombers.<sup>23</sup>

Women, especially young girls, have been used to devastating effect as suicide bombers by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Skirting jihadist norms, Boko Haram favoured women suicide bombers because they were cheap, more expendable than male combatants, and a useful means of evading security measures following counterterrorism crackdowns and a declared state of emergency in Nigeria from 2014.<sup>24</sup> This use of women and girls was unprecedented in the world of jihad at the time and did more to normalise the role of women as suicide bombers than arguably any other group. In the six years between April 2011 and June 2017, Boko Haram deployed 434 suicide bombers, of which at least 56 per cent were women — a higher proportion of women than any other terrorist group in history.<sup>25</sup> Boko Haram eventually became an IS affiliate in 2015.

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The precursor to Islamic State, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), also conducted dozens of female suicide bombings under the leadership of Abu Musab al Zarqawi. An arm of its Diyala Province branch was tasked specifically with recruiting female bombers. AQI's infrastructure had become weakened and fractured as Coalition forces became adept and efficient at picking off mid-level AQI operatives. With fewer men left to fight, using women was a logical response. This was in defiance of the ideology of

their central organisation, however, and was one of the factors that led to the split between AQI and al-Qaeda central and the eventual formation of Islamic State.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE

Whether women are prohibited from fighting in jihad altogether, or whether they are permitted to fight under specific circumstances, has been a subject of debate since the times of the Prophet Muhammad. There is no clear consensus in the religious literature on the acceptability of Muslim women taking up arms.

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There are two well-known accounts of women who fought alongside the Prophet Muhammad in his battles. Nusayba, also known as Umm Umara, fought in the Battle of Uhud in 626 AD. The Prophet's aunt, Safiya, took up a sword in the Battle of Khandaq in 627 AD. Safiya reportedly cut off the head of an enemy fighter trying to scale the city walls and threw it back over to his fellow soldiers.<sup>26</sup> And early in Islam's history, Muhammad's widowed young wife, Aisha, led an army of 3000 in the Battle of the Camel in the religion's first civil war. Despite these accounts of women fighting during the Prophet's time, many Muslim jurists advised against it in later periods, recommending alternative jihads for women, such as the hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, there was no firm consensus on when and how women were to participate in jihad. Participation depended on a specific fatwa, or ruling, being issued by a recognised religious authority, which set out the conditions of that participation. The modern jihadist ideological position generally hewed to the view that women were an impediment to men in their quest for jihad, representing the ties that bind,<sup>28</sup> but left room for adjustment.

One of the foundational documents of modern jihad, Abdullah Azzam's *Defense of the Muslim Lands*, argued that women should be allowed to participate in combat in particular circumstances. In 1979 Azzam famously wrote that "if a piece of Muslim land the size of a hand span is infringed upon, then jihad becomes *farḍ ayn* [individual duty] on every Muslim male and female, where the child shall march forward without the permission of its parents and the wife without the permission of the husband".<sup>29</sup> In Azzam's framing, Muslims were waging a defensive jihad and therefore it was obligatory for every individual to participate, women and children included.<sup>30</sup>

While Azzam was a key influence on al-Qaeda and subsequent jihadist organisations, the dominant Salafi jihadist view was that women were to continue to follow their traditional segregated gender role. Participating in 'male jihad' by participating in combat or conducting a suicide operation was a contravention of the ideology.<sup>31</sup>



The debate about women in combat roles was resuscitated in the 1990s with Muhammad Khayr Haykal's treatise, *Jihad and Fighting According to Sharia*. His writings reopened the question of whether women were actually *forbidden* from fighting. He used the same ideological construction as Azzam and concluded that when it was *farḍ ayn*, women were not forbidden from fighting but in fact should do so under defensive circumstances.<sup>32</sup>

Scholar David Cook identified six subsequent fatwas issued by religious leaders after Azzam which made the argument that women be allowed to participate in combat operations under certain circumstances.<sup>33</sup> The most well known was by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was not a jihadist ideologue but a popular sheikh famous throughout the Islamic world from his television appearances. In response to a 2004 suicide bombing carried out by a Palestinian mother working for Hamas, Qaradawi, echoing Azzam, stated: "When jihad becomes an individual duty, as when the enemy seizes the Muslim territory, a woman becomes entitled to take part in it alongside men ... a woman should go out even without the consent of her husband, a son can go too without the permission of his parent."<sup>34</sup>

The prohibition of women in combat jihad — either tactically or ideologically — has therefore never been rigid but instead has been adjusted, challenged and debated within jihadist circles since the earliest days of Islam.

Reviewing the recent conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the extent of women's roles has mostly been dictated by the particular circumstances of the jihadist group. When suffering heavy losses or operating under a prohibitive counterterrorism regime, jihadist groups eased the prohibition on women fighting. Decisions to deploy women in combat were a response to restrictions and losses. Women's participation in combat operations was also a means of shoring up flagging recruitment: not just to replenish the ranks with women, but to shame available men into rejoining the fight.<sup>35</sup>

Women's combat participation in jihad has been justified based on such operational realities. What had been tactical considerations became strategic choice.<sup>36</sup> Strategic choice then often led to ideological rationalisation.<sup>37</sup>

However, it was not until the advent of Islamic State that women's involvement in combat evolved from being permissible in certain circumstances to becoming obligatory. Islamic State not only rationalised its tactical choices, it went a step further by stating women were in fact *obligated* to participate in combat. That small semantic shift has important potential consequences for the future of the jihadist movement and the nature of the threat it poses.

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## THE ISLAMIC STATE DIFFERENCE

The popular perception of Islamic State is of an organisation that has placed brutal restrictions on women. IS female adherents, particularly its foreign recruits, were labelled as 'jihadi brides', women attracted to, or groomed by, bad boy Muslim extremists. These women were presented as duped, cloistered or oppressed, confined at home bearing and rearing children, with little constructive role in the organisation. However, the experience of women in Islamic State went far beyond these assumptions. Despite its many well-documented atrocities against women, the caliphate attracted a significant number of women, more so than other jihadist theatres. Since its establishment, 15 per cent of voluntary migrants to the caliphate have been women.<sup>38</sup>

Islamic State gave its female adherents in jihad a sense of agency and empowerment. The group appealed to women by framing travel to the caliphate as a religious duty and by offering them a rationale to defy husbands, family, and even Islamic laws such as travelling alone if necessary.<sup>39</sup> They also appealed to women by projecting messages of empowerment through their contribution to Islamic State's collective goals.<sup>40</sup> Islamic State effectively harnessed the power of women's roles as wives and mothers. Far from framing wives and mothers as passive or supportive, IS narrative presented these active choices as a means of female agency.<sup>41</sup>

In its early days, Islamic State shared and promoted the prevailing jihadist stance on the role of women and their prohibition from combat. In an article published in *Dabiq* magazine, "A Jihad Without Fighting", its female author laid out the essential role of women in building the Ummah (worldwide Muslim community) as a wife and bearer of the next generation of jihadists.<sup>42</sup>

Using potent language she evoked the strong protective imagery of a lion and her cubs: "As for you, O mother of lion cubs ... what will make you know what the mother of lion cubs is? She is the teacher of generations."<sup>43</sup>

Yet even while encouraging women to confine themselves to their home and extolling their domestic role, IS women were also called on to perform security and recruitment functions for the organisation. The notorious al-Khansaa Brigade, purportedly led by a Moroccan woman,<sup>44</sup> was made up of mostly French-speaking women<sup>45</sup> who acted as a *hisba*, a morality police force. Members of the al-Khansaa Brigade ventured out in full niqab, rifles over shoulders, patrolling the streets for women who violated Islamic State's strict decency codes and meted out *hudud* or punishment when necessary. While they did not participate in combat operations, they were given weapons and weapons training.<sup>46</sup> The female *hisba* forces were often the most brutal enforcers of the draconian community rules.

While al-Khansaa enforced morality or *hisba* rules, other female battalions extended their responsibility beyond *hisba*. There are reports of female IS supporters accompanying male fighters on house raids so they can search women,<sup>47</sup> and running brothels of Yazidi sex slaves.<sup>48</sup>

Women were also given leadership roles. For example, Nisreen Assad Ibrahim Bahar (also known as Umm Sayyaf)<sup>49</sup> advised IS senior leadership and was personally appointed by the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to supervise hostages including American aid worker Kayla Mueller.<sup>50</sup>

In one study examining the profiles of female IS supporters, the most common self-identified role, surpassing even the number of women who identified as 'wife/mother', was as recruiter for the organisation.<sup>51</sup> IS women recruited on the ground among local populations in Iraq and Syria as well as online. They urged people to come to the caliphate in general pronouncements, but also specifically identified would-be recruits online and facilitated their travel to Syria. In the online space, women acted as propagandists, facilitators of travel, and influencers, as well as recruiters for the caliphate.<sup>52</sup>

One example of such an IS actor is Australian Zehra Duman, who at 19 left Australia to join Islamic State and is currently in a Kurdish-run detention camp.<sup>53</sup> Duman maintained an active online presence where she promoted Islamic State, celebrated martyrdom, threatened Australia, and attempted to recruit for the caliphate.<sup>54</sup> IS promoters such as Duman promoted a narrative some have termed 'jihadi girl-power'.<sup>55</sup>

Shadi Jabar was another young Australian who was an active online recruiter and promoter of Islamic State. According to US Pentagon officials, she contributed to the planning of IS external attacks, and was "active in recruiting foreign fighters in efforts to inspire attacks against Western interests".<sup>56</sup> Jabar was also instrumental in radicalising her younger brother, 15-year-old Farhad Jabar, who shot police accountant Curtis Cheung at the Parramatta police station in 2015.<sup>57</sup>

Jabar and Duman's social media accounts depict life in Islamic State as normal, even glamorous. Like other female IS supporters in the online space, they played a role in normalising the atrocities and the radicalism of the group, and presenting it as a lifestyle choice and an initiation into a sisterhood.<sup>58</sup> Their social media posts talk about "five-star jihad", show them posing in pictures with luxury cars, and depict the perks of life as a foreign fighter of the caliphate.<sup>59</sup> Duman posted a picture of herself with her girl squad, tagged "Can't mess with my clique. From the land down under, to the land of Khilafah. That's the Aussie spirit."<sup>60</sup> IS widows have claimed to be more content than ever after their husbands' deaths.<sup>61</sup> Others have depicted Islamic State and jihadism as a "cool" or "alternative" lifestyle.<sup>62</sup>

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The examples of Duman, Jabar and others illustrate how IS women online have been able to engage in jihad beyond their traditional support roles and with fewer gender constraints. Because Islamic State considers its virtual caliphate just as important as the physical caliphate,<sup>63</sup> women's independent and assertive activity online unlocked an alternative space for them and provided a cognitive opening for the acceptance of greater roles for women in jihad.<sup>64</sup>

But women also had more 'direct' roles online, comparable with kinetic or operational roles in the physical realm. American Kim Anh Vo, for example, was arrested by the FBI for her involvement in the United Cyber Caliphate (UCC), an online group pledging allegiance to Islamic State that carried out online attacks and published "kill lists" of US personnel.<sup>65</sup> While UCC's offensive cyber capabilities are and were very limited,<sup>66</sup> Vo's arrest shows that women were not excluded from Islamic State's fledgling cyberterrorism efforts.

## THE DECLINE OF THE CALIPHATE AND THE CALL ON WOMEN FIGHTERS

As Islamic State suffered increasing military and territorial losses in its fight to maintain the physical caliphate, it became more important to shore up participants in battle — including women. In January 2015, the al-Khansaa Brigade published a manifesto on the role of women, articulating a combat role for women in specific defensive circumstances. Although the manifesto focused on the traditional role of wife and mother and rebutted "Western" notions of human rights and gender equality,<sup>67</sup> it stated that women could venture outside their homes and engage in jihad "as the women of Iraq and Chechnya did".<sup>68</sup>

Other IS documents echoed this. IS Arabic-language newspaper *al-Naba* published an article in 2016 stating: "Jihad as a rule is not an obligation for women, but let the female Muslim know as well that if the enemy enters her abode, jihad is just as necessary for her as it is for the man and she should repel him by whatever means possible."<sup>69</sup> As in past jihadist conflicts when losses were mounting, IS pronouncements evolved to allow women to take on combat roles, at least defensively.

However, IS online magazine *Rumiya* went further in July 2017,<sup>70</sup> going beyond the defensive jihad justification in issuing a call to arms. Recalling the history of Umm Umara, IS women were urged to the battlefield on the basis that jihad was now *fard ayn*, an individual obligation. The *Rumiya* article explicitly urged women to take up arms "not [to compensate for] the small number of men but rather due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah and their desire for Jannah (paradise)".<sup>71</sup>

In October 2017, in an essay in *al-Naba*, IS stated that women were not only permitted but now *obligated* to fight on behalf of the caliphate,

calling on women to follow the examples of other women who fought alongside the prophet Muhammad.<sup>72</sup>

Seven months after the fall of Raqqa and their declaration that women's jihad was obligatory, Islamic State released an official propaganda video in January 2018 featuring female combatants.<sup>73</sup> Women had rarely been seen in official propaganda material or pictured engaging in combat operations. Part of the "Inside the Caliphate" series, the video showed niqab-clad women fighting alongside men in Deir Ezzor, the narrator noting: "The chaste mujahid woman journeying to her lord with garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for her religion and for the honor of her sisters imprisoned by the apostate Kurds." The narrator noted the "beginning of the new era" in the caliphate.<sup>74</sup>

It could be argued that Islamic State is merely following the same trajectory as other jihadist groups and conflicts before it, overriding established ideology for tactical reasons in arguing that combat jihad was now permissible for women. As the *Washington Post* bluntly put it: "How do we know the Islamic State is losing? Now it's asking women to fight."<sup>75</sup>

Around the time of propaganda releases, Islamic State was indeed collapsing, with fighting in Mosul and Raqqa at its peak and Coalition forces closing in. There were reports of multiple female suicide attacks in Mosul.<sup>76</sup> By the time Islamic State decided women's participation in jihad was obligatory in October 2017, the caliphate had lost 60 per cent of its territory and its last major stronghold, the IS capital Raqqa, was liberated from IS control.<sup>77</sup>

Yet regardless of battlefield losses, Islamic State did not frame a woman's obligation to conduct jihad through a lens of loss. In its publications and propaganda, Islamic State did not frame women's participation as a means to shame men into fighting and did not justify it based on losses or pressure from their adversaries, as other groups before it had. It was presented as a natural extension of a women's duty to defend the caliphate. And there was no caveat or expiration date on the call to combat.

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Even before Islamic State declared it obligatory for women to fight on the battlefield, women had already begun fighting in its other branches. The first confirmed report of a female IS suicide bomber was from an affiliate organisation in Libya.<sup>78</sup> There were several female suicide bombings there (both attempted and successful) throughout 2016,<sup>79</sup> and in an evacuation of women and children from an IS holdout in Sirte, women bombers used children as decoys.<sup>80</sup>

The al-Khansaa Brigade leader, Umm Rayan al Tunisi, had significant success in involving women in Islamic State after establishing a women's unit in Libya,<sup>81</sup> and their usefulness was not confined to suicide bombings. Female fighters also reportedly handled logistics, were given

weapons training and explosive belts, and fought alongside men.<sup>82</sup> They were sent out as recruiters and paid as much as \$3000 per recruit.<sup>83</sup> By the end of 2016, an estimated 1000 women, 300 of them Tunisian, were fighting with Islamic State in Libya.<sup>84</sup>

## GLOBAL ISLAMIC STATE TERRORISM AND WOMEN

Female participation in IS terrorism has not been confined to the theatres of Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Women have been involved in, planned, and perpetrated terrorist attacks around the world since the inception of the Islamic State.

Islamic State held a particular appeal for Western women. Some reports claim that close to 20 per cent of the organisation's Western recruits were women, higher than any other jihadist group to date.<sup>85</sup>

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In Europe the numbers are striking. Between 2014 and 2018, there were 33 separate plots involving women in European countries.<sup>86</sup> There was a significant uptick in terrorism-related arrests of women over that period, from 96 arrests in 2014 to 171 in 2015, 180 in 2016 and 123 in 2017.<sup>87</sup> France has produced more foreign fighters proportionally than any other Western country, and French authorities estimated in 2016 that 40 per cent of young French people who travelled to Syria were females.<sup>88</sup>

The first all-female IS cells emerged in France in 2014, connecting via social media.<sup>89</sup> Two girls aged 15 and 17 were arrested in August 2014 for conspiring to carry out a suicide bombing against a synagogue in Lyon.<sup>90</sup> In 2016, another all-female cell (two members of which were engaged to male jihadists who had previously carried out attacks in France) attempted several attacks over the span of a few days, including against the Notre Dame cathedral. In the course of their arrest, one of them stabbed a police officer.<sup>91</sup> All of the women had attempted to travel to Syria but had been stopped by authorities. Undeterred, they directed their efforts against their home country instead.<sup>92</sup>

In many cases they were encouraged and guided by male counterparts. However, they independently took matters into their own hands, inspired by propaganda such as that of Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, former IS spokesman and head of external operations, who said in an audio message recorded before Ramadan in 2016: "the smallest act you do in their heartland is better and more enduring to us than the biggest act done here. If one of you hoped to reach the Islamic State, we wish we were in your place to punish the Crusaders day and night."<sup>93</sup>

While Australian women have been slower to heed Islamic State's call mobilising them to violence than their European counterparts (roughly 40 Australian women migrated to the caliphate), those women are becoming *more* involved, compared with women's involvement in other jihadist conflicts.<sup>94</sup> As well as Momena Shoma, other women such as Alo-Bridget Namoa have been convicted of engaging in preparation of a

terror attack.<sup>95</sup> Australian women such as Jabar and Duman have also acted as “social influencers, facilitators, enablers and supporters”.<sup>96</sup>

There are numerous other cases of women in the West self-radicalising, attempting unsuccessfully to travel to join the caliphate, and plotting attacks on their home territory. An all-female cell, a mother and two daughters, planned knife attacks near the UK Parliament. One of the women, Safaa Boular, was groomed by Australian Shadi Jabar, who proved to be a prolific networker before her death by a Coalition drone strike in 2016.<sup>97</sup> In Germany, a 16-year-old was convicted of stabbing a police officer at a train station.<sup>98</sup> There was also a successful 2015 suicide attack in Istanbul by an 18-year-old widowed, pregnant Russian woman who had previously lived in Syria with her husband who had fought for Islamic State.<sup>99</sup>

One of the deadliest attacks orchestrated by a woman was the 2015 San Bernardino shooting in California, in which Tashfeen Malik and her husband killed 14 people in a small arms ambush attack. US officials now understand that Malik, not her husband, was the driving force behind the attack.<sup>100</sup> She had previously posted online about her commitment to Islamic State, but those posts were not seen by US officials who later admitted potential vulnerabilities in the screening process for visa applicants, like Malik, seeking residency in the United States.<sup>101</sup> Malik and her husband were killed in a police shootout after the attacks, orphaning their six-month-old child. The group later praised Malik for her attack.<sup>102</sup>

Africa and Asia have also been targets of female IS terrorists. In addition to the female suicide bombers of Boko Haram, other African women have plotted and committed attacks. In Mombasa Kenya in 2016, three women who had pledged allegiance to Islamic State set off a petrol bomb inside a police station and stabbed an officer before being killed by police. Originally thought to be the work of al-Shabaab, this was the first claim of an attack by female IS-inspired jihadists in Kenya.<sup>103</sup> Morocco also saw its first female-only cell, a group of ten teenage girls under 18 who were in touch with IS elements over the internet and had explosives in their possession before the cell was dismantled.<sup>104</sup>

Tunisia has been the largest source of IS foreign fighters in Syria and Libya, and more than 100 Tunisian women have been arrested in Tunisia since 2015 for a variety of terror-related offences.<sup>105</sup> It is unsurprising then that Tunisia had a female suicide bomb attack in 2018, when a grenade detonated by the self-radicalised Mouna Guebla in central Tunis injured at least 20 people.<sup>106</sup>

The 2019 Sri Lanka Easter bombings, the deadliest terrorist attack ever claimed by Islamic State, also featured a female suicide bomber. Fatima Ibrahim, the pregnant wife of one of the church bombers, detonated a bomb that killed her and her three children, as well as three police, during a raid on the family home in the days after the church

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bombings.<sup>107</sup> She was part of a tight-knit family cluster that planned and participated in the attacks,<sup>108</sup> a growing trend that has stymied counterterrorism efforts as family units can reinforce radicalisation and are better able to hide their intentions and maintain operational secrecy.

Perhaps the most shocking example of the expanded profile of IS jihadists was the Surabaya bombings, in which three families associated with IS affiliate Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) strapped explosives on themselves and their children and attacked churches and police stations killing 30 people in May 2018.<sup>109</sup>

Islamic State's territorial losses and military defeats in Syria do not seem to have dampened its appeal in Indonesia. In March 2019, as fighters in Baghouz lost their last territory in Syria, a JAD-affiliated mother and son committed a home-grown suicide attack during a stand-off with police at their North Sumatra home.<sup>110</sup> The rise of JAD and the evolving combat role of Indonesian women and their families in JAD have provoked a significant escalation of the terror threat in Indonesia, which had previously been focused on male militancy.

These various cases indicate that Islamic State's call for an obligatory combat role for women was presaged by a range of female recruitment, security and enforcement roles and functions in place prior to IS territorial and battlefield losses. Women were already involved in other security operations in the caliphate; IS affiliates had already used women as suicide bombers and combatants; women outside the conflict zone who were inspired by Islamic State initiated attacks in their home countries, and women were active in online jihad. All these circumstances normalised the idea of a greater combat role for women, which Islamic State then formalised by its declaration of obligatory female engagement in violent jihad.

*...the policy of females in combat was accepted at Islamic State's highest levels.*

Recently surfaced documents from the IS delegate committee (the organisation's main decision-making body) indicate that the policy of females in combat was accepted at Islamic State's highest levels. In a statement critiquing IS strategy and operations as being instrumental in its losses, Syrian member of the IS Shura council<sup>111</sup> Abu Abd al-Malek al-Shami argued that the decision to mandate women's combat roles was not only correct, but came too late, and that IS losses could have been stemmed with more women in active military roles, among other strategic and tactical adjustments.<sup>112</sup>

## WOMEN, ISLAMIC STATE RESURGENCE, AND GLOBAL JIHAD

In some ways, Islamic State's declaration of obligatory women's combat is now largely moot. The caliphate has been defeated. There have been few reports of female suicide bombers in Syria or of women fighting in Baghouz, the last remaining IS stronghold.<sup>113</sup> There is no way to verify



whether the women depicted fighting in an IS propaganda video released in February 2018 were in fact women or men dressed in niqab. There is no evidence of an influx of women participating in military operations or suicide missions in the Syria-Iraq theatre. The majority of IS women and children were evacuated and detained by the Iraqi government or by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in makeshift camps; 70 000 or more people are now in the Al Hol refugee camp, around 10 000 of them foreign, most of them women and children and many of them IS supporters.<sup>114</sup>

Yet while the caliphate may be no longer, Islamic State is far from a spent force. As Islamic State shifts from governance project to global terrorist and insurgent force, women will play an important role in its resurgence and transformation.<sup>115</sup>

According to recent US government reports, "ISIS remains an active insurgent group in both Iraq and Syria. If Sunni socio-economic, political, and sectarian grievances are not adequately addressed by the national and local governments of Iraq and Syria it is very likely that ISIS will have the opportunity to set conditions for future resurgence and territorial control ... [IS] retains excellent command and control capability."<sup>116</sup> While IS holdouts of mainly foreign fighters may have made a last stand in Baghouz, the organisation had made a strategic retreat and a pivot back to an insurgency since the fall of Mosul in 2017, if not before.<sup>117</sup>

Women appear to be a part of this resurgence strategy. There are reports that women have been recruited or compelled to act as couriers, go-betweens, and weapons smugglers since the fall of Mosul. They have been transporting supplies from groceries to home-made bombs to male fighters biding their time underground. Women are also reportedly used as communications links between desert/rural-based IS cells and IS networks in villages and camps.<sup>118</sup>

Perversely, the conservative cultural norms around gender in Iraq and Syria have allowed Islamic State to take advantage of its 'progressive' stance on female participation in jihad to rebuild. The use of women is an advantage because they are subject to much less security scrutiny. They are allowed to move more freely in heavily policed areas; they pass through checkpoints without being searched, and unlike men, garner little suspicion when they enter government buildings or assemble in groups.

Iraqi and Syrian forces do not have adequate security forces or procedures to deal with these women. Judge Raid Hamid, a judge in Mosul's terrorism court, stated: "In an eastern society it is difficult for us to track, interrogate and arrest women." Because of the segregation of sexes in Muslim societies, there are few female security forces available to search women at checkpoints or interrogate them. There are few women police officers and none working in combat roles in the army or special operations forces in Iraq.<sup>119</sup>

*...70 000 or more people are now in the Al Hol refugee camp, around 10 000 of them foreign, most of them women and children and many of them IS supporters.*

Islamic State still views women as critical to the long-term survival of the organisation in their roles as wives, mothers, and indoctrinators of the next generation of jihad. In the words of one IS supporter smuggled out of Syria back to her home country: “We will bring up strong sons and daughters and tell them about the life in the caliphate. Even if we hadn’t been able to keep it, our children will one day get it back.”<sup>120</sup>

Women were integral to the migration of entire families to the caliphate. Mothers brought and conceived children into the caliphate where they were subjected to a robust and methodical indoctrination infrastructure. Books and pamphlets instructed women on how to bring up children in the jihad and transfer skills and ideological beliefs, including by telling bedtime stories about ‘martyrs’, showing them jihadi propaganda, and encouraging them to play with guns.<sup>121</sup>

Many of the women who surrendered in Baghouz and are currently detained in SDF camps remain unapologetically committed supporters of Islamic State. Some women in these camps have claimed that Islamic State ordered them to surrender and to bide their time, until the group rises again. This explains in part the lack of women fighters, even after the declaration of obligatory female combat.<sup>122</sup>

Many of these women have also continued their enforcement of IS norms inside the Al Hol camp. A group of IS female supporters reconstituted the *hisba* force and have stoned, spat on and brandished knives against those they consider impious, even burning down their tents. They have threatened women who denounced Islamic State and have coerced others into joining their efforts.<sup>123</sup>

*Female IS returnees are posing a particular challenge to counter-terrorism officials who had been preparing for an influx of male foreign fighters.*

In addition to sustaining an insurgency in Iraq and Syria, an essential component of Islamic State’s long-war strategy will be to continue a global terror campaign.<sup>124</sup> Foreign female fighters, who are particularly strident and committed, are likely to feature in this strategy. Female IS returnees are posing a particular challenge to counterterrorism officials who had been preparing for an influx of male foreign fighters. Instead, women and children are the ones returning. They may not have participated in combat but they have been exposed to violence and some have received weapons training. Many remain committed to the cause and have been instructed to prepare for Islamic State’s future — either by indoctrinating the next generation or by participating in future attacks.<sup>125</sup>

Islamic State’s declaration of women’s obligatory role in jihad may have been intended for a particular moment — when the group was in a defensive crouch. However, it could also signal a more permanent shift in the role of women within the organisation. The group’s intentions have been kept purposely vague. Although it declared women’s participation in jihad as obligatory, it has not compelled its female members to fight, nor has it chided any of its *wilayats*, or provinces, for not making fuller use of women as combatants.

Instead, the instances of IS women taking part in combat operations have been the result of localised decision-making. Among certain cohorts and branches, women did take up combat jihad. Others did not, instead leaning on the traditional role of women as the bearers of future generations and as a means to the caliphate's revival. Islamic State has a history of tailoring its propaganda and messaging to various constituencies, and the pronouncement on the role of women is no different. It has allowed a diversity of views and expressions of jihad within the organisation. However, with the normalisation of women in security and combat functions, the rubicon has been crossed. Islamic State has led the way in evolving the role of women in jihad, and now other jihadist groups are echoing the call for women to take up direct combat.

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), for example, has mimicked Islamic State's call for women to participate in jihad. In August 2017, TTP issued a new English-language propaganda piece in its first direct appeal to women to participate in violent operations.<sup>126</sup> This portends a shift in the jihadist landscape in the Af-Pak region, one with a long-standing jihadist insurgent presence but where women have traditionally played a comparatively small role in combat. Now, with the normalisation of women in combat, jihadist groups are seeking to exploit a "largely untapped female operative market".<sup>127</sup>

Yet, the other jihadist lodestar, al-Qaeda, has not followed Islamic State, and the role of women in jihad is an important point of contention and difference between the two groups. In Syria, women trying to join al-Qaeda's affiliated groups were largely rebuffed, with al-Qaeda's social and ideological norms proscribing women in combat at least for the time being.

*The use of women in combat roles has shifted from a mere tactical response to a more permanent feature.*

Despite this, the potential of women in Islamic State and within the Salafi jihadist movement as a whole has been underestimated and is expanding. The use of women in combat roles has shifted from a mere tactical response to a more permanent feature. Women have become agents, facilitators, and promoters of jihad as much as men. In an IS resurgence, this means they present a powerful potential force.

## COUNTERTERRORISM IMPLICATIONS

The greater role of women, and potentially their children, in jihad poses distinct and unique challenges to policymakers and counterterrorism efforts around the world. This has implications for four key policy areas: (1) repatriation; (2) sentencing; (3) rehabilitation; and (4) counterterrorism assistance.

### REPATRIATION

One of the most pressing policy issues is the processing of foreign fighter females currently held in Kurdish and Iraqi custody. After the

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defeat of the caliphate, many of these women have requested to return to their countries of origin with their children, and SDF forces are eager to be rid of them. However, their countries, particularly Western ones, are reluctant to repatriate them.

Australia is no exception. Save the Children estimates that there are about 70 Australians in Al Hol camp, at least 30 of them children and 22 of them under 10 years old.<sup>128</sup> Many of the women, including Duman, have requested via media interviews or through family members, to return to Australia. A recent *Four Corners* investigative report detailed the extraordinary efforts of Karen Nettleton to repatriate her grandchildren, the children of Khaled and Tara Sharrouf, back to Australia.<sup>129</sup> At the time of publication, eight Australian children of foreign fighters, including five members of the Sharrouf family, had been rescued from the northern Syrian camps.<sup>130</sup>

While Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the decision to repatriate the children was not made “lightly”, he also said that he “would not allow any Australian to be put at risk”.<sup>131</sup> The Australian Government has stated that it would not expend resources or offer assistance in repatriating Australian IS supporters.<sup>132</sup> Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has cited national security reasons in arguing that these women should be dealt with “as far from our shores as possible”.<sup>133</sup> Australian legislation allows the government to strip Australian citizenship from dual nationals, thus avoiding responsibility for them. The government has also introduced Temporary Exclusion Orders preventing Australians involved in terrorism abroad from legally returning to Australia for up to two years and setting specific conditions for their return.<sup>134</sup>

Male foreign fighters have traditionally faced intense scrutiny, whereas returnee women, especially mothers, have benefited from a positive security bias. Many of the female IS supporters in custody claim to have been merely housewives and mothers. However, this is a potential misrepresentation of their roles, and many could present a security risk to Australia upon their return.

It will be very difficult to assess the true risk these women pose to society without a thorough assessment of women’s roles incorporated in government risk and threat assessments.<sup>135</sup> Prosecutions are problematic, not least because of the difficulty of obtaining sufficient admissible evidence. Even if returnees are tried and convicted for terrorism offences, they present a radicalisation risk both in and outside of prison. Monitoring these individuals would require significant government resources, and the prospects of rehabilitation are uncertain. It makes a certain sense to keep these women at a distance.

Yet leaving women to fester in refugee camps or handing them over to an already overwhelmed and inadequate Iraqi criminal system carries its own set of risks, including the risk of further radicalisation.<sup>136</sup> Recent news reports have detailed dire conditions in the Al Hol camp, with poor

sanitation, lack of access to services, and an imposing radical IS cohort still enforcing IS rules, forming an unofficial “ISIS mafia”.<sup>137</sup> There are serious health and safety risks at these camps to the women and their children<sup>138</sup> and these conditions can serve as fuel for further and continuing radicalisation.<sup>139</sup>

Ironically, by stripping the citizenship of IS supporters and blocking or delaying their repatriation, countries are also inadvertently stoking the IS narrative that the nation state identity is irrelevant and that the caliphate is the only true and just polity for Muslims. The longer these women remain in the camps with no access to rehabilitation or justice, the greater the likelihood of further radicalisation or plotting. Leaving IS supporters in Syrian or Iraqi custody or in refugee camps enables them to network and plot out the future of their jihadist movement and radicalise others; Islamic State itself was a reconstitution of AQI by former Iraqi Baathists and insurgents in detention in Camp Bucca in Iraq in the early 2000s.

The choice of whether to repatriate foreign fighter women, therefore, is a choice between bad and worse. Despite the risks that female IS supporters pose upon their return to Australian soil, these are on balance outweighed by the risks of not repatriating them. They should be returned to their countries of origin to be tried, potentially convicted, monitored and possibly rehabilitated.

Additionally, many of these women are mothers and there are implications for their children. Children who were brought to or born in Syria are double victims. They were traumatised by their experiences in a war zone and are now paying the price of their parent’s decisions.

In order to conduct an effective repatriation and reintegration program, however, it is essential these women and their children have a community to return to. Government needs to identify and thoroughly consult with potential community partners before making any reintegration efforts. The success of any reintegration efforts will hinge on this alone.

## SENTENCING

A significant factor in the prosecuting and sentencing of female jihadists is the prevailing perception of female agency. Women tend to receive more lenient treatment in the criminal justice system,<sup>140</sup> based on false assumptions about their limited agency.<sup>141</sup>

In Sydney, Alo-Bridget Namoa and Sameh Baydeh have been sentenced over their plot to rob non-Muslims on New Year’s Eve 2015, and then using those funds to carry out further IS-inspired violence. They were sentenced to four years each,<sup>142</sup> the shortest sentence imposed for conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism. The short sentences are

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partly a result of Namo'a and Baydeh renouncing their beliefs and assisting authorities. But youth and gender may also have been a factor.

Many women who have returned from the caliphate have received pardons or lesser sentences.<sup>143</sup> Assumptions about women and violence and a misconstrued understanding of women's roles in jihad could mean that many of these women may not be held properly accountable for their actions. With female involvement in violent jihad likely to increase, the justice system must adjust.

According to one analysis of female sentencing: "Case documents [show] gendered arguments of women as 'misled victims', 'unknowing', 'terrified', 'emotional', 'seduced', 'lured' and 'brainwashed' ... and 'naïve'. Women are continually infantilized and sexualized; their agency is narrated to a minimum, and they are represented as misunderstood victims, rather than as motivated agents."<sup>144</sup>

This is contradicted by what is now known of women's direct and varied roles in Islamic State. Many, particularly foreign women, joined the group of their own volition and free will. Their motivations were political, religious, and ideological. Their support of Islamic State had the same push and pull factors as that of men.<sup>145</sup>

*The definition of 'participation' or 'support' of a terrorist organisation must be expanded to account for the full contribution of women in jihad...*

The definition of 'participation' or 'support' of a terrorist organisation must be expanded to account for the full contribution of women in jihad, including the essential state-building tasks these women performed — such as supporting combatants, educating recruits and transporting supplies — and not just the recruiting and propagandist work. Absent other mitigating factors, women's crucial domestic, educational and other enabling influence should also be considered as 'support', as Islamic State itself does, and charges and sentencing should reflect this.<sup>146</sup>

## REHABILITATION

The recent United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate Trends Report confirms that while women tend to receive more lenient treatment in criminal justice systems, they also "tend to receive more limited rehabilitation and reintegration support, thus putting them at potentially greater risk of recidivism and re-radicalization and potentially undermining their successful reintegration into society".<sup>147</sup> New deradicalisation efforts must be tailored for women to acknowledge their shifting role in jihad.

This means a significant shift in the way women are viewed in deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and in counterterrorism efforts more generally. Women and families have often been viewed as potentially powerful and positive deterrents against extremism. The opposite is also now true. Women and families serve to radicalise as well as insulate. Any approach to countering violent extremism must take this into account.



## COUNTERTERRORISM ASSISTANCE

Jihadism is a global movement and a global concern. Therefore Australia must not only adjust its own counterterrorism polices in light of the greater role for women in Islamic State and other jihadist organisations, but it also must review its international counterterrorism assistance. Counterterrorism efforts and counterterrorism assistance can no longer be gender-blind.

More female security officers need to be trained in order to overcome gaps, such as security screening, which jihadist groups can exploit by using their female adherents. Female security officers are needed in gender segregated societies to conduct searches, obtain intelligence from populations that men do not have access to, and to improve community policing efforts.

Australia must also support female-centred countering violent extremism and counter radicalisation programming and fund programs that are not only tailored towards women, but ones in which women are a part of their development, leadership, administration, and delivery.<sup>148</sup>

Australia should prioritise funding programs in which women are integrated in terrorism prevention efforts and security services.

*Counterterrorism efforts and counterterrorism assistance can no longer be gender-blind.*

## CONCLUSION

Islamic State has expanded the way women participate in jihad. There must therefore be a corresponding shift in the way counterterrorism services view the radicalisation of women and the threat they pose on returning from IS-held territory. Right now, counterterrorism authorities need to contend with a complex threat environment after the fall of the caliphate. The reappearance of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in a recorded video appearance for the first time in five years, signals a globally focused IS resurgence in which women will play a part.<sup>149</sup>

Many female foreign fighters remain ideological adherents, recruiters, logisticians, attack planners and operatives who will form an important part of an IS resurgence. Female returnees could serve to radicalise others in their home countries and form critical connections between the large cohort of foreign fighters and new adherents.

Women in IS-affiliate organisations around the world may continue to inspire other women, and work to remobilise men, even while the former incarnation of Islamic State is largely defunct. A more networked extremist organisation is likely to survive. While men may be overrepresented in extremist organisations, “women emerge with superior network connectivity that can benefit the underlying system’s robustness and survival”.<sup>150</sup>

There are thousands of female IS supporters, including Australians, seeking to return to their country of origin. Yet our assumptions and



*Women's agency as active and sometimes violent participants in jihad must not be misunderstood or underestimated.*

biases can obstruct an accurate assessment of the threat these women pose. Counterterrorism officials must be aware of the tendency to a positive security bias, and be wary of claims of exploitation and victimhood. Some women may indeed have been victimised and forced into Islamic State against their will by jihadist husbands. However, multitudes of other women played an active role in encouraging their husbands and families to the caliphate in the first place and served a variety of functions while there.

Islamic State is a highly misogynistic organisation. Yet it has propelled its female supporters into more active positions in the organisation, arguably more so than any other jihadist group or conflict. Since its inception, Islamic State has expanded both the potential and the scope of the roles and functions women can play, providing additional avenues for their participation in jihad in both kinetic and non-kinetic roles. Women's agency as active and sometimes violent participants in jihad must not be misunderstood or underestimated. It will have a profound influence on the jihadist threat and counterterrorism efforts for years to come.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Rohan Smith, “Accused IS-Inspired Stabber Momena Shoma Appears in Court”, News.com.au, 3 May 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/national/victoria/courts-law/accused-is-inspired-stabber-momena-shoma-appears-in-court/news-story/d62669f0a5d4d1aa4bc09cd8587bd137>.
- <sup>2</sup> Adam Cooper, “‘I Had to Do It’: Woman to Plead Guilty to Islamic State-Inspired Stabbing”, *The Age*, 1 August 2018, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/woman-set-to-plead-guilty-over-islamic-state-inspired-stabbing-20180801-p4zuum.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> For a categorisation of Australian women’s roles in jihad, see Michele Grossman, Susan Carland, Hussein Tahiri and Andrew Zammit, *The Role of Women in Supporting and Opposing Violent Extremism: Understanding Gender and Terrorism in Contemporary Australia* (Melbourne: Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, 2018), [https://andrewzammitdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/0d916-womenandvecvescreport\\_final28lowres29.pdf](https://andrewzammitdotorg.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/0d916-womenandvecvescreport_final28lowres29.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> See *R v Bayda; R v Namoa (No 8) [2019] NSWSC 24*, Supreme Court of New South Wales decision, 31 January 2019, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/nsw/NWSC/2019/24.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> Omar Hussein also known as Abu Sa’eed al Britani, “Advice to Those Who Cannot Come to al Sham”, 11 January 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Charlie Campbell, “ISIS Unveiled: The Story Behind Indonesia’s First Female Suicide Bomber”, *Time*, 3 March 2017, <http://time.com/4689714/indonesia-isis-terrorism-jihad-extremism-dian-yulia-novi-fpi/>.
- <sup>7</sup> *Inside the Caliphate #7*, al-Hayat Media Center, Islamic State, 7 February 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> Anna Kelsey-Sugg and Belinda Sommer, “The Role Women Played in Indonesia’s First Whole-Family Suicide Bombings, and What to Do Next”, ABC News, 30 May 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-30/women-terrorists-in-indonesia/9811152>.
- <sup>9</sup> “The Duty of Women in Waging Jihad against the Enemy”, *al-Naba*, Issue 100, 5 October 2017. See also, “Islamic State Calls on Female Supporters to Take Part in ‘Jihad’”, *Middle East Eye*, 6 October 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.com/news/islamic-state-calls-female-supporters-take-part-jihad>.
- <sup>10</sup> Terrorism financing experts estimate that Islamic State has around \$400 million dollars in its coffers via stolen gold, currency and antiquities. The group is able to access and transfer resources through an extensive *hawala* system (traditionally a trust-based system of value transfer), money laundering in legitimate businesses throughout the Middle East, and bank networks with links in Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. This \$400 million is what is left of the estimated \$6 billion previously controlled by Islamic State via heists on the central banks of Iraq and Syria and their control of oil fields, mines, factories and farms, as well as taxation revenue control during the time of the caliphate. See Joby Warrick, “Retreating ISIS Army Smuggled a Fortune in Cash and Gold Out of Iraq and Syria”, *The Washington Post*, 21 December 2018.

- <sup>11</sup> UNFPA Syria, “Al Hol Situation Report”, Update Number 4, 1 April 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Al-Hol%20Camp%20Situation%20Report-%20Update%204%2C%2001%20April%202019%20-%205BUNFPA%2C%20Syria%5D.pdf>; “Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp — Situation Report No 3, as of 1 May 2019”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 19 May 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-humanitarian-response-al-hol-camp-situation-report-no-3-1-may-2019>.
- <sup>12</sup> Isabel Coles, “Hard-core Islamic State Members Carry Ideology from Crushed Caliphate”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-diehards-carry-groups-ideology-from-crushed-caliphate-11552914058>.
- <sup>13</sup> Siobhan Heanue and Eric Tlozek, “Pregnant Wife of Sri Lanka Bomber Detonates Suicide Vest, Killing Children and Police”, ABC News, 25 April, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-25/pregnant-wife-of-sri-lanka-bomber-detonates-suicide-vest/11045306?pfmredir=sm>.
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- <sup>15</sup> Nelly Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis’ Exclusion of Women from Jihad”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, No 5 (2014), 780–802.
- <sup>16</sup> The first female Palestinian suicide bomber attack was carried out in January 2002. See James Bennet, “Arab Woman’s Path to Unlikely ‘Martyrdom’”, *The New York Times*, 31 January 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/31/world/arab-woman-s-path-to-unlikely-martyrdom.html>.
- <sup>17</sup> Yoram Schweitzer, “Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers: Virtuous Heroines or Damaged Goods?”, in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*, Cindy Ness ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).
- <sup>18</sup> Katharina Von Knop, “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, No 5 (2007), 397–414.
- <sup>19</sup> Swati Parashar, “Gender, Jihad and Jingoism: Women as Perpetrators, Planners, and Patrons of Militancy in Kashmir”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, No 4 (2011), 295–317.
- <sup>20</sup> Farhat Haq, “Militarism and Motherhood: The Women of the Lashkar-i-Tayyabia in Pakistan”, *Signs* 32, No 4 (2007), 1023–1046.
- <sup>21</sup> Don Ressler et al, “The Fighters of Lashkar-e-Taiba: Recruitment, Training, Deployment and Death”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Occasional Paper Series, April 2013, [https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/07/Fighters-of-LeT\\_Final.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/07/Fighters-of-LeT_Final.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Although there have been reports that at least one women was an LeT suicide bomber: see Deepshikha Gosh, “David Headley Says Ishrat Jehan Was Lashkar Terrorist”, NDTV, 11 February 2016, <https://www.ndtv.com/cheat-sheet/david-headley-says-ishrat-jehan-was-lashkar-terrorist-10-developments-1276269>.
- <sup>23</sup> Christine Fair and Ali Hamza, “Women and Support for Terrorism in Pakistan”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, No 6 (2018), 962–983.

<sup>24</sup> Jason Warner and Hilary Mattfess, “Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers”, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, Report, August 2017, 29, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2017/08/Exploding-Stereotypes-1.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 29–30.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahid al-Maqdisi (d 1203 AD), *Manaqib al-sahabiyyat (The Merits of Women Companions [of the Prophet Muhammad])*, as cited in David Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad?”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, No 5 (2005), 375–384.

<sup>27</sup> The author is grateful for the consultation and clarification of Islamic jurisprudence and thought of H.A. Hellyer.

<sup>28</sup> See Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad?”.

<sup>29</sup> Abdullah Azzam, *The Defense of Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Iman* (Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Azzam distinguished between two types of obligation in the Muslim religion: *fard ayn* and *fard kifaya*. *Fard ayn* is an obligation on each member of the Muslim community individually. And *fard kifaya* is an obligation on the community as a whole to engage in jihad. When jihad is deemed to be *fard kifaya*, women were not obliged to fight but had the option. When it was labelled as *fard ayn* by religious authorities, it also became an individual duty of women to participate.

<sup>31</sup> Von Knop, “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women”.

<sup>32</sup> As referenced in Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad?”, 379.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 380.

<sup>34</sup> “The Qaradawi Fatwas”, *Middle East Quarterly* 11, No 3 (2004), 78–80, [https://www.meforum.org/articles/2004/the-qaradawi-fatwas#\\_ftnref3](https://www.meforum.org/articles/2004/the-qaradawi-fatwas#_ftnref3).

<sup>35</sup> After the first Palestinian female suicide bomber attack in 2002, an editorial appeared in the Egyptian Islamist weekly, which read: “It is a woman, a woman, a woman who is a source of pride for the women of this nation and a source of honour that shames the submissive men with a shame that cannot be washed away except by blood.” As quoted in Von Knop, “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women”.

<sup>36</sup> Von Knop, “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women”.

<sup>37</sup> Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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<sup>139</sup> Ben Hubbard, “In a Crowded Syria Tent Camp, the Women and Children of ISIS Wait in Limbo”, *The New York Times*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/isis-syria-women-children.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Safia S, a teenager sentenced to six years imprisonment in Germany for stabbing a police officer in the name of Islamic State, is a revealing example. Her youth and claims of contrition may have contributed to the lenient sentence. It is likely, however, that she also benefited from a positive security bias. She was well known to German counterterrorism authorities, came from a radicalised family, and had attempted to travel to the caliphate. Yet despite all that was known about her and her connections, she was sentenced to a relatively light term: see “16-year-old Sentenced to Six Years after Stabbing German Police Officer for IS”, DW, 26 January 2017.

<sup>141</sup> Audrey Alexander and Rebecca Turkington, “Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice?”, *CTC Sentinel* 11, No 8 (2018), 24–29, <https://ctc.usma.edu/treatment-terrorists-gender-affect-justice/>.

<sup>142</sup> R v Bayda; R v Namoa (No 8) [2019] NSWSC 24, Supreme Court of New South Wales decision, 31 January 2019, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/cases/nsw/NSWSC/2019/24.html.post>.

<sup>143</sup> Ester EJ Strømme, “Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da’esh — From Recruitment to Sentencing”, GPS Policy Brief 01/2017, PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security, 9 May 2017, <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=10546>.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Grossman et al, *The Role of Women in Supporting and Opposing Violent Extremism: Understanding Gender and Terrorism in Contemporary Australia*.

<sup>146</sup> Strømme, “Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da’esh — From Recruitment to Sentencing”.

<sup>147</sup> CTED, “Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives”.

<sup>148</sup> Policy recommendations outlined in Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, “Women and Terrorism: Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners”, Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Paper, May 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/report/women-and-terrorism>; Jaqui True and Sri Eddyono, “Preventing Violent Extremism: Gender Perspectives and Women’s Roles”, Monash University Policy Brief, [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b4aef1\\_5780b931ae164ace83e5377c490f05e1.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b4aef1_5780b931ae164ace83e5377c490f05e1.pdf).

<sup>149</sup> “Abu Bakr al Baghdadi: IS Leader Appears in First Video in Five Years”, BBC News, 30 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48098528>.

<sup>150</sup> Pedro Manrique et al, “Women’s Connectivity in Extreme Networks”, *Science Advances* 2, No 6 (2016), <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/advances/2/6/e1501742.full.pdf>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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