

# The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State

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# The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State

## **Author Biography**

Amanda Spencer recently completed a Master's in Global Affairs at New York University, where she focused on Middle Eastern studies and Islamic extremism. Passionate about making a difference and contributing to the world of counterterrorism, her research explores the multifaceted roles of women in terrorism. Amanda is currently on the OFAC Sanctions team at Deutsche Bank Securities.

## **Abstract**

As it stands today, counterterrorism approaches aimed to dismantle the Islamic State primarily targets male militants. Astoundingly enough, women are leading contributors to ISIS' strength and capabilities. Female operatives hold increasingly influential positions in the group's construction of a proto-state. Women responsibilities include: suitability as a wife to ISIS soldiers; birthing the next generation of jihad; advancing ISIS' global reach through online recruiting; maintaining order within ISIS' network of women. All crucial roles in the advancement of the cause. This paper will explore the myriad of activities performed by ISIS' network of women and analyze why women hold particular roles in the caliphate. A reliable comprehension of these factors can produce essential intelligence in the fight against ISIS.

## Introduction

Women are increasingly holding roles in terrorism. Their involvement is significant as they perform in a myriad of activities, including procreating the next generation of militants, managing the logistics, recruiting new members to the organization, being political representatives, and also acting as operation leaders and militants. Despite their contribution, there is a tendency amongst counterterrorism experts and policymakers to minimize the female influence in the success of extremist groups. The importance of women in terrorism is a topic that requires in-depth analysis especially in terms of understanding the validity of their presence in terrorism. Specifically, this research study will merely explore the roles of women in the Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS was selected in this study because of the group's unique ability to effectively capitalize on its network of women.

The self-proclaimed caliphate, the Islamic State, poses the greatest terrorist threat to the global community today. The organization's goal is relatively simple—establish a massive Islamic State by conquering land throughout Syria and Iraq, while simultaneously developing terrorist cells and *wilayat*<sup>1</sup> around the globe. ISIS operates as a quasi-state, holding territorial claims throughout Syria, Iraq, and Libya. This stronghold was achieved by brutally terrorizing individuals who would not comply with its demands, including women and children.

ISIS' treatment of women has placed the organization among the world's worst perpetrators of gender-based violence. Its cruel tactics include: imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, and the execution of thousands of both Muslim and non-Muslim women. In spite of their inhumanity towards so many women, many also flock to its ranks. ISIS successfully recruits a substantial amount of marginalized females to the caliphate. By romanticizing the life of women in the caliphate, ISIS has manipulated more recruits than any of its terrorist predecessors.

Incrementally, the women of ISIS have attained influential roles in the caliphate despite the pitiless treatment of women throughout the territory that the group controls. The responsibilities of females include: Wife to ISIS soldiers, birthing the next generation of jihad, advancing ISIS' global reach

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<sup>1</sup> Wilayat is an Arabic word meaning administrative division, usually translated into English as "province," or occasionally as "governorate."

through online recruiting, and maintaining order within ISIS' network of women. All are crucial roles in the advancement of the cause. These undertakings by women must not be underestimated. They greatly contribute to ISIS' strength and capability to threaten the local, regional, and international community. As such, it is imperative that we better understand the roles of women in ISIS, how those roles are assigned, and how women contribute to ISIS' operational objectives.

Through an analysis of 72 individual profiles of women in ISIS, this study will define routine activities performed by the ISIS network of women and analyze why women hold particular roles. This analysis will show that although the majority of research on women in ISIS has confined their roles to a particular activity or specific position (e.g. wife, mother), there is a broader range of activities that women hold in the Islamic State. Female members hold increasingly influential positions in ISIS' construction of a proto-state. Women are performing a myriad of activities in moral and logistical support, state-building, and tactical operations. Although women taking part in terrorist organizations is not a new phenomenon, their existence seems more varied within the caliphate than is usually reported—performing roles in leadership, domestic affairs, and acts of violence. As such, this study contributes to not only our scholarly understanding of the roles of women in ISIS, but lends additional insight to the contemporary security environment and the fight against ISIS.

## Literature Review

While written material on the subject is relatively scarce, the literature does offer some insight into the roles women hold in ISIS and, more broadly, the roles women have traditionally held in other terrorist organizations. The study begins with a general analysis of the roles of women within terrorist groups and then examines the specific importance of women in the Islamic State and investigates the process of their role assignment once in the ISIS-held territory. Finally, the research reviews the various roles women are expected to hold within the caliphate.

### *Female Roles in Terrorist Groups*

Women have been actively involved in terrorism throughout history and across multiple contexts—from the People's Will and the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, to the suicide bombers or Black Widows of Chechnya, to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During periods of heightened conflict, women

have enthusiastically joined terrorist groups, fought for what they believed, and suffered the repercussions of involvement similar to their male counterparts. Considering this, it is somewhat surprising that the current trend in female terrorism studies paints women largely as victims of male-instigated violence.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, women in these movements are thought to hold insignificant, auxiliary logistic roles such as nurturer and caretaker, while men are either on the frontlines or incarcerated. Relevant literature did not identify women as key players in terrorist organizations until the 1970s and 1980s—when females held protagonist roles in the Latin America's guerrilla wars.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, a rapid expansion of research on the matter began. In the last decade, research on female roles in terrorism has considerably increased due to the rise of women suicide bombers.<sup>4</sup>

Women have willingly and unwillingly held a variety of roles with terrorist organizations. These tasks run the gamut from moral and logistics support to espionage, outright terror operations, and the occasional leadership position. Every terrorist group has unique ideologies and practices. As such, the participation of women in each organization is likely to vary. Certain studies have identified common trends and themes by the ideological type or variant of terrorism. For example, in leftist terrorist organizations fighting for state independence or to liberate nations from dictators and oppressors, women are more inclined to hold operational roles.<sup>5</sup> The revolutionary nature of left-wing terrorism and its progressive outlook is attractive for women seeking a better quality of life through active participation.<sup>6</sup> In groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF), many females acted as conventional terrorists. Upon distinguishing themselves, they were rewarded by being assigned leadership positions. Women in the PIRA became famous for conducting bombing operations on British targets. In the RAF, women bombed department stores throughout Germany and led high-risk attacks against U.S. installations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mia Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror," *Gender Issues* 28:1 (May 6, 2011): 5, available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12147-011-9098-z>.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21:3 (March 9, 2010): 505.

<sup>4</sup> Mahan, Sue and Griset, Pamala L., *Terrorism in Perspective* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques, K., Taylor, P., "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21:3 (2009): 510.

<sup>6</sup> Raghavan, S., Balasubramavan, V., "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?" *Journal of International Women Studies* 15:2 (July 2014): 200, available at:

<http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?Article=1761&context=jiws>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Jacques and Taylor's 2009 findings, argued that in right-wing terrorist organizations—where the objective is not to transform the structure of society but to tear it down or obliterate it—operational roles for women are limited.<sup>8</sup> In these instances, terrorist roles for women usually mimic the positions they hold in that particular community. For instance, it has been argued that in the right-wing National Democratic Party (NDP), women only performed traditional, supportive, and low-level operational roles—child bearers, nurturers, activists, street fighters, and leaders of local, relatively insignificant gangs.<sup>9</sup> However, it is noted that the roles of women in the NDP expanded significantly to include such critical work as coordinating demonstrations and even becoming local government politicians.<sup>10</sup> Women in the NDP also notably created numerous false relationships with men that they then leveraged into human networks to provide critical information for terrorist activities.

In Islamist extremist organizations such as al-Qaida and Hamas, the responsibilities of women traditionally were to simply provide moral and logistics support. Women in these groups are principal actors in the "vertical transmission" of family morals and values.<sup>11</sup> Predominantly, female participation consists of being a wife, mother, recruiter, organizer, proselytizer, teacher, translator and fund-raiser. Women were to remain hidden and veiled and play background positions, only authorized to pass on family traditions and systematically restructure, repackage, and recycle cultural traits. Women are viewed as the keepers of family values and morals, it naturally becomes their responsibility to convey this knowledge to subsequent generations.<sup>12</sup> Yet, in contrast with historically fundamentalist Islamic principles, the employment of women in frontline positions has dramatically increased over the last few decades. Females are executing sensational Holy War suicide missions. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2006, for example, female suicide attacks spiked with 27 female suicide

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques and Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," p. 512.

<sup>9</sup> Siobhan Dowling, "Neo-Nazis' secret weapon: women," *Business Insider*, (2011) available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/german-neo-nazis-secret-weapon-women-2011-12>.

<sup>10</sup> Ravdan, H., and Altmeyer, "Overlooked and underrated: women in right-wing extremist groups in Germany," *Open Democracy*, (2014) available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/heike-radvan-carmen-altmeyer/overlooked-and-underrated-women-in-rightwing-extremi>.

<sup>11</sup> Byrd, Winn and Decker, G., "Why the U.S. Should GENDER Its Counterterrorism Strategy," *Military Review* (2008) available at: [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20080831\\_art015.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20080831_art015.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> D E Georges-Abeyie, "Women as Terrorists," *Perspectives on Terrorism* (1983): 79.

bombers dying between the years 2006 and 2008 alone.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps what is most interesting in the review of the literature on the roles of women in terrorism is the evolution of their positions. The responsibilities have become more diverse across the spectrum of these groups, empowering women, and making them key players in future attacks.

### *The Importance of Women in the Islamic State*

In the contemporary operating environment, terrorist groups are progressively implementing women to obtain their political or ideological objectives.<sup>14</sup> The Islamic State is no exception. ISIS actively recruits women for a variety of reasons, including growing their population and membership, and creating media attention. Akin to many terrorist organizations today, ISIS views women participants as an untapped resource and is increasingly willing to make concessions in its ideology to fold women into its ranks.<sup>15</sup> The presence of women evolved into a strategic advantage for the group. It became apparent that the use of female terrorists produced sensational, international media attention. Morbidly fascinated by the roles that women held within ISIS, foreign media outlets dramatically increased their coverage.<sup>16</sup> Ratings significantly improved and a new swath of potential recruits became alerted to the ideological cause. The media found reporting on the involvement of women in terrorism irresistible, doubling-down on the coverage—all to the advantage of the Islamic State. Realizing what an important tool was suddenly at its disposal, ISIS began actively using women for propaganda purposes.<sup>17</sup> Now, employment of the female gender is a critical strategic technique for ISIS. Widespread advertisement has clearly improved its capacity to entice new members into the organization. Consequently, ISIS has been making a concerted effort to attract more and more female recruits. Within the caliphate, women are primarily required to be of service to their husbands, children, and community, performing a myriad of morally-based activities. But there are many other logistical and

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<sup>13</sup> Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan, “Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups...”

<sup>14</sup> Naureen Chowdhury-Fink, Rafia Barakat, and Liat Shetret, “The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors,” *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation*, April 2013: 13, available at: [http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/NCF\\_RB\\_LS\\_policybrief\\_1320.pdf](http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/NCF_RB_LS_policybrief_1320.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Marne L. Suttan, “The Rise of the Importance of Women in Terrorism and the Need to Reform Counterterrorism Strategy,” *United States Army Command and General Staff College*, 2009: 17.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Gardner, “The Crucial Role of Women within Islamic State,” *BBC News*, August 20, 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33985441>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

tactical necessities for an insurgency; women are increasingly filling such roles.

### *Recruitment to Assigned Roles within ISIS*

Upon their arrival in the caliphate, women are escorted to ISIS' all-female safe house in Islamic State-controlled Syria, known as the *maqar*. Containing unmarried recruits, the house serves two purposes—a matchmaking service and a jihad-style finishing school, *Al-Zawra*.<sup>18</sup> In the establishment of the *maqar*, ISIS created a comprehensive institute to prepare women for their roles as *mujahidin*.<sup>19</sup> Evidence suggests that while enrolled at *Al-Zawra*, women are offered courses in five disciplines: 1. first aid training; 2. social media marketing and computer programming; 3. Islamic law; 4. firearm and explosive training; 5. domestic affairs.<sup>20</sup>

ISIS propaganda suggests that Allah's ordained purpose for pure Muslim women is to support the *ummah* by being a good wife and nurturing the following generation of jihad.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in the caliphate, the responsibilities of a woman lie first and foremost to her husband and to maintain the household, with the exception of a handful of narrowly defined circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The insurgency strategically markets this role of wife and mother by romanticizing jihadi marriages via social media. Fairy tale depictions of nuptials between an ISIS soldier and his wife have drawn numerous women to the caliphate.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Kulze and Gilad Shiloach, "ISIS Opens a Jihadi Finishing School for Women," *Vocative*, October 17, 2014, available at: <http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/isis-opens-jihadi-finishing-school-women/>.

<sup>19</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0).

<sup>20</sup> "Matchmaking and Marriage, Islamic State- Style," *Radio Free Europe*, January 15, 2015, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/matchmaking-marriage-islamic-state-style/26774719.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," Charlie Winter (trans.), *Quillam Foundation*, February 2015, available at: <https://www.quillamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/women-of-the-islamic-state3.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Anita Peresin, "Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:3, available at: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/427/html>.



The insurgent group has allegedly established a legitimate matchmaking service to ensure all individuals are satisfied with their mate.<sup>24</sup> However, many women have experienced complications in being married off. Among the caliphate, recruits are ranked by nationality and appearance -- foreign, blonde women as well as converts are considered to be of higher value and often rewarded the most honorable soldiers.<sup>25</sup> International migrants are thought to be more zealous in performing their roles as a wife and mother than local women.<sup>26</sup> ISIS soldiers have allegedly described native women to be undesirable because of their uppity and snobbish manners. As a result, the favoritism of foreigners has generated jealousy amongst the women in the *maqar*, as immigrants are married off quicker.<sup>27</sup>

Although ISIS still publicly claims that the primary function for women is in the home, the group has clearly tasked certain women to manage roles outside of the home. Selected females are permitted to provide limited services in strengthening the *ummah*. These situations are relatively few, most commonly: 1. to perform jihad; 2. to study the sciences of religion; 3. to fulfill duties as a doctor or a teacher.<sup>28</sup> The following section provides a typology of the different roles most commonly held by women in ISIS. It is important to note that women in the caliphate may concurrently hold more than one role and that their roles may shift over time.

## Typology of Female Roles in ISIS

### *Domestic Roles*

ISIS claims it is a genuine crusader for women's rights, contending that Western societies prevent Muslims from reaching their purest virtue. ISIS blames the West for crumbling and collapsing societal foundations with the overlap and mixture of gender roles.<sup>29</sup> The official line of the insurgency is that the West is polluted with soldiers of the *Iblis* (the devil), and that its true motives are disguised by Western culture with the aim of spreading

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<sup>24</sup> Mia Bloom, "How ISIS is Using Marriage as a Trap," *Huff Post*, May 2, 2015, available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mia-bloom/isis-marriage-trap\\_b\\_6773576.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mia-bloom/isis-marriage-trap_b_6773576.html).

<sup>25</sup> Peresin, "Fatal Attraction."

<sup>26</sup> Nimmi Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS," *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2014, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-08-21/women-isis>.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Sullivan, "Women in the Islamic State: 'Til Martyrdom Do Us Part,'" *NDTV*, October 5, 2015, available at: <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/women-in-the-islamic-state-till-martyrdom-do-us-part-1226145>.

<sup>28</sup> *Quillam Foundation*, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>29</sup> Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, "The Women of ISIL," *Politico*, December 7, 2015, available at: <http://www.politico.eu/article/the-women-of-isis-female-suicide-bomber-terrorism/>.

ungodliness to dismantle the purity of Muslim women.<sup>30</sup> By encouraging women to hold prominent positions that are rightfully intended for men, the West abandons responsibilities of family. For that reason, the world is penetrated with consistent chaos. As a solution, ISIS offers women an escape from the harsh dictates of Western feminism and the opportunity to become a virtuous yet instrumental actor in the caliphate. Some analysts believe that ISIS hard sells the honor of performing traditional roles—wife, mother, nurturer—to unwittingly transform women into custodians of cultural, social, and religious values, naturally passing on these concepts to the following generation.<sup>31</sup>

### *Wife*

ISIS holds a hardline position on marriage. Women are created to populate the earth for the service of man. Members of ISIS believe that a woman is made from Adam and for Adam, and that she has no greater responsibility than being a good wife to her husband.<sup>32</sup> Quranic scripture states: "There is no better structure founded in Islam other than marriage"<sup>33</sup>. Girls are expected to submit to marriage by sixteen or seventeen years old while they are youthful, pure, and attractive.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, ISIS legitimatizes marriages of nine-year-old girls by glorifying the life of Prophet Mohammed and his young wife.<sup>35</sup>

As a wife of a jihadist, women are expected to perform myriad activities. Apart from birthing the next generation, a wife's principal function is to maintain and take care of her husband. It is her duty to achieve this goal with a degree of sagacity, style, and ingenuity. As a companion, it is her obligation to win over her husband's heart and be a source of comfort to him during his

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<sup>30</sup> Quillam Foundation, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>31</sup> Ellie Hall, "Inside the Chilling Online World of the Women of ISIS," *BuzzFeed*, September 11, 2014, available at: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/ellievhall/inside-the-online-world-of-the-women-of-isis#.fqP90Nq1r>.

<sup>32</sup> Jamaal Abdul-Alim, "ISIS 'Manifesto' Spells Out Role for Women," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/isis-manifesto-spells-out-role-for-women/387049/>.

<sup>33</sup> Online Muslim Matrimonial. "Muslim Marriage in the light of Holy Quran (Book of Allah) and Ahadees", available at: <http://www.ezsoftech.com/omm/marriage.asp>.

<sup>34</sup> Mia Bloom, "Six Things You Need to Know about Women and ISIS," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2015, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/04/six-things-you-need-to-know-about-women-and-isis>.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Spencer, "Wives of the Islamic State: When One Husband Gets Martyred, It's Like a Celebration," *Jihad Watch*, March 26, 2015, available at: <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2015/03/wives-of-the-islamic-state-when-one-husband-gets-martyred-its-like-a-celebration>.

fight in the Holy War.<sup>36</sup> Wives are expected to remain in the house, hidden and veiled, while they accomplish chores such as providing daily meals, clean uniforms, and a spotless house.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, women are responsible for understanding and satisfying their husband's needs for sexual intimacy.<sup>38</sup>

Before marrying an ISIS soldier, women are inculcated to not fear or be saddened by the death of their prospective husbands. The insurgency insists that women regard becoming a martyr's widow as an honor and a privilege. In reality, a considerable amount of recruits find themselves widows shortly after marrying their jihadist husbands. In Islamic tradition, a widow is required to undergo a waiting period called *'idda*.<sup>39</sup> Widows must wait four months and ten days until they can be married again. However, in typical ISIS fashion, the group abides by certain theological practices and abandons others, in this case simply dismissing the period of *'idda*.<sup>40</sup>

### *Mother*

Though only a quasi-state, ISIS fully understands the crucial nature of procreation to its future. Motherhood is a well-defined element of the ISIS experience for women. Similar to marriage, the organization uses Quranic scriptures to support its core beliefs regarding motherhood. In its 40-page manifesto for women, ISIS clearly conveys the message that Allah's main purpose for women is the divine duty of motherhood.<sup>41</sup> In ISIS ideology, the home symbolizes a woman's paradise where she can be free from harmful influences of the *Iblis* and remain in heavenly decree with Allah.<sup>42</sup> Women are directed to continue religious studies while nurturing, educating, and protecting children from the influences of infidels. Unquestionably, a woman's greatest responsibility is to foster the next generation of jihad—a generation knowledgeable in Allah's ultimate destiny.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Vivienne Walt and Margny-les-Compiègne, "Marriage and Martyrdom: How ISIS is Winning Women," *Time*, November 18, 2014, available at: <http://time.com/3591943/isis-syria-women-brides-france/>.

<sup>37</sup> Suttan, "The Rise of the Importance of Women in Terrorism."

<sup>38</sup> Tiffany Ap, "What ISIS Wants from Women," *CNN*, November 20, 2015, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/20/europe/isis-role-of-women/>.

<sup>39</sup> Moaveni, "ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration."

<sup>40</sup> Sullivan, "Women in the Islamic State: 'Til Martyrdom Do Us Part'."

<sup>41</sup> Motherhood is the state or experience of having or raising a child.

<sup>42</sup> Quillam Foundation, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>43</sup> Bloom and Winter, "The Women of ISIL."

### *Operational Roles*

According to the ISIS manifesto, certain women are permitted to work outside the home.<sup>44</sup> The guiding premise allows women to leave the home only under exceptional circumstances, including participation in jihad. If "the enemy" is attacking their "country," and there are not enough men to protect it, and the *imams* have issued a *fatwa* for it, women are allowed to fight.<sup>45</sup> Further, if a woman is a widow or unmarried, she might be assigned low-level professional roles outside the home specifically designed to support the caliphate. These roles would generally be limited to inclusion in ISIS' all-female security force, *Al-Khansaa* Brigade, or becoming a recruiter.

### *Al-Khansaa Brigade*

On 02 February 2014, the Islamic State announced the formation of an all-female brigade—*Al-Khansaa*. The female wing was reportedly created to enforce ISIS' stringent conception of Islamic morality. In actuality, the unit was established to perform stop and search activities at Islamic State checkpoints after a series of assassinations against commanders were carried out by men donning female religious clothing.<sup>46</sup> The *Al-Khansaa* unit executes activities in intelligence gathering, law enforcement, overseeing slaves, and recruiting.<sup>47</sup>

The literature regarding membership in the brigade is conflicted. While there is universal consensus that the brigade consists of single women between the ages of 18 and 25, the nationalities of the participants are undetermined. Some analysts argue that the majority of the division's 60 members are Westerners.<sup>48</sup> But U.S. officials and counterterrorism experts are of the opinion that women holding executive roles in the state are to be solely of Arab descent because of the necessity to communicate with locals.<sup>49</sup>

In late 2015, *Al-Khansaa* was tasked with policing public morality of women in the de facto capital of Raqqa. Before taking positions on the street, each member received a 15-day weapons course, learning how to load, clean, and

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<sup>44</sup> Abdul-Alim, "ISIS 'Manifesto' Spells Out Role for Women."

<sup>45</sup> Quillam Foundation, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>46</sup> Bloom and Winter, "The Women of ISIL."

<sup>47</sup> Abdul-Alim, "ISIS 'Manifesto' Spells Out Role for Women."

<sup>48</sup> Jigmei Bhutia, "ISIS's Al-Khansaa Brigade Kills Woman for Breast Feeding Baby in Public in Raqqa," *International Business Times*, December 28, 2015, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isiss-al-khansaa-brigade-kills-woman-breast-feeding-baby-public-raqqa-1535110>.

<sup>49</sup> Bhutia, "ISIS's Al-Khansaa Brigade Kills Woman."

fire pistols.<sup>50</sup> After training, dressed in *abayas* and *niqabs*, the women began patrolling the city as an effective militia, ensuring that female citizens abide by ISIS' strict sharia laws.<sup>51</sup> ISIS has imposed a dress code demanding all women from puberty upwards wear two gowns to conceal their body shape, black hand gloves, and dark layers of two face veils year-round. No makeup is allowed.<sup>52</sup> To enforce the regulations, *Al-Khansaa* is equipped with AK-47s to invade women's lives anytime, for any reason.<sup>53</sup> Through these activities, intelligence is produced for male supervisors to review. It is suggested that these women are tantamount to spies, catching ordinary citizens who might break any of a long list of terribly strict rules, including voicing even the smallest negative sentiment about the Islamic State.<sup>54</sup>

The role of the *Al-Khansaa* Brigade continues to evolve. The unit now oversees detention camps where thousands of kidnapped Yazidi Christian and foreign hostages are prisoners.<sup>55</sup> Here, unfortunate and innocent people are subjected to daily physical abuse, rape, torture, and even execution. The brigade allegedly hurls verbal abuses and administers physical acts of violence—often justifying their actions by quoting passages from the Quran.<sup>56</sup> Although the unit holds an authoritative position, the women cannot challenge any policies or practices of ISIS. They are merely enforcers.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the unit operates as an all-female ultra-oppressive militia or police force.

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<sup>50</sup> “Khansaa Brigade – ISIS ‘Female’ Police,” *The Belfast Child*, October 21, 2015, available at: <https://belfastchildis.wordpress.com/tag/umm-abaid/>.

<sup>51</sup> Lydia Smith, “Isis: The ‘Central’ Role of Women in Forming the Next Jihadist Generation,” *International Business Times*, September 26, 2015, available at: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-central-role-women-forming-next-jihadist-generation-1521058>.

<sup>52</sup> Harris Rafiq and Nikita Malik, “Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State,” *Quilliam Foundation*, November 2015, available at: <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-is.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Mah-Rukh Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women,” *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 2015, available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Isis%20and%20Propaganda-%20How%20Isis%20Exploits%20Women.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> Gowrinathan, “The Women of ISIS.”

<sup>55</sup> Doha Hassan, “Meet Umm Hamza, The Slaughterer,” *Now*, November 7, 2014, available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/meet-umm-hamza-the-slaughterer>.

<sup>56</sup> Moaveni, “ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration.”

<sup>57</sup> Bloom and Winter, “The Women of ISIL.”

## Recruiters

ISIS has established an immense social media platform that has lured more than 20,000 foreign militants.<sup>58</sup> Studies indicate that ISIS predominantly relies on Western female recruits to lead the social media campaign on sites including, Twitter, Tumblr, Kik, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Ask.FM.<sup>59</sup> This female media unit appears to hold a quasi-official status within ISIS' media wing. The objectives of the propaganda campaign are relatively straightforward—motivate women from abroad to perform *hiraj* to ISIS-controlled territory.<sup>60</sup> ISIS propaganda schemes target women who view themselves as outliers of their community because of social injustice.<sup>61</sup> Women recruiters offer attractive solutions for personal frustrations and lifestyle dissatisfactions. Improved living conditions and other benefits are often promised once joining the caliphate, bridging the intangible with the material.<sup>62</sup>

ISIS media accounts display images of women cooking, making Nutella pancakes, playing with children, doing homework, and posting pictures of Syria's beautiful sunset. In addition, recruiters provide important, practical tips to future *muhajirats*—from a list of what to bring (hair dryer, warm clothes, good pair of boots, and the type of vaccinations required), to a list of what not to bring (coffee and tea), and recommendations on how to contact their families once leaving home.<sup>63</sup> There are also watered-down instructions on how to be good wives to jihadists. Traveling to reach ISIS recruiters can be tricky and the sites contain useful advice in navigating foreign airports, etc.<sup>64</sup> Included with airline tickets, recruits receive well-organized operational support, contact numbers of ISIS operatives, and even lawyers for solving discrepancies with officials in transit countries.

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<sup>58</sup> Peresin, "Fatal Attraction."

<sup>59</sup> Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, "How a Woman Joins ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, December 06, 2015, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/06/how-a-woman-joins-isis.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Peresin, "Fatal Attraction."

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Cockburn, "Life Under ISIS: The Everyday Reality of Living in the Islamic 'Caliphate' with its 7th Century Laws, Very Modern Methods and Merciless Violence," *Independent*, March 15, 2015 available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-the-everyday-reality-of-living-in-the-islamic-caliphate-with-its-7th-century-laws-10109655.html>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Peresin, "Fatal Attraction."

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

### *State-Building Roles*

The Islamic State operates as a quasi-state. The group's primary objective is to establish an Islamic utopia for its Sunni Muslim followers.<sup>65</sup> In close proximity to achieving its goal, the caliphate has developed a relatively sophisticated bureaucracy that consists of a functioning judicial system, an Islamic court, and military and law enforcement agencies.<sup>66</sup> In addition, ISIS boasts administered public works including grocery markets, banks, transportation systems, post offices, an electricity department, etc.<sup>67</sup> Throughout all of these agencies and departments, ISIS offers a semblance of stability compared to surrounding highly unstable and marginalized areas. Responsibility for upkeep, maintaining, and expanding the state is not solely under the purview of male members. Women are permitted to leave the house to serve their community in times of military need, or to reach specified employment locations like schools or hospitals.

### *Skilled Workers*

Since the establishment of the caliphate, the Islamic State has consistently reached out to individuals who hold professional degrees. In 2014, an audio recording of former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi surfaced. It appealed for scientists, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers, and scholars to join the caliphate.<sup>68</sup> Since that time, ISIS has been measurably more successful in enticing recruits with essential skill sets. The need for skilled workers is not limited to men. The insurgency has attracted many foreign women under the notion that their skill sets will be both crucial and appreciated in building the caliphate.<sup>69</sup> ISIS has permitted female doctors and teachers the clearance to work outside of the home.<sup>70</sup> In addition to these roles, women are performing law enforcement, administrative, and welfare activities.<sup>71</sup> Women are also

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<sup>65</sup> Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

<sup>66</sup> Felipe Umana, "The Islamic State: More than a Terrorist Group?" *E-International Relations*, April 3, 2015, available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/03/the-islamic-state-more-than-a-terrorist-group/>.

<sup>67</sup> Nabeelah Jaffer, "The Secret World of Isis Brides: 'U dnt hav 2 pay 4 ANYTHING if u r wife of a martyr'," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/isis-brides-secret-world-jihad-western-women-syria>.

<sup>68</sup> Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS."

<sup>69</sup> Mia Bloom, "What ISIS Wants from Women" *CNN* November 20, 2015, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/20/europe/isis-role-of-women/>.

<sup>70</sup> Quillam Foundation, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>71</sup> Spencer, "Wives of the Islamic State: When One Husband Gets Martyred."

being used in the reopening and establishing of hospitals, convalescent homes, welfare centers, and orphanages.<sup>72</sup>

The ISIS manifesto for women authorizes employment outside of the home. In that document, it is mandated that a woman's independent duties must not exceed more than three days a week or should not last late in the day so her absence from home will not be too long. Employers must grant women leave for the illness of children, a husband's absence, and a two-year maternity leave. Employers must provide daycare for children until they reach school age.<sup>73</sup>

### *Students*

ISIS believes women should not desire or acquire multiple degrees as such knowledge is unwarranted for her primary functions.<sup>74</sup> Studies show that ISIS' education of women merely supports her "purpose" to be of service to society as a wife, mother, or a civil servant.<sup>75</sup> In strong disagreement with the Western approach towards educating women, and in firm opposition to Western gender equality, ISIS has created what the group considers an ideal curriculum for female children.<sup>76</sup>

The ISIS manifesto includes a detailed course description for each age group. Students from seven to fifteen are taught in an all-girls environment, learning mental arithmetic and other age-appropriate skills-sets.<sup>77</sup> From age seven to nine, girls study *fiqh*, religion, sciences (including accounting and natural sciences), and Quranic Arabic.<sup>78</sup> In this age group, girls are required to learn how to correctly read and write verses from the Quran. From age ten to twelve, lesson plans are more religious based.<sup>79</sup> Girls continue learning about *fiqh*, focusing on how it relates to their gender. Laws on marriage and divorce are also covered. Apart from religious studies, girls are required to take lessons in textiles, knitting, and basic cooking.

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<sup>72</sup> Smith, L., (2015, September 26) *Isis: The 'central' role of women in forming the next jihadist generation*. Retrieved from <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-central-role-women-forming-next-jihadist-generation-1521058>

<sup>73</sup> Kulze, "ISIS Opens a Jihadi Finishing School for Women."

<sup>74</sup> Quillam Foundation, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto."

<sup>75</sup> Gowrinathan, "The Women of ISIS."

<sup>76</sup> Sullivan, "Women in the Islamic State: 'Til Martyrdom Do Us Part'."

<sup>77</sup> Josh Hallidays, "Female Jihadis Publish Guide to Life Under Islamic State," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/jihadist-girl-marry-liberation-failed-islamic-state>.

<sup>78</sup> Kulze, "ISIS Opens a Jihadi Finishing School for Women."

<sup>79</sup> Hallidays, "Female Jihadis Publish Guide to Life Under Islamic State."



During the pre-teen years, ISIS appears to be introducing skill sets designed to make girls an adequate spouse.<sup>80</sup> Between ages thirteen and fifteen, lessons are centered on motherhood and Sharia law. The science curriculum has ended. Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers dominate. When girls turn fifteen, their formal education is over, and they are expected to soon marry an ISIS soldier.<sup>81</sup>

The tasks performed by women in the Islamic State are numerous and diverse. The recent phenomenon of women willingly joining ISIS and gaining meaningful “employment” has produced an avalanche of related articles. However, these are mostly descriptive individual accounts. There is limited research or meaningful data regarding patterns in the recruitment of women to different roles. While it is impossible to accurately determine the full reasoning behind why women hold particular positions within ISIS, the objective of this study is to provide a snapshot of the roles held by women within ISIS and to identify any systematic patterns in the characteristics of the females holding these roles. To do so, this study analyzes the profiles of 72 women who have traveled to or reside in ISIS territory and have joined the caliphate.

## Hypotheses and Methods

To fully understand why the caliphate has permitted women to undertake certain roles, it is imperative to clarify and conceptualize the word *role*. In this research, role will be defined as the actions assigned or required including domestic and operational activities, and state building. As noted, roles may be held concurrently and are likely to vary over time. The study will test the relationship between women’s roles within the caliphate and four independent variables: 1. participant’s nationality; 2. age; 3. technical expertise; 4. husband's rank in ISIS.

The nationality of female recruits may be significant in determining their role in the caliphate as foreigners are considered to be more valuable and committed.<sup>82</sup> Migrant pilgrimages to ISIS-controlled territories are fueled by the belief that ISIS ideology is superior to the migrant’s own country’s ideology.<sup>83</sup> Further, the ability of a foreign female recruit to connect with

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<sup>80</sup> Quillam Foundation, “Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto.”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Peresin, “Fatal Attraction.”

<sup>83</sup> Bloom, “What ISIS Wants from Women.”

other foreigners could be a significant tool for the insurgency. Another possible explanation is that women are assigned to roles based on their age. It is assumed younger women are more desired by soldiers. Thus, they would be inclined to hold traditional roles, such as wife and mother, while older females might perform more authoritative activities based on their maturity and/or if they are widowed. Women with technical expertise may be crucial assets to the group. In this study, technical expertise is classified as the ability to do something well in a particular skilled field. For example, being educated in medicine, engineering, communication, linguistics, computer technology, sciences, weapons, financing, etc. would be skill sets that could contribute importantly to the caliphate. Lastly, a husband's rank in the ISIS organizational chart may determine his wife's position. Women married to high-ranking members of ISIS may be entitled to certain privileges and opportunities.

### *Data Collection and Methods*

To measure these variables, the study implements a mixed-methods approach through both quantitative and case study analysis. Using both techniques allows the researcher to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of why women hold certain roles and to account for a large amount of missing data on certain variables (e.g., technical expertise, husband's rank). Generating information on women in ISIS is extremely difficult since the phenomenon is ongoing and occurring in one of the world's most perilous areas. Nonetheless, I was able to obtain a sample of 72 cases of women involved in ISIS who have lived in the caliphate and homegrown "fighters."

Data on individual cases of women associated with ISIS were gathered from several secondary sources, including open-source information—media reports, web-based, content, public data, and academic research studies. Reliance on secondary source data was driven by the difficulties associated with obtaining a large sample of a clandestine population.

The data collection process entailed two approaches. First, an array of sources that conveyed data at the individual level were used—generally interviews with former female participants. These sources were discovered through online searches using key phrases such as "roles of women in ISIS" or "activities performed by women in ISIS." The second method of data gathering concentrates on the identification of confirmed cases from secondary sources. Internet searches were conducted of the names of female members in efforts to identify additional sources such as newspaper articles.

Information on each case was then coded into relevant variables using a spreadsheet. To verify a position, all cases and activities required corroboration from another source. Effectively, this coding method generated a sample of 72 cases across 10 variables for analysis. To determine one's primary role, this study systematically examines the documented activities of each female member to reveal her fundamental contribution to the caliphate. All other proclaimed undertakings were labeled as secondary and tertiary positions.

## Results

### *Women's Roles in the Islamic State*

Figure 1 below presents the roles of 72 female operatives in the Islamic State for whom data were available. The full range of specific functions held by each woman is indicated including her primary, secondary, and tertiary roles. Similar to the Science Advances' recent study, Figure 1 shows that undertaking of ideological supporting roles supersedes traditional roles for women in the caliphate.<sup>84</sup> Specifically, 55% hold positions in recruitment (35 women), while 48% are playing the role of a jihadist wife (40 women).

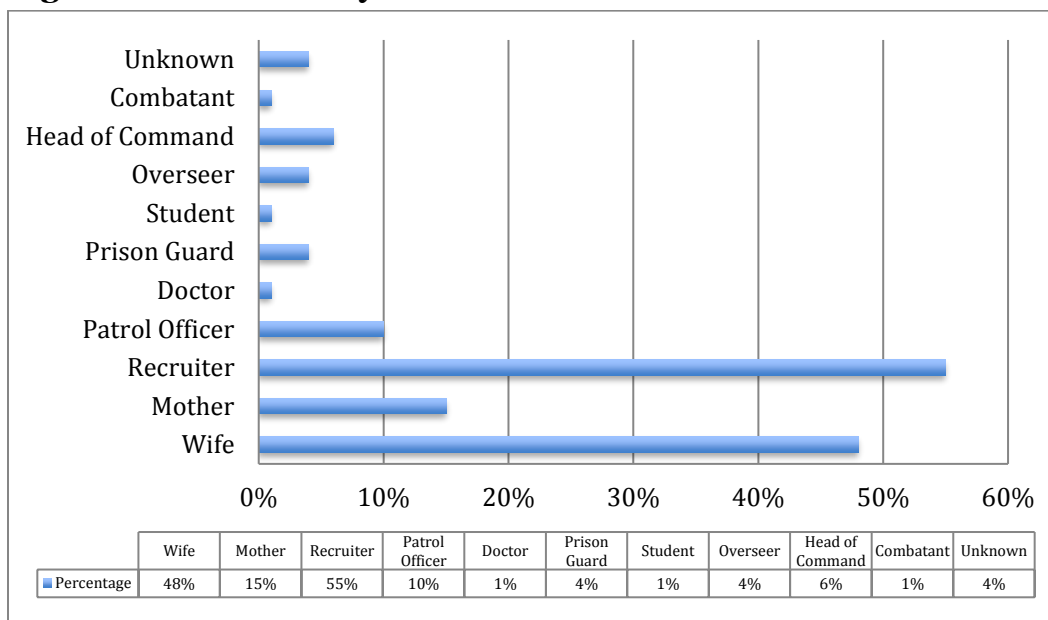
In line with Bhutia's findings, the analysis confirms that some women hold authoritative positions in ISIS.<sup>85</sup> Ten percent are patrol officers (7 women), 6% are principal advisors (4 women), 4% are prison guards (3 women), and 1% hold a combatant position (1 woman). These results substantiate that the roles of women in the caliphate are varied and complex and, for some, go beyond traditional and supportive functions.

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<sup>84</sup> Science Advances, "Women's connectivity in extreme networks", (2016), Vol. 2, no. 6, e1501742, available at: <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/2/6/e1501742>

<sup>85</sup> Bhutia, "ISIS's Al-Khansaa Brigade Kills Woman."

**Figure 1. Roles held by women in ISIS**



*Primary Roles of Women in the Islamic State*

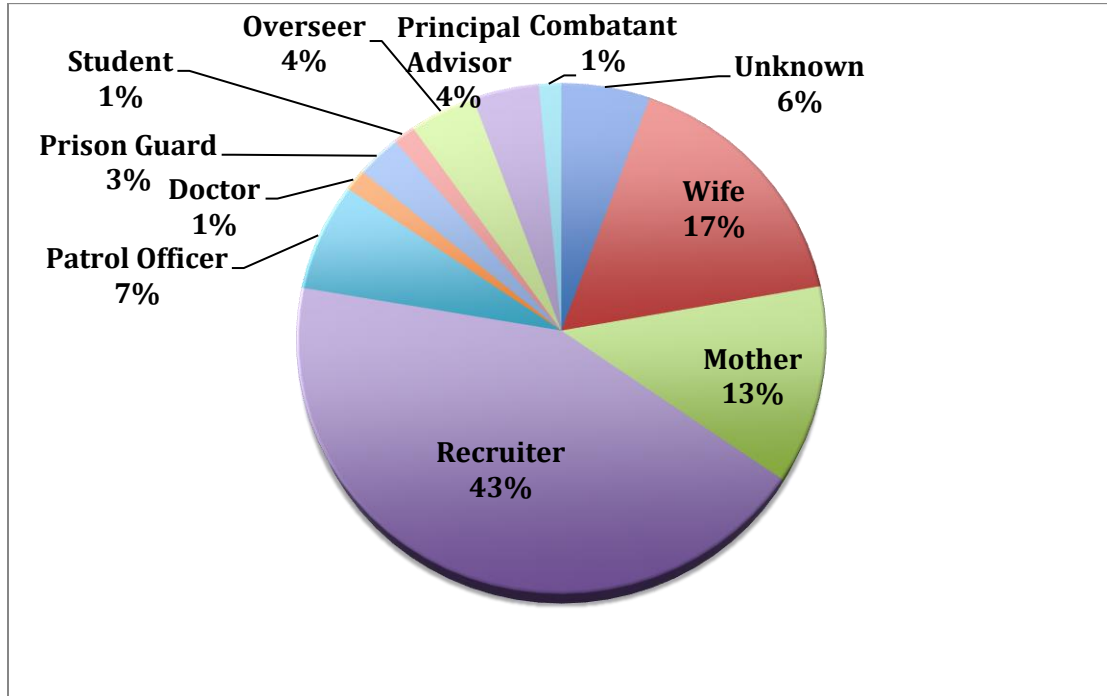
Women frequently hold multiple roles through the course of their stay. The majority of them hold more than one position at a time. However, the purpose of Figure 2 is to exclusively show the primary roles being held by ISIS’ network of the women included in the study. Therefore, this chart only codes for each woman’s main function within the caliphate. The findings are parallel with Figure 1 in so far as the vast majority of the sample is undertaking activities in recruitment and domestic affairs. Forty-three percent of individuals are recruiters (31 women), 17% are wives (12 women), and 13% are both wives and mothers (9 women). These results highlight the importance of women’s roles as traditional and ideological supporters in upholding the long-term maintenance and ideological motivation of the Islamic State.

This data supports Bloom, who argued that ISIS forbids women from holding direct, active roles in the organization.<sup>86</sup> Women in the caliphate inherently hold “back seat” roles, performing activities that are largely in-home such as online recruiting and managing the household. However, the study also shows that online recruiters play a very active role, projecting ISIS’ beliefs through social media. This specifically points to the notion that ISIS female recruiters are irreplaceable assets in the

<sup>86</sup> Bloom, “Six Things You Need to Know about Women and ISIS.”

insurgency. Ali’s argument that ISIS is heavily reliant on its network of women to spread the group’s ideology and entice others to join the state through the Internet is supported.<sup>87</sup>

**Figure 2. The Primary Roles of Women in ISIS**



### Explanations for the Roles Undertaken by Women in ISIS

As noted, there are four variables examined in this study to explain why women perform certain roles in ISIS.

#### *Nationality*

To examine the hypothesis that a woman’s role is a function of her nationality, the origin of each woman within the data set has been investigated. Women are categorized as local if they were Syrian or Iraqi citizens, foreign if they migrated to ISIS from another country, and unknown if their nationality was not reported or could not be inferred. It is important to understand that the literature regarding the women of ISIS is essentially Western-based. Thus, the information is vastly focused on Western women and these women are very likely to be overrepresented in the sample. As an example, only 7% are Syrian or Iraqi, 82.2% are of foreign citizenship, and

<sup>87</sup> Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women.”

9.6% are labeled as unknown. The analysis also reveals that foreign recruits hold passports from countries in Asia, Africa, and the West.

Foreign women—specifically blondes and converts—are the most desired for recruitment and by male soldiers.<sup>88</sup> Correspondingly, the investigation uncovers that there is an overrepresentation of foreign women serving as recruiters. Specifically, for 60% of foreign women the primary function is recruitment, and only 20% of foreign women are wives. Consistent with Spencer's 2015 finding, the analysis does not show any evidence of non-foreign recruiters.<sup>89</sup> Notwithstanding, the study discloses a solid majority of local women (67%) are wives to ISIS jihadists. Interestingly, 100% of local women hold authoritative positions in the caliphate. This correlates with Harris and Youssef, which state that local Arab women hold executive positions in ISIS because of their abilities to communicate with locals.<sup>90</sup> Logically, these women may possess intimate knowledge of the native people, local community, and Arabic and Islamic culture.

The study divided and recorded the cases of women classified from Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) descent versus Western descent to determine if primary roles were affected. Out of the nine from the MENA region, each case held a low-level commanding or influential position, yet only 1% of Western women held authoritative positions. At 62%, the fundamental role of recruiter for Western women was consistent with other findings in the study. The larger conclusion of the research is that the nationality of a woman plays a key part in what role she holds in the caliphate.

### *Age*

In an attempt to determine whether age plays a factor in the roles of women in ISIS, the study codes the available age data of the subject females. Ages are categorized into four categories: 1. Preteen—ages 11 to 13; 2. Teen—ages 14 to 18; 3. Young adult—ages 19 to 24; 4. Adult—ages 25 and up. Generating reliable data presented challenges in this category. In Western society, verifying the true age of certain women can be delicate. This kind of social courtesy does not apparently exist in ISIS. At the same time, the ages of women are not readily available. However, through meticulous cross-

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<sup>88</sup> Peresin, "Fatal Attraction

<sup>89</sup> Spencer, "Wives of the Islamic State: When One Husband Gets Martyred."

<sup>90</sup> Nancy A. Youssef and Shane Harris, "The Women Who Secretly Keep ISIS Running," *The Daily Beast*, July 5, 2015, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/05/the-women-who-secretly-keep-isis-running.html>.

checking, the study was able to generate substantial data about both the ages and assigned roles of the women.

In particular, the roles of wives, mothers, recruiters, patrol officers, and principal advisors surfaced with sufficient clarity in regard to age. Evidence revealed that 53% of women serving the role of a wife are between the ages of 14 and 18, while 56% of mothers are 25 and up. The findings also show that 50% of female recruiters are between the ages of 19 and 24. This is comparable with female patrol officers who are predominantly between the ages of 19 and 22. Women that occupy an authoritative position are generally older, between the ages of 24 and 27, with only one case that is under 21 years old. ISIS seems to employ older women in advisory roles because they are considered to be well educated, well disciplined, and mature. ISIS is a young environment for women. Yet, within that relatively limited spectrum, the breakdown of roles is still heavily age-specific. However, the data suggests that age is a real factor in the roles women assume in ISIS.

### *Technical Expertise*

Women possessing essential technical skills are likely to be significantly beneficial to the insurgency. To provide evidence in support of this theory, this study examines the remarkable case of Shams, an active ISIS female doctor. A case study is used because of the lack of data on technical expertise for a large portion (91.6%) of the sample.

Shams is an exceptional case within this research by virtue of her occupation as a physician. In her widely acknowledged Tumblr blog, Shams happily describes her experience as an ISIS doctor, beginning with her assignment to the Syrian city of Tabqah. Shams still operates as a medical professional for ISIS, specializing in primary health care for women and children.<sup>91</sup> It has been reported by various sources that ISIS, pleased with her performance, rewarded Shams with essential medical equipment, including broad-spectrum antibiotics and a pressure monitor.<sup>92</sup>

On her online blog, Shams writes that she conducts medical examinations with the support of three female assistants that translate patient grievances

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<sup>91</sup> Melanie Smith and Erin Saltman, "Til Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon," *The Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, available at: [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till\\_Martyrdom\\_Do\\_Us\\_Part\\_Gender\\_and\\_the\\_ISIS\\_Phenomenon.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

from Syrian Fusha into Modern Standard Arabic. In this fashion, Shams carries out antenatal checks, prescribes antibiotics, and administers vaccines.<sup>93</sup> Shams' blog suggests that she also provides check-ups to pregnant women and multiple vaccinations to children.<sup>94</sup> The blog has been a great public relations boon to ISIS but, at the same time, has confirmed that women have expanding roles within the Islamic State. It is essential to reiterate that Shams' profile is highly unique among the population of female operatives examined in this research. However, it could be argued that the role of a physician is statistically rare in the Islamic State. Nonetheless, Shams' elevated position in the caliphate is based on her expertise—confirming that women may attain certain positions in ISIS based on their skill set.

### *Husband's Rank*

Umm Sayyaf was captured by ISIS and married off to its chief financial leader, Abe Sayyaf. This analysis uses Umm Sayyaf as a case study examining the relationship between a woman's role and her husband's rank. Overall, there is a dearth of information about the subject. My sample, for instance, lacks data on this variable for 88.3% of cases. But because of the high profile nature of the marriage, and the capture of Umm Sayyaf by U.S. forces, there is a comparative abundance of useable case study data.

Sayyaf represented an elite class of women within ISIS' male-dominated hierarchy. At the time of her capture, she was one of the most influential female leaders. Her marriage to an ISIS higher-up gave her a rare understanding of how the organization systematically operated its financial and tactical operations.<sup>95</sup> Notwithstanding her husband's assistance, Sayyaf held a prominent position in her own right. According to an anonymous senior defense official, Sayyaf was a principal advisor to the caliphate leadership on all critical women's matters. Her elevated rank underscores how heavily the insurgency has come to rely on certain women to retain soldiers, run day-to-day operations, etc. In her later interrogations by U.S. military personnel, she disclosed one of the richest human intelligence sources against ISIS during that time—by revealing an in-depth analysis on the inner-workings of the network including recruitment, intelligence, and

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<sup>93</sup> Atika Shubert, "The Women of ISIS: Who are they?" *CNN*, May 29, 2015, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/middleeast/who-are-the-women-of-isis/>.

<sup>94</sup> Bloom, "What ISIS Wants from Women."

<sup>95</sup> Sam Levin, "ISIS Widow Charged for her Role in the Death of Hostage Kayla Mueller," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2016, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/08/isis-widow-charged-for-her-role-in-the-death-of-hostage-kayla-mueller>.



sexual slavery.<sup>96</sup> She also admitted that she was appointed by the supreme leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to supervise the American hostage, Kayla Mueller.<sup>97</sup>

As clever and ambitious as Sayyaf was, her success within the organization likely would not have happened without her husband's sanction. Women living under ISIS' stronghold are not able to occupy senior commanding roles; specific women are privy to top-secret discussion and undertake operations dependent on their husband's seniority. The odyssey of Umm Sayyaf confirms this.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to test broad etiological hypotheses regarding the roles of women in ISIS and to highlight the increasing importance of women to the organization. In addition to case studies, a comprehensive database was created and analyzed focusing on four key variables: 1. nationality; 2. age; 3. technical expertise; 4. husband's rank and its relationship to one's role(s). Due to the reliance on information obtained from secondary sources and the likely oversampling of Western recruits, this research merely provides a foundation for understanding why women hold particular roles in ISIS. Further studies can advance these results with primary sources such as interviews with defectors and by expanding the sample identified here. Nevertheless, the findings of this relatively large sample of 72 women in ISIS challenged existing stereotypes of their involvement including that the roles of women within the organization are narrowly defined.

On the subject of nationality, the widely accepted beliefs of Bloom, Abdul-Alim, and Gowrinathan—that *all* women in the caliphate hold “back seat” roles—were refuted. The data clearly prove that Middle Eastern and North African women are more likely to gain authoritative positions like patrol officers and overseer because of their inherent knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture. The findings of the Bhuati, Harris, and Yossef—asserting that female recruiters were almost all from Western countries—were substantiated. These women possess unique abilities to communicate on a global front. Unquestionably, “nationality” is a factor in the determination of certain roles within ISIS.

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<sup>96</sup> Youssef and Harris, “The Women Who Secretly Keep ISIS Running.”

<sup>97</sup> Levin, “ISIS Widow Charged for her Role in the Death of Hostage Kayla Mueller.”

The data uncover similar patterns of prevalence regarding the ages of women in certain roles, such as wives and principal advisors. The majority of ISIS brides are teenagers, between the ages of 14 and 18, while female principal advisors are predominantly in their late 20s. These results reflect Paraszczuk's argument that young women are most desired by soldiers and older women are better candidates for comparatively influential positions, being significantly more disciplined and assertive.<sup>98</sup>

The study selected case studies to examine what influence technical expertise and a husband's rank have in determining roles within ISIS. In both instances, the individual story was extremely compelling. Shams, a female doctor, was rewarded for her good work by the male hierarchy, and even published a widely read blog about her ISIS exploits. Umm Sayyaf, a captive who rose to a very powerful position with the help of her high-ranking husband, was amongst the most influential females in all of ISIS when U.S. forces captured her. Though these examples are convincing on a stand-alone basis, future research is needed to test the premise across a larger sampling of women.

The Islamic State's treatment of women has appropriately cast the organization as one of the world's most egregious perpetrators of gender violence. Paradoxically, despite its horrifying brutality against women, the female sex has become an irreplaceable asset to the longevity of ISIS. Women hold the responsibility of being proper Muslim wives to ISIS soldiers, procreating the following generation of jihad, expanding ISIS' global reach through recruitment, and stabilizing ISIS' network of women.

It is evident that female participation in ISIS is evolving. The group's willingness to use women in increasingly more important activities poses a substantial security threat to the international community. Unambiguously, the employment of women exponentially raises the threat of ISIS due to the growth of membership and population, unconventional tactical advantages, and added media coverage. Despite the alarming consequences, counterterrorism strategies continue to focus on the group's male militants, essentially overlooking the relevancy of their female counterparts. The increasing importance of women within ISIS is what led the U.S. military to obtain one of the richest human intelligence sources against ISIS to date with the capture of Umm Sayyaf. By addressing the contributions of, and the roles

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<sup>98</sup> Radio Free Europe, "Matchmaking and Marriage, Islamic State- Style."

held by, women in the terrorist group, this study should serve as a catalyst for more research in this area.