

ACADEMIC PAPER

EMPOWERMENT OR SUBJUGATION:

An analysis of ISIL's
gendered messaging



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EMPOWERMENT OR SUBJUGATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ISIL'S GENDERED MESSAGING



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June 2018

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SYNOPSIS

In recent years, there has been greater recognition of the interplay of issues of gender equality and violent extremism (VE), and of peace and security more broadly. In December 2013, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2129 in which it affirmed ‘the intention to increase its attention to women, peace and security issues in all relevant thematic areas of work on its agenda, including in threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.’ In October 2014, and in response to the flow of foreign fighters to fight for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a statement by the President of the Security Council highlighted the need to improve the quality of information and analysis on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls. In 2015 the Council adopted resolution 2242, explicitly recognizing the interlinkages between women, peace and security agenda and issues of preventing violent extremism. To bolster the knowledge base on this, this study analyses the ways in which ISIL sought to communicate its worldview to its readers, and the extent to which gender equality issues and roles were used as a recruitment tool and mechanism to maintain control.

This study explores how ISIL, a group that explicitly espouses a worldview that promotes women’s subjugation and sexual slavery could appeal to and seemingly offer women tools of empowerment. It analyses the gendered messaging of ISIL through a systematic examination of the group’s Arabic (*al-Naba’*), English (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*) and French (*Dar al-Islam* and *Rumiyah*) magazines that were produced and posted online from their inception until February 2017, a period that covers ISIL’s governance during both its territorial ascent and descent. The analysis shows how the group integrated questions of gender and masculinity into its governance of both the public and private spheres.

Although by 2017 ISIL had lost its territorial base, the group continues to mount operations in and outside the Levant; and the threat that ISIL and other violent groups pose to the security of the international community remains potent. Therefore, the findings of the paper aim to inform and influence the debates surrounding prevention and alternative messaging strategies, as well as initiatives for a more efficient and effective response to these challenges.

INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS¹

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a group explicitly committed to the segregation of the sexes, the promotion of a rigid social order premised on control over women's bodies (how they behave, interact and dress) and the enslavement of women and children as a recruitment incentive to be distributed among ISIL fighters as spoil of war, a practice the group proudly credits itself for having revived from the pre-modern era.² To advance its agenda, ISIL actively reaches out to women. In response, women have joined ISIL to be part of 'the caliphate'³, the group's state-building enterprise.⁴ Women, like men, who travelled from outside the Levant to join ISIL did so as '*muhajirat*' (emigrées), a term rich in historical connotations that continues to resonate in Muslims' religious imagination⁵.

How could a group that promotes women's subjugation and sexual slavery also appeal to women and seemingly offer them tools of empowerment? To appreciate how ISIL managed its approach to gender issues and the role this plays within the governance

structure of the group, it is necessary to understand how it communicated its worldview to its readers, and, in particular, how the group navigates questions of gender relations into its governance of the public and private spheres. What follows is a summary of the findings, developed in the three sections of this study.⁵

Summary of Findings

The paper finds that ISIL strategically crafted its messaging to men and women in different ways to achieve its objectives in recruitment, governance, control and state-building. Men and women are all expected to adhere to ISIL's moral code and governance model, which includes women's obedience to their husbands. ISIL publications give women a voice, and evocative efforts are made to portray this as agency, and even empowerment. Yet fundamentally, when reconciling the different voices used and messages put forward, the content of the messaging is about ISIL empowerment and not women's empowerment. In addition, women's voice in some articles is used to restrict the behaviour of women – shaming and reporting those who do not conform to ISIL's rigid conservatism.

1 I am grateful for the research support I received from Rana Choueiry and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Marteu for her feedback and to several other ISS colleagues for their research support, and to Hebatalla Taha for insightful conversations. My gratitude also to Rachel Does-Weeks for her thoughtful suggestions on a near final draft, and for the constructive feedback that she, Naureen Fink and Sophie Giscard D'Estaing made on an early draft.

2 For a comprehensive and accessible review of the law of war in Islam in the context of international pre-modern norms, see Majid Khadduri, 'Translator's Introduction', in *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani's Siyar* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), pp. 1–41.

3 In geographical terms, the caliphate is a reference to the territories in Iraq and Syria that ISIL controlled and governed

4 For a useful background on foreign fighters and estimates, see Hamed el-Said and Richard Barrett, consultants, *Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria*, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, July 2017, http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf

5 The term derives from hijra (emigration); in Islamic parlance, it refers to the year 622, the beginning of the Muslim hijri calendar, marking the hijra that the prophet Muhammad performed when he and his followers left Mecca to Medina. According to the Islamic tradition, this hijra was due to the oppression and persecution from which the early believers suffered for their faith, and it signifies their willingness to leave their properties behind in search of a place where they could safely establish God's teachings. In return, God rewarded them many victories. When ISIL calls on Muslims to perform the hijra, it is hoping that this history of sacrifice and reward would inspire men and women to travel to the territories governed by the group. For historical background, see Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad: Prophet of Islam*, London/New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2002, pp. 96-147.

ISIL uses religion to justify the legitimacy of its actions, including its subjugation of women (e.g., sexual slavery, physical appearance and social interactions). To achieve its aims, religion is used in contradictory ways.⁶ For example, religion is used to justify greater freedoms for women to travel on their own to ISIL controlled areas, thereby contributing to ISIL's state-building exercise, and also used to justify limitations on the basic movements of women living in ISIL territories.

The paper finds that ISIL's publications demonstrate the strategic use of gender roles and relations as a core of how the group sought to govern and control their territory. A close reading of these publications reveals that ISIL's governance is akin to a Hobbesian state of war. It is a *war of women against women*, wives against other wives, wives against sex slaves. For sex slaves, this dark reality is compounded, having to endure the verbal and physical assaults of jealous wives and the physical abuse of the men who claim possession over them.

Section I:

How language shaped different representations of women's experiences

ISIL magazines draw on a variety of women's experiences to recruit women into their ranks, to provide 'solace' to the family members of men fighting with ISIL and to delineate strict gender roles. This section of the study examines these experiences as represented in ISIL's messaging with due consideration to the different linguistic textures that differentiate the weekly Arabic (*al-Naba'*) magazine from the English and French (*Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*) monthly magazines. The Arabic magazine *al-Naba'* stands out in utilizing certain descriptions that not only confine women to stereotypical gender roles, but also demean them – potentially offending even those women who support ISIL. This includes descriptions that portray women in a derogatory fashion, e.g., as inherently unequal,

6 ISIL seeks to ground its worldview in Islamic Scripture and classical scholarly texts to attribute legitimacy to its governance and violent actions. However, the group's interpretations of many aspects of this classical corpus are widely contested by alternative interpretations of the same religious texts by mainstream Muslims.

disposed to indulging in gossip, and preoccupied with shopping when they should devote their free time to prayer and reflection.

The English and French magazines, *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*, in contrast avoid resorting to such demeaning descriptions of women. The differences should not be attributed to greater tolerance for gender equality on the part of English and French writers, for the worldview they all seek to promote is the same. The difference is more likely to be accounted for by considerations of the intended readership. Whereas the Arabic magazine seems to be intended for male fighters within the rank and file of ISIL structures, it is likely that the English and French magazines were initially designed as recruiting tools among both male and female readers in Europe and North America. The recruiting component is particularly evident in those articles that call on women who want to protect their religion to travel to ISIL territories, alone if necessary. As such, the editors of *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* may have decided to adopt a tone that projected female empowerment in the hope of attracting women to travel to the caliphate.

The findings of the analysis further show that ISIL's territorial losses had a dramatic impact on its ability to deliver a consistent standard of messaging in English and French. In September 2016, coinciding with ISIL's rapid territorial losses, the group began to produce its non-Arabic magazines under the heading of *Rumiyah*, consisting mostly of translations of articles that had appeared in *al-Naba'*. Accordingly, the demeaning descriptions of women that appeared on the pages of the Arabic magazine began to appear in English and French magazines as well.

Section II:

Gendered messaging: Privileging masculinity, segregation of the sexes, sex slavery, excluding women from combat

This section examines ISIL's gendered policies with a focus on the segregation of the sexes, sexual slavery

and the nature of empowerment it projected. It illustrates the way in which the group elevates the value of traditional forms of masculinity, privileging men's rights over those of women and imposing strict limitations on women's role in society, including regulating their conduct in the home. At the same time, the group seeks to present a constructive narrative that speaks to women on issues that imply a sense of empowerment and agency, such as highlighting educational opportunities available to women in ISIL controlled areas.

The findings show that ISIL's enforcement of segregation of the sexes and control reflects how the group sought to govern both the public and the private spheres, to the point of micro-managing women's movements inside their homes. Some articles implicitly point to women seeking to resist ISIL's rigid moral codes and finding ways to evade them.

The analysis further highlights the extent to which ISIL utilized sexual slavery and the subjugation of women's bodies as a recruitment tool. Sexual slavery is framed as a spoil of war and is justified on religious grounds. It is important to put into context the appeal of a group providing men with lawful access to sex. The societies from which many of the foreign fighters come are socially conservative, and the dominant norm is to discourage both men and women from engaging in pre-marital sex and extra-marital affairs (which are often penalized under criminal law). Thus, the possibility of having lawful access to multiple wives, in addition to other women as *sabaya* (women captives in war), cannot be underestimated as a recruitment tool. Moreover, for men coming from European states, where, on average, women benefit from greater equality, sexual slavery and language around regaining control, power and dominance can be an evocative and powerful lure for men who feel that their traditional roles have been usurped by greater equality.

Thus, reviving sex slavery as a lawful Islamic practice gives ISIL, literally, a sex appeal unmatched by other groups (or states for that matter) competing for the

same political landscape. ISIL's messaging on enslavement, including sex slavery, seeks to manage women's reactions to the practice by grounding it in 'law' and religion, at the same time as recruiting men to join ISIL's ranks. The messaging is designed to convince women that sex slavery is not prostitution, while also appealing to men, promising them many sexual partners if they fight for ISIL.

Lastly, this section also considers the possibility of ISIL deploying women in combat, not least to compensate for the decline of foreign male fighters. Whereas the use of women as suicide bombers was ideologically justified by jihadi groups, they have not permitted women to take part in combat. Unlike other jihadi groups ISIL stands out in projecting an aura of an ISIL female warrior. However, the study argues that it would be difficult to see how ISIL could, in reality, reconcile its rigid segregation of the sexes policy with allowing women to fight alongside men on the battlefield. This group policy, however, has not prevented some women supporting ISIL from mounting operations on their own initiative.

Section III: Conclusions

The study concludes, from the analysis of the messaging used by ISIL (based on the actual content of ISIL's magazines), that the group did not offer women any tools of empowerment. It is true, however, that ISIL's English and French magazines featured articles purportedly authored by women defending and embracing ISIL's worldview, and encouraging women to demonstrate their agency by joining the group and thereafter surrendering it to advance the worldview of the group. The *voice* of women in ISIL official publications projects agency when the actual messaging promotes policies that subjugate women, including segregation of the sexes and sex-slavery. If empowerment and adventurism account for women joining ISIL, then counter-messaging should rely heavily on showing ISIL's worldview for what it is, for neither empowerment nor adventurism are on offer.

I.

HOW LANGUAGE SHAPED DIFFERENT REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

The experiences of women that one encounters on the pages of ISIL's magazines are varied. They include women's education, their roles as mothers and wives, and the various responsibilities incumbent upon them to support ISIL. The role of women as wives makes up the lion's share of the articles on gender issues. This section examines women's experiences as represented in the messaging of ISIL with due consideration to the different linguistic textures that differentiate the weekly Arabic magazine (*al-Naba'*) from the English and French monthly magazines (*Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*).⁷

While publications in all three languages promote a rigid conservative social order (e.g., the virtue of segregation of the sexes to protect society's morals and restricting women's role to the private/domestic sphere), the same message is communicated using a different texture in each of the languages examined. The Arabic magazine *al-Naba'* stands out in utilizing descriptions that not only confine women to stereotypically gendered roles, but would also be likely to offend even the most ardent ISIL supporters. These include descriptions that portray women in a demeaning fashion, e.g., as inherently unequal, disposed to indulging in gossip, and preoccupied with shopping when they should devote their free time to prayer and reflection. Other articles infantilize women and

seek to micromanage their conduct, even inside their homes. It is noteworthy that the English and French magazines, *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*, avoid resorting to such demeaning descriptions of women.

This section further analyses the transformation of ISIL's English and French messaging as communicated in *Rumiyah*, the magazine that replaced *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* as of September 2016. It shows that the content of *Rumiyah* consisted of articles that were for the most part translated from the Arabic *al-Naba'*. In turn, this resulted in a transformation in the messaging of the English and French publications which began to adopt the same demeaning descriptions of women. This serves to highlight the link between language and ISIL's messaging, and it also reflects the negative impact of ISIL's territorial losses on its ability to maintain original publication output in English and French.

Women's experiences

ISIL publications speak to a variety of women's experiences. Importantly the messaging is intended to target women already residing in territories governed by ISIL as well as appeal to women to travel to join the group and live in the 'land of the caliphate.' While most articles that speak to women's issues or gender relations are addressed to Muslim women, some articles use the voice of women converts to appeal to non-Muslim women to join ISIL.

⁷ Appendix 1 includes a description of the overall content of all three magazines, and Appendix 2 includes a description of the methodology.

The official gendered worldview of ISIL is articulated in a variety of voices. One voice seeks to present ISIL as a state attentive to and grateful for women's sacrifices, aware of and supportive of their potential contribution as agents of ISIL. For example, some articles stress the importance of liberating faithful women who are imprisoned by 'infidel governments,' presumably because of their support for ISIL (e.g., *al-Naba'* 18/Feb. 2016: 8; 22/Mar. 2016: 12; 23/Mar. 2016: 12; 26/Apr. 2016: 8, 9; 30/May 2016: 8); other articles refer to mothers' concern for their sons about to be martyred in an endearing and supportive fashion (*al-Naba'* 9/Dec. 2015: 8); some articles highlight the value of mothers as 'shepherds,' responsible for raising children and teaching them the principles of their religion (*al-Naba'* 38/Jul. 2016: 14), inciting their sons to fight for ISIL, and lauding those who welcome the martyrdom of their sons. According to one article, these are mothers who, for the most part, are not highly educated, come from 'the general public' and are blessed with 'sound innate character' (*al-fitra al-salima*) (*al-Naba'* 20/Mar. 2016: 11). *Al-Naba'* praises such mothers and describes them as those who follow the model of al-Khansa', a seventh century poetess who welcomed the martyrdom of her four sons, thanking God for honouring her with such blessing.

In a similar spirit, some articles stress the importance of wives reminding their husbands of the virtue of being steadfast, lest their commitment to fight is weakened (*al-Naba'* 46/Sept. 2016: 9).⁸ Other articles highlight the value of women attending lectures to expand their religious knowledge (*al-Naba'* 32/May 2016: 14; 59/Dec. 2016: 8). An article that celebrates the opening of a faculty of medicine in Raqqa deserves highlighting; it reports that one-third of students admitted are women but is careful to remark that the faculty complies with the regulations of segregation of the sexes. The same article interviews a father who left Mosul to accompany his daughter to Raqqa so that she may pursue her studies in medicine (*al-Naba'* 18/Feb. 2016: 12-3).

The notion of *hijra* (emigration) is central to the messaging targeting women outside ISIL territories.

8 This article would later be translated and published in *Rumiyah* English 2: 28-30 and *Rumiyah* French 2: 7.

Classical Islamic law is generally inclined to discourage women from travelling on their own, with some jurists making this lawful only if women are travelling to perform the religious obligation of the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Given its interest in appealing to women to join the group, it is not surprising that ISIL should adopt the permissive view on the question of women's *hijra*. Thus, we come across references that make it clear that women (and men) are called upon to perform the *hijra* (*al-Naba'* 46/Sept. 2016: 14) and 'should hasten to declare their allegiance to the caliphate and join fellow Muslims [i.e., ISIL supporters]' (*al-Naba'* 17/Feb. 2016: 8, interview with the *wali* leader of Khorasan province, Hafiz Sa'id).

English and French articles are more forceful on the question of *hijra*, not least because they aim to appeal to women residing in Europe and the United States. In this spirit, a French article cites at length classical scholars who argue in support of 'women travelling alone without a *mahram* (i.e., brother, father)⁹ [to be able to perform their obligation] to practice their religion' (*Dar al-Islam* 3/Mar.-Apr. 2015: 10).

Similarly, an English article tackling the same subject of *hijra* (*Dabiq* 8/Mar.-Apr. 2015: 32-38) explains that it is lawful for women to perform the *hijra* on their own to protect their religion if they fail to secure a *mahram*. It is written as if it is responding to accusations, or at least insinuations questioning ISIL's standards of morality, levelled by the group's enemies. The article, supposedly authored by a woman, argues:

Here I want to say with the loudest voice to the sick-hearted who have slandered the honour of the chaste sisters, a woman's *hijrah* from darulkufr (i.e., 'the abode of unbelief') is obligatory whether or not she has a mahram, if she is able to find a relatively safe way and fears Allah regarding herself. She should not wait for anyone but should escape with her religion and reach the land where Islam and its people are honoured [*sic*].

9 *Mahram* is a male relative of a close blood relationship that a woman would be prohibited from marrying, e.g., father, son, brother). The definition is discussed in Section II.

ISIL acknowledges that calling on women to travel on their own is not compatible with the philosophy of a group that promotes a strictly conservative worldview and imposes rigid regulations on women's movements. That is why the argument in support of women's *hijra* is conditional on, or tied to, women's responsibility to protect their religion. It should be noted that ISIL publications do not promote freedom (and individuality), as developed in the Western Liberal tradition. Islamist and jihadist ideologues, including those who write in support of ISIL, speak of Islam liberating humankind from worshipping man-made laws by submitting to God's Law that will ensure justice to all.¹⁰ In other words, it is through *obedience* to God's Law, not through freedom(s), that divine justice is administered.

Nevertheless, women who travelled to join ISIL and were later interviewed by scholars spoke of 'freedom' to practise their religion.¹¹ It is possible that ISIL's call for women to perform *hijra* on their own may have been perceived by some women as suggesting certain freedoms, but ones that ISIL would not accommodate. If this is the case, then ISIL's messaging succeeded in projecting a sense of empowerment for women, without needing to deliver it in practice.

Language and messaging

Notwithstanding the variety of women's experiences that ISIL seeks to address in all three languages, the Arabic weekly magazine *al-Naba'* stands out in using overtly sexist descriptions. For example, one encounters unflattering descriptions of women, e.g., with a 'vicious tongue' (*lisan salit*) (*al-Naba'* 20/Mar. 2016: 8); and generalizations in which women are characterized as those

who are prone to exhibiting insolent behaviour in the form of cursing and complaining (*al-Naba'* 57/Nov. 2016: 15). Men are advised to be patient as they put up with the shortcomings of their wives, for 'women are naturally deficient in intellect and in their understanding of religion' (*al-Naba'* 56/Nov. 2016: 14).

Other articles promote the micromanagement of women's daily habits and their movements, not just in public, but even in the privacy of their home. For instance, they outline strict legal regulations that would severely limit women's access to public spaces, including going to the *souq* or market to do their grocery shopping (*al-Naba'* 28/Apr. 2016: 14). The virtue of staying at home, except for essential outings, is repeatedly highlighted and husbands are advised that it is their right to enforce restrictions on their wives' sorties (*al-Naba'* 50/Oct. 2016: 15).¹² Several articles question the need for women to spend excessive time in the company of each other (*al-Naba'* 65/Jan. 2017:15), criticise women's gossiping (*al-Naba'* 67/Feb. 2017: 15) and denounce their spreading of rumours that could harm the jihadis (*al-Naba'* 31/May 2016: 15; 40/July 2016: 14; 42/Aug. 2016: 14).

References to such rumours may have had political ramifications beyond those explicitly stated. Reading between the lines, it is likely that some women may have been sharing with each other their husbands' fears about ISIL's territorial losses, and then communicate to their husbands what other husbands/fighters were sharing with their wives. Such a scenario could spread fear among ISIL fighters and undermine their morale.

Beyond infantilizing women to micromanage their movements, many articles describe women as wasteful. Women, these articles report, use Ramadan as an excuse to go out shopping for clothes and sweets; their shopping habits are excessive (*al-Naba'* 68/Feb. 2017: 14) and their preoccupation with material matters display their indifference to the sacrifices of the jihadis fighting on the frontiers (*al-Naba'* 37/June 2016: 14; 42/Aug. 2016: 14). Since Islamic Law stipulates

10 Islamist and jihadist ideologues ground this view in Islamic theology and often refer to an utterance that is reported to have been made by an Arab military leader (RibT b. 'Amir), who, on the eve of the Battle of Qadisiyya (c. 636/7), explained Islam's mission to the Persian General, Rustum: 'God sent us to deliver humankind from [the ignorant state of] worshipping human beings to [the just state of] worshipping the Lord of humans, and to deliver people from the injustice of [polytheist] religions to the justice of Islam, from the oppression/narrowness of this world to the vastness [that Islam's justice brings] to this world and the next.' The Battle of Qadisiyya was decisive in the conquest of Persia.

11 I am grateful to Lydia Wilson for sharing with me this 'freedom' perception she gained from her fieldwork.

12 This article would later be translated and published in *Rumiyah* (English) 3: 40 and *Rumiyah* (French) 3: 32-33.

financial obligations on husbands to provide adequately for their wives, ISIL cannot call on men to deny their wives their financial entitlements. Instead, to manage women's spending in a manner advantageous to ISIL's needs, the group urges women to sell their gold and give money to support jihad (*al-Naba'* 45/Aug. 2016:14),¹³ and reminds them that while they have a legal right to a dowry (*mahr*), they are encouraged to spend it (*al-Naba'* 51/Oct. 2016: 15).¹⁴

In contrast to the short anonymous articles (at most a single page) of *al-Naba'*, *Dar al-Islam* and *Dabiq* devote lengthy articles supposedly authored by women and discuss difficult issues that women may find challenging in their new environment. The messaging in English and French is noticeably attentive to women's perceived concerns, interests and priorities. The issues addressed include how women should deal with jealousy in polygamous marriages, others address the political importance of 'enslaving the *mushrikun* (polytheists)', giving men access to women as 'sex slaves', and why women should accept this. Beyond that, articles purportedly authored by women in English and French address political matters, such as the legitimacy of the institutions set up by ISIL and the importance of jihad for men.

The French articles adopt a different approach, one that on the surface attempts to address women's 'sensitivities.' For example, an article supposedly authored by a certain Umm 'Umar, a widow, narrates not only the prowess of her martyred husband, but also how caring he was of her feelings. She relates that whenever he noticed that he had upset her, 'he would not stop apologizing, and his last phrase to me [before he headed to battle] was "Umm 'Umar, please forgive me if I annoyed you"' (*Dar al-Islam* 8/Jan.-Feb. 2016: 72). *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* occasionally feature articles (in translation) that are similarly intended to address women's perceived emotional needs.

13 This article would later be translated and published in *Rumiyah* (English) 1: 18 and *Rumiyah* (French) 1: 14.

14 According to the Qur'an, a woman's dowry is hers to keep, if she so chooses (Q. 4: 4).

Dabiq features a regular column by a certain Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajira¹⁵. Her profile is commensurate with the ideals the Islamic State is keen to showcase: she performed the *hijra*, married a jihadi, bore him at least one daughter (and no doubt more children to come), and she is adding her voice in support of the caliphate through her articles in *Dabiq*. Her voice is far from being submissive and many of the issues she discusses have political implications for ISIL. For example, she calls on the wives of the 'Sahwat soldiers,' meaning the Sunnis who are fighting against ISIL, to leave their husbands. She asserts that by adopting certain secular political orientations, the Sahwat men have compromised their Islamic faith. According to the Qur'an, she adds, this would render them unlawful husbands, and their Muslim wives have a legal obligation to leave them (*Dabiq* 10/June-Jul. 2015: 42-48), thereby using domestic (family) politics to advance political and military interests of ISIL. The same Umm Sumayyah, as will be noted in section II, defends sex slavery (*Dabiq* 9/May-June 2015: 44-49), promoting the subjugation of women.

Other English and French articles supposedly authored by women, either as wives or widows of fighters, use a woman's voice to position them as recruiters for ISIL. Thus, in an interview with the wife of Abu Basir 'Abdullah al-Ifriqi, in both English and French (*Dar al-Islam* 2/Jan.-Feb. 2015: 11-12; *Dabiq* 7/Jan.-Feb. 2015: 50-51), we encounter Umm Basir addressing 'my brothers and sisters' in an article in which she expresses her concern 'about the condition of the Ummah in the world.' Umm Basir goes on to urge her sisters to 'be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers and sons.' The tone of the article suggests that women are expected to rise to the challenges that the jihad of men may impose on their families. Given that the article is authored by a woman, it is intended to highlight that

15 These are the names used in the writings. The author is not able to verify whether the author of each article corresponds to the name used. The pseudonym indicates that the author is a female: 'umm' means 'the mother of.' This *kunya*, or name construct, is usually followed by the name of the oldest son, and if the woman has not given birth to a son, then "umm" is followed by the name of the oldest daughter, in this case Sumayyah is a female name. The addendum to the *kunya*, "al-Muhajira", is meant to provide additional information about Umm Sumayyah, namely that she is an emigrée, i.e., not a local to Syria or Iraq, but someone who once resided outside ISIL territories and performed the *hijra* to the caliphate.

women need not be told by men that they are falling short of their duties, as some of the articles in *al-Naba'* convey. Instead, the messaging points to the fact that women themselves can address their shortcomings and endeavour to rectify them.

Another noteworthy article is authored by Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah, meaning that she is originally from Finland. The article is crafted both as a PR exercise and a call to violence in Europe (*Dabiq* 15/Jul.-Aug. 2016: 36-39). It is intended to appeal specifically to non-Muslim readers, calling on Christians in Finland and elsewhere 'to open your heart and find out about the religion of Islam.' In the article, Umm Khalid describes her spiritual journey into Islam when she was still living in Finland, the difficulties and rejections she met from her non-Muslim family and friends when she began to wear the *hijab*, and how she found solace and understanding when she married a Muslim. Initially, she wanted to focus on *da'wa* (religious preaching), but when her husband was arrested by the authorities on terrorism charges, it 'opened my eyes to the importance of *hijrah*.'

The reader is invited to surmise that the Finnish authorities persecute Muslims. Combined with the lessons of Umm Khalid's own experience of rejection after she converted to Islam, the reader is meant to reach the same conclusion as Umm Khalid, specifically that Muslims cannot coexist with non-Muslims. She urges those reluctant to perform the *hijra* not to be dissuaded by the obstacles they encounter, for 'these obstacles are just in your head and they're the work of Satan. When you take the first step, Allah will take care of the rest.' In addition to making a case for *hijra*, Umm Khalid adds her voice to that of ISIL's leaders who advocated that Muslims who cannot perform the *hijra* should carry out violence, particularly in Western countries. In this spirit, she urges ISIL sympathizers outside the caliphate 'to attack the Crusaders and their allies wherever you are, and that is something that you are able to do.'

What's in the language?

Notwithstanding the absence of demeaning descriptions of women in ISIL's English and French

publications, the fundamentals are the same. Several ISIL media outlets posted photos of *al-Naba'* being distributed to fighters stationed on the frontiers of ISIL territories. This suggests that ISIL considers Arabic speaking male fighters as the primary audience of *al-Naba'*. As such, the editors of *al-Naba'* may have judged that Arabic speaking fighters would welcome the use of language that describes women in a demeaning fashion on some of its pages. French writers, some of whom may well have been women, channelled ISIL's rigid worldview but through what may be described as an affectionate tone, e.g., highlighting a husband's attention to the 'sensitivities' of his wife; its English writers, also including women, imbued the same worldview with a rational argument, e.g., drawing on the political benefits of sexual slavery.

The difference in approach is nevertheless worth highlighting, as it may have been consequential for the intended readership, namely women (and men) who travelled to join ISIL assuming that greater tools of empowerment awaited them in ISIL territories. Indeed, the messaging targeting women in *Dar al-Islam* and *Dabiq* is deceptive. The articles are often written by women and for women (and men). Thus, having a woman's voice on the pages of ISIL magazines projects a façade of female agency. Additionally, the fact that women call on men to respond to the call of jihad and fight may project a sense that women have a say in matters that concern the politics of the caliphate. This façade of agency may well appeal to women seeking empowerment, particularly young ones with an adventurist spirit.

As noted earlier, it is likely that some articles in *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* specific to women's issues and gender relations were designed to serve as recruiting propaganda, to appeal to women in English and French-speaking countries to emigrate to the land of the caliphate. In time, they gradually began to cater for English and French-speaking women who were struggling to cope with life in the caliphate, including challenges that relate to polygamous marriages and having to cohabit with sex slaves under the same roof. Their distinct messaging is probably intended to paint an attractive vision of the world of the Islamic State to English and French-speaking

women (and men) who needed to be *eased* into ISIL's oppressive worldview.

It is important however to distinguish between *voice* (in English and French) and *agency*, i.e., the ability of women to make their own decisions. Even if the English and French articles were authored by women, the content of the messaging is about ISIL empowerment, not women's empowerment. This is to say that whereas the Arabic magazine does not pretend to be attentive to women's sensitivities, English and French magazines give women a voice that is ultimately in the service of supporting the very ISIL institutions and practices that subjugate them.

Indeed, the central message of the women whose voices were noted earlier is support and obedience to men so that they would in turn defend the caliphate. Thus, the Finnish Umm Basir's key message to her sisters is 'do not make things difficult for them [i.e., your men who are fighting]. Facilitate all matters for them.' Similarly, the French Umm 'Umar who narrates the sentimentality of her martyred husband urges her women readers to be patient and reminds them of their duty to support and obey their husbands.

The façade of women's agency is further diminished when assessed in the context of ISIL's emphasis on urging families to marry their daughters to fighters, encouraging widows to remarry (*al-Naba'* 54/Nov. 2016: 12; *Rumiyah* English 4/Nov.-Dec. 2016: 32-33) and calling on married women to remain within their homes. In this sense, when the seemingly empowering call for women to travel on their own is analysed in a broader context, it is evident that it is less about empowering women to be in control of their movements and more about appealing to women from outside ISIL territories to travel and contribute to state-building. As Section II shows, upon arrival at the land of the caliphate, women's movement becomes highly regulated. Thus, women may well exercise agency when they decide of their own accord to travel to the caliphate, but when and if they get there, their contributions will be to serve as wives for the fighters and subsequently as mothers who will raise their children in the love of jihad.

Rumiyah and language

The messaging of *Rumiyah* serves to highlight the distinction between the Arabic messaging and that in English and French. In September 2016, ISIL stopped the publication of *Dar al-Islam* and *Dabiq* and all other non-Arabic magazines. By this time, it should be noted, ISIL was suffering rapid territorial losses. The territorial extent of ISIL had peaked in May 2015, but for about a year and despite territorial losses, the group was able to make some territorial gains in both Iraq and Syria. As such, its media output was not immediately affected, and its online army appeared to maintain its zeal.

After September 2016, ISIL began to produce all non-Arabic magazines under the name *Rumiyah*. On the surface, and since the group kept up publication in all the same languages as before, the distant observer is likely to assume that the messaging and its content would be more of the same. Upon close examination, it transpires that most of the articles in the French and English *Rumiyah* are translations of ones that had already appeared in *al-Naba'*. Accordingly, *Rumiyah's* French and English issues began to adopt offensive and demeaning descriptions of women, to propagate its rigid approach to questions of gender and masculinity.

This indicates that, by September 2016, the zeal of ISIL's European-American online army had significantly diminished, and the group had no choice but to turn to translators to compensate for the declining number of writers who were native English and French speakers.

It is worth noting that no issues of *Rumiyah* have been published since September 2017, the time when ISIL was losing Raqqa, a loss which put an end to its territorial governance. ISIL, however, continues to produce *al-Naba'* (this study was completed in March 2018). If this hiatus of its non-Arabic publications continues, it would suggest that the group's territorial losses have had a severe impact on its ability to sustain its communications and media engagement. As such, not only has ISIL failed to keep its (native) speaking English and French writers, but it has also struggled to maintain the enthusiasm of its translators.

II.

GENDERED MESSAGING: PRIVILEGING MASCULINITY, SEGREGATION OF THE SEXES, SEX SLAVERY, EXCLUDING WOMEN FROM COMBAT

This section examines ISIL's gendered policy messaging, with a focus on how the group privileged dominant masculinity, its enforcement of segregation of the sexes and sex slavery. It also considers the possibility of ISIL deploying women in combat. These dynamics reflect the way the group sought to govern both the public and the private spheres to the point of micro-managing women's movements inside their homes.

Privileging masculinity

Notwithstanding the differences in messaging between languages, all ISIL magazines covered in this study promote a rigid social conservatism. This rigidity elevates the value of traditional forms of masculinity that privilege men's rights over those of women and imposes strict limitations on women's role in society, including regulating their conduct in the home.

As the rest of this section shows, privileging dominant masculinity is a theme that underpins most articles concerning women and gender relations, with some doing this more explicitly than others. One article, for example, is titled, 'Women's obedience to [their] husbands is a religious duty'; the merits of masculinity are

asserted throughout the article in categorical terms (*al-Naba'* 30/May 2016: 14). Women are reminded that performing their daily prayers, fasting, charity and *hijra* to the caliphate do not substitute for the obedience they owe to their husbands. God, the article asserts, decreed this duty. As such, husbands ought to remind their wives that failure to comply with their wishes would constitute a grave sin.

Another article that promotes dominant masculinity is entitled 'The multiplicity of wives is a prophetic practice.' As the title suggests, the article asserts men's right to multiple wives on the basis that it constitutes good religious conduct. Since the prophet Muhammad had multiple wives, the article argues, polygamy should be adopted by good Muslim men as a Sunna, i.e., a way of emulating the practice set by the Prophet himself. God, the article explains, made it lawful for men to have multiple wives for many reasons, not least because 'men in general are known for their love of women, and this is not something of which men should be ashamed.' Other reasons or benefits are added: when men have multiple wives, their ability to procreate will be greatly enhanced, thereby increasing the number of Muslims; women themselves will have

more time for prayer, though some women have pondered whether men's sexual activities count as part of their religious/prayer duties; polygamy addresses the demographic imbalance in Muslim societies resulting from the many wars that usually cause more casualties among the men who are the fighters. Women are warned against resisting being in polygamous marriages, for this would amount to resisting what God decreed (*al-Naba'* 35/Jun. 2016: 13).

Privileging dominant masculinity is, of course, not limited to what men are entitled to do in matters that affect women but extends to what women should do to serve their husbands and male relatives. To start with, the group has detailed guidelines on women's dress code, enumerating a long list of features that must be met for a *hijab* to be considered lawful (*sifat al-hijab al-shar'i*). According to the Arabic article in *al-Naba'* (*al-Naba'* 23/Mar. 2016: 15), Islamic law stipulates that eight conditions must be met, namely that the *hijab*:

1. is made out of 'thick' fabric (i.e., not transparent) such that the parts of the female body are not in any way even remotely visible;
2. is 'loose/baggy' (*fadfadān*) so that the shape of a woman's body is not apparent;
3. covers the entire body including the face and the palms;
4. does not attract people's comment, either by the way it is tailored or its colour;
5. should not resemble clothes worn by 'infidels';
6. should not resemble men's clothes, presumably, therefore, no trousers, however loose, would be lawful;
7. should not have any accessories so as to avoid attracting attention; and
8. should not exude a fragrance of any kind, as that might arouse men's sexual desires.

Another article reminds women that they should comply with the lawful dress code out of fear of God and to comply with His command. Through this ISIL is hoping that women will internalize and embrace their dress code willingly by fearing God, not out of fear of the

hisba, i.e., those who may be described as the 'morality police' tasked with enforcing ISIL's moral code in public. Writing suggests that women were seen 'nervously looking left and right', fixing their hijab if they thought that a *muhtasib* (the morality police) was in the area (*al-Naba'* 28/Apr. 2016: 13). In ISIL's worldview, the importance of understanding the lawful dress code for women contributes to a 'qualitative change in people's [proper] understanding of religion.' It is likely that the dress code was part of the curriculum that the Islamic State devised as part of the courses in Islamic law (*al-dawrat al-shar'iyya*) it offered to Muslims residing in ISIL territory (*al-Naba'* 26/Apr. 2016: 13).

In addition to regulating women's dress code, ISIL's messaging includes regulations that govern women's movement in public, specifically the reasons and conditions that make it permissible for women to go out to the market. In principle, women should endeavour to stay at home, their sorties should be on the basis of 'need' or 'necessity'. When they do leave the home, women should comply with the dress code mentioned earlier, avoid wearing high heels and stick to the side of the road so as not to get physically close to men or make eye contact with them. They should also lower their voice so as not to draw attention, but not soften it when conversing with salesmen in the store. This is presumably to distinguish between modesty (low voice) and flirting (soft voice) (*al-Naba'* 28/Apr. 2016: 14). Other articles suggest that women in the Caliphate are not behaving in accordance with these rules and reminds men that they are entitled 'to forbid their wives from going out if they were in the habit of doing so excessively' (*al-Naba'* 50/Oct. 2016: 15).

ISIL's gendered messaging extends to a variety of other topics, ranging from women's shopping habits to their role in promoting the merits and virtues of jihad among their male relatives. To gain a greater understanding of its gendered governance, two key themes are worth highlighting, namely ISIL's emphasis on strict forms of segregation of the sexes and on promoting the practice of sex slavery as a political institution. In what follows, this section closely examines how ISIL's messaging on these two themes was communicated in its publications.

Segregation of the sexes and ISIL's governance of the private sphere

Jihadi groups like al-Qa'ida and ISIL promote segregation of the sexes in their ideological literature to assert their credentials as those who are faithful to the norms set by early Muslims. Judging by the propaganda of jihadi groups, they almost certainly seek to implement segregation of the sexes. Accordingly, it should not be surprising that ISIL's literature should highlight that all its institutions enforce segregation of the sexes. As a case in point, in the article reporting female students studying medicine, the author highlighted that women have a separate wing at the faculty of medicine that ISIL supposedly established in Raqqa.

However, the rigid rules and limitations that ISIL magazines are at pains to stress, including micromanaging women's movements within the home, stand out. Whereas other jihadi groups that gained prominence on the world stage, such as al-Qa'ida, did not face the challenge of accommodating the influx of thousands of *muhajirun* (emigrés) from different cultural environments at the same time as governing territories, ISIL has had to contend with both and in a relatively short period. It is likely that as ISIL sought to provide housing for the emigrés and their immediate and/or extended families, segregation of the sexes presented serious challenges. To make segregation of the sexes feasible, ISIL would have needed to provide separate homes for each wife of their fighters. While one may expect that practicalities should have lent themselves to more pragmatic ideological applications, or at least turning a blind eye to some inevitable violations of segregation of the sexes, the group's publications suggest that the opposite is true. Indeed, the group does not attempt to hide the fact that such violations are taking place, and one observes a virtual obsession with the minutiae of how best to enforce segregation of the sexes.

How then does ISIL promote its narrative of segregation of the sexes? To start with, we encounter the argument that mixing between the sexes is a political

liability, with one article asserting that it was one of the causes for the fall of the Almoravids (1056-1147) that reigned over today's Morocco and part of Algeria (*al-Naba'* 22/Mar. 2016: 14). To ensure that segregation of the sexes is understood both as a religious norm and a state policy, ISIL reports that it held courses to educate its public about Islamic law, including legal rules that govern segregation of the sexes. According to classical Islamic law, except for their husbands, women are only allowed to mix with a *mahram*.¹⁶ Legal jurists have relied on the verses in Q. 4: 22-26 and Q. 24:31 to define the *mahram*; and on that basis, the women's close blood male relatives such as father, brother, nephew would qualify as *mahram*, but male relatives on the husband's side, such as her brother-in-law and his sons would not. Following these regulations, the group devotes a series of articles that enumerate the attributes of a *mahram*, consequently preventing women from mixing with most men on their husband's side (*al-Naba'* 23/Mar. 2016: 15).

The level of attention that ISIL places on segregation of the sexes makes it apparent that the group sought to match its ideology with its governance, not just over the public sphere, but to extend it to the private/domestic sphere. One of the themes that is repeatedly featured concerns the stipulation that a woman should not mix with her male in-laws, especially the 'brother-in-law.' This preoccupation with the 'brother-in-law' suggests that ISIL's governance was encountering problems enforcing its strict segregation of the sexes policy in the domestic/home sphere. One article entitled 'al-hamu al-mawt', which roughly translates as '[mixing] with your [male] in-laws is [the equivalent] of death,'¹⁷ asserts that 'o you chaste [sister], the brother-in-law and your male cousins and such men among your relatives are not your mahram, be sure then not to uncover your head in their company' (*al-Naba'* 24/Mar. 2016: 15). To accentuate this point, the same article goes on to contend that mixing with a brother-in-law is even more sinful than mixing with a foreigner (*ajnabi*).

16 See Nelly Lahoud, 'The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' exclusion of women from Jihad', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 26:5 (780-802), pp. 783-7.

17 The group draws on the Hadith to make this point, see al-Bukhari, *Fath al-Bari*, 9/330.

The same subject is addressed to the husband and his parents. Entitled 'Beware of Mixing with Women,' the article touches on a common practice in Arab societies that would render segregation of the sexes nearly impossible. It is culturally acceptable, in some instances encouraged, that when the oldest son gets married, he and his wife are expected to live with and support his parents. The article calls for an end to this practice, which makes it impossible for the wife to avoid mixing with her male in-laws. The possibility that women could 'sit together with her in-laws, share a family meal with them or watch TV together,' one article warns, is one of the 'most corrupt things that could happen in the home.'

It is noteworthy that on this issue, a woman has the right to disobey her husband if he fails to provide her with a separate home or ensure that the movements of male members of his family comply with the legal regulations on segregation of the sexes (*al-Naba'* 43/Aug. 2016: 14). The same subject is raised in relation to family gatherings during religious festivities, and again, ISIL reminds readers that such festivities should not be used as an excuse for 'mixing between the sexes' and 'shaking each other's hands' on the occasion of Eid (*al-Naba'* 46/Sept.: 8).

Domestic challenges and segregation of the sexes

While articles focusing on segregation of the sexes are intended to enforce and legitimize ISIL's rigid worldview, some references in these articles suggest that the messaging was also intended to address challenges that the group was encountering in its governance model. It is likely that some women were resisting ISIL's rigid rules and the impact they had on their domestic lives. For instance, the same article that reminds women that obedience to their husbands is a religious duty, cited earlier, alludes to some women refusing to engage in sexual relationships with their husbands (*al-Naba'* 30/May 2016: 14). It is not clear whether this is due to women not marrying the men of their choice or because they were unhappy about polygamy and/or having to share their husbands with sex slaves.

If access to multiple wives (and sex slaves) was part of ISIL's appeal to some men who joined the group, polygamy was not universally welcomed by women. This is evident in a French article entitled 'Two, Three or Four' (*Dar al-Islam* 7/Nov.-Dec. 2015: 20-23). The title is a reference to a Qur'anic verse (Q. 4:3) which makes it lawful for men to marry up to four wives, and the overall gist of the article is to defend polygamy and address the challenges concerning women's resistance to the practice. Although the article is anonymous, when French feminine declensions are used, they serve to indicate that the author is a female; in this case, *Dar al-Islam* wants to make it explicit that the article is authored by a woman to strengthen the credibility of the argument.

The author laments that one woman told her that she would agree to 'anything but polygamy ... I cannot accept it'; another whose husband is imprisoned confessed that she prefers him to remain in prison lest he takes on other wives upon his release. Another woman was categorical about her rejection: 'do you want me to commit unbelief and to apostatize?' she said in despair, for 'if I see him with another woman, I would [fail] the test of my religion and abandon my home distraught!'

The author's tone reflects that she is disturbed that multiple marriages are being rejected, not just by 'average Muslim women,' but also by some who are well-versed in religion. In the author's view, rejecting polygamy 'could be construed as unbelief.' Her frustration bordering on anger is evident in the line 'why then did you emigrate, my sister?' The reference to *hijra* suggests that women who emigrated, probably European and adventurous Arab women, were putting up most of the resistance to multiple marriages.¹⁸ Given that the author felt it necessary also to address men in her article is an indication that female discontent with polygamy was not limited to isolated cases. The author went on to counsel men who wish to take on additional wives to mitigate their wives'

18 This article in *Dar al-Islam* is developed further in Nelly Lahoud, 'Islamic State's domestic problems,' *IISS Voices*, 10 December 2015, <http://www.iiss.org/en/iiss%20voices/blogsections/iiss-voices-2015-dda3/december-5c5a/islamic-states-domestic-problems-3811>

understandable jealousies by justifying their decision as an obligation to serve God's religion. For example, men who desire taking on a second wife are encouraged to marry a widow to protect her chastity; such a decision and reasoning, the article argues, would be likely to be less hard on the first wife.

It appears that some men may have abused their entitlement to multiple wives even according to the standards of the Islamic State. One article entitled 'Multiple [wives] but without Transgression' is dedicated to criticizing men for abusing this right. 'Some men,' the article relates, 'take up a second wife, then a third and [even a] fourth, and leave the wives who preceded their latest marriage.' The same article went on to warn men that it is unlawful to make all their wives share the same home against their will. Given that it would have been difficult for ISIL to provide up to four houses for each of its fighters, it is likely that some men forced all their wives to live under the same roof, disregarding their responsibilities under Islamic Law (*al-Naba'* 36/June 2016: 13).

Another article dedicated to sexual hygiene encouraged men and women to wash themselves after experiencing sexual gratification, awake or asleep, suggesting that ISIL was having to deal with issues of sexually transmitted diseases (*al-Naba'* 30/May 2016: 14). This should not be surprising given ISIL's promotion of sex slavery (discussed in more detail below). Another article hints that some fighters were having difficulties finding wives and that some families refused to marry their daughters to fighters, fearing that their daughters were likely to be widowed (*al-Naba'* 33/May 2016: 14), while others refused to marry their daughters at a young age (*al-Naba'* 52/Oct. 2016: 15).¹⁹ It is possible that these were excuses that local families or residents may have used because they did not support ISIL and feared for their daughters when ISIL fighters proposed marriage. Such rejections would have posed challenges for a group that promised its male fighters multiple sexual partners.

19 This article would later be translated and published in *Rumiyah* English 5: 34-5 and *Rumiyah* French 5: 28-29.

Other domestic problems alluded to may have had additional political ramifications for ISIL. One article suggests that some women continued to communicate by phone with their families outside ISIL territories, and they did so against their husbands' wishes or orders. The article makes it explicit that they should cease to have any affection for their relatives if the latter were not loyal to ISIL (*al-Naba'* 62/Jan. 2017: 14).²⁰

Overall, ISIL's mode of governance is as much about controlling the domestic sphere as it is about the political and military domains, and demonstrates the extent to which these two spheres are linked. The group's emphasis on enforcing segregation of the sexes reveals the extent to which the public and the private are intertwined. As the examples in this section clearly demonstrate, ISIL's governance of women encompasses excessive regulations of their movements and actions. The implications of such a model of governance on situating women's place in society cannot be exaggerated, but it could be possible - and research into this point would be illuminating - that the same policy may have had an impact on ISIL's short-lived experience as a governing group.

Sex slavery as a political institution

In her book, *The Last Girl: My story of captivity, and my fight against the Islamic State*, published in late November 2017, Nadia Murad, the Yazidi woman who escaped from ISIL thanks to the help of a Sunni family, provides a detailed account of ISIL's sex slavery based on her own first-hand experience. Murad relates that ISIL had a special market where its fighters could shop for *sabaya* in person after an *up-close-and-personal* viewing. Murad - who has been named as the UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking for her dignified activism - vividly recounts that:

The Slave market opened at night. We could hear the commotion downstairs where militants

20 This article would later be translated and published in *Rumiyah* English 6: 22-24; *Rumiyah* French 6: 36-38.

were registering and organizing, and when the first man entered the room, all the girls started screaming. It was like the scene of an explosion. We moaned as though wounded, doubling over and vomiting on the floor, but none of it stopped the militants ... They gravitated toward the most beautiful girls first, asking “How old are you” and examining their hair and mouths. “They are virgins, right?” they asked a guard, who nodded and said, “Of course!” ... Now the militants touched us anywhere they wanted, running their hands over our breasts and our legs, as if we were animals ... on the lower floor, a militant was registering the transactions in a book, writing down our names and the names of the militants who took us. Compared to upstairs, the downstairs was orderly and calm.²¹

As ‘*sabaya*’ (women captives in war) and ‘*jariyat*’ (pl. of slave girls; sg.: *jariya*), women become the properties of ISIL fighters who in turn have the freedom to have sexual access to them at will, and to sell them if and when they cease to meet their desires. During an interview with the journalist Jenan Moussa, the wife of an ISIL fighter relates that her husband and fellow fighters had access to a Telegram channel that allowed them to buy and sell female sex slaves. The channel to which she was referring is called ‘Souk lil *Sabaya*’ (*sabaya* market). ‘If she’s beautiful,’ the wife explained, ‘the captive woman could fetch a ‘high price. If she’s pretty and virgin, VERY expensive. Some sold for \$30,000 [sic].’²² Other reports based on interviews with female victims of ISIL suggest that sex slavery and other forms of female subjugation were widely practised in ISIL territories.²³

ISIL had begun justifying and promoting sex slavery several years before Murad’s book was published. As early as the fourth issue of *Dabiq*, in an article entitled ‘The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour’ (*Dabiq* 4/Sept.-Oct. 2014: 14-17) – reproduced in French in Issue 5 of *Dar al-Islam* – the group proudly recounted the capture of Sinjar in the Iraqi province of Ninawa, and the enslaving of Yazidis. The article describes Yazidis as ‘a pagan minority existent for ages in regions of Iraq and Sham’ and lamented that such a group should have survived at all, for ‘their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question, as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day.’²⁴ In ISIL’s view, the fact that the Yazidis have preserved their cultural and religious identity is an indication that Muslims have violated God’s teachings by allowing their survival. By enslaving the Yazidis who refuse to accept Islam, ISIL saw itself as faithful to God’s command, citing a verse in the Qur’an (Q. 9: 5) that commands Muslims to ‘... kill the mushrikin²⁵ wherever you find them, and capture them, and besiege them ... But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give *zakah*,²⁶ let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.’²⁷

Using classical Islamic texts to justify its actions, the article went on to describe that:

After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shari’ah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State’s authority to be divided as *khums*²⁸ ... The enslaved Yazidi families are now sold by the Islamic State soldiers as the *mushrikin* were sold by the Companions (*radiyallahu*

21 Nadia Murad, *The Last Girl: My story of captivity, and my fight against the Islamic State*, New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017, pp. 136-7.

22 The tweets by Jenan Moussa are dated 3 August 2017 and can be found at the following link: <https://nervana1.org/2017/08/06/twitter-thread-jenan-moussa-on-ISIL-wives-and-yazidi-slaves/> (last accessed 14 August 2017). Included in the thread is a link to the video interview that Moussa conducted.

23 See for example the interview with Nadia Murad on Hardtalk, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37384324>, 16 September 2016; Rukmini Callimachi, ‘ISIL enshrines a theology of rape,’ 13 August 2015, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/ISIL-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>

24 Dabiq, ‘The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour’, p. 14. The translation of the Qur’anic verse is as cited in Dabiq and citations are based using the English article as published in Dabiq.

25 ‘*Mushrikin/mushrikun*’ is the plural of ‘*mushrik*’, it refers to polytheists, or those who associate other deities with the One God. As such their beliefs violate monotheism, the essential tenet of the Islamic faith.

26 ‘*Zakat*’ or ‘*zakah*’ is almsgiving, and it is considered by Muslims to be one of the five pillars of Islam.

27 Ibid., p. 14.

28 In Islamic law, ‘*khums*’ is one-fifth of the spoil of war that goes to the state.

‘anhum) before them. Many well-known rulings are observed including the prohibition of separating a mother from her young children. Many of the mushrik women and children have willingly accepted Islam and now race to practice it with evident sincerity after their exit from the darkness of shirk.²⁹

The Islamic State’s promotion of sex slavery serves several purposes. Primarily, it promises male fighters, the engine of violence that keeps ISIL in motion, access to multiple sexual partners beyond the four wives that the Islamic institution of marriage allows. While other jihadi groups, such as al-Qa’ida, encouraged and financially supported their fighters to marry up to four wives if they so desired, their writings do not reveal that they encouraged or permitted their fighters to have sexual access outside the institution of marriage. It is possible that, like mainstream Muslims, other jihadi groups have abandoned this pre-modern practice; but it is also possible that they did not revive this practice simply because, unlike ISIL, they did not capture territories that put them in a position to govern non-Muslim populations.

It is important to put in context the appeal of a group providing men lawful access to sex. Muslim societies are socially conservative, and the dominant norm is to discourage both men and women from engaging in pre-marital sex. And although Muslim-majority states do not forbid multiple marriages, since Islamic law compels husbands to have separate homes for each of their wives, most men cannot afford to have more than one wife. If cultural norms are followed, Muslim men and women are only permitted to have sexual relations with their spouse; additional sexual partners would be permitted only if they divorce and remarry. Thus, the possibility of having lawful access to multiple wives, in addition to other women as *sabaya*, all at the same time, cannot be underestimated as a recruitment tool for conservative men whose normal cultural and economic environment would have permitted them only one sexual partner for life. Moreover, for men coming from European states, where on average women benefit from greater equality, sexual

slavery and language around regaining control, power and dominance can be an evocative and powerful lure for men who feel that their traditional roles have been usurped by greater equality. Thus, reviving sex slavery as a lawful Islamic practice gives ISIL, literally, a sex appeal unmatched by other groups (or states for that matter) competing for the same political landscape.

Beyond using sex slavery as a recruitment tool to appeal to men, ISIL sought to present reviving enslavement as a sign of its political and military success. More specifically, as the group frames it, there is no better way to humiliate the infidels than by enslaving their women. It was through the voice of a woman, notably Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajira, that ISIL sought to market the virtues of sex slavery. In Issue 9 of *Dabiq*, and in an article entitled ‘Slave-Girls or Prostitutes’, Umm Sumayyah defended sex slavery as carried out by the Islamic State and argued that the practice should not be confused with prostitution, and ISIL fighters who bed slave girls cannot be accused of rape (*Dabiq* 9/May-June 2015: 44-49).

Umm Sumayyah staunchly criticized the mainstream media that reported the enslavement of Yazidi women, and, in her view, falsely described their enslavement as a form of ‘fornication or rape.’ She was equally angered by ISIL defenders who sought to deny the news of enslavement out of embarrassment as if ISIL ‘had committed a mistake or evil.’³⁰ To those who denied it, she pointed out that *sabi* ‘is a great prophetic’ practice, and the Prophet and his Companions all practised it. To those criticizing the practice, Umm Sumayyah developed at length her views about the differences between a slave and a prostitute. She explained that a slave can be set free if she accepts Islam and ‘some slave girls in our State are now pregnant and some of them have even been set free for Allah’s sake and got married in the courts of the Islamic State after becoming Muslims and practising Islam well.’³¹ The conditions for a prostitute, in her mind, are by far less forgiving. In her words, ‘a prostitute in your lands comes and goes, openly committing

29 Ibid., p. 15.

30 Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajira, ‘Slave-Girls or Prostitutes’, *Dabiq* 9: 45.

31 Ibid, p. 47.

sin.’ Umm Sumayyah cannot fathom how ‘the slave girl that was taken by the swords of men’, and who can be set free if she accepts Islam, can be considered to be ‘in opposition to human rights and copulation with her is rape?! What is wrong with you?’

To emphasize the differences between prostitutes and slaves, Umm Sumayyah reminds her readers that Islam embraces all those who profess the faith, and slaves are not excluded. She cites a classical report that highlights some of the great lineages that can be traced back to slaves, specifically that of Isma’il/Ishmael who ‘was the son of a slave girl, and Allah made the best of mankind, Muhammad, from his progeny.’³² According to Biblical tradition, Isma’il is the son of Abraham and his concubine Hajar/Hagar; Muslim annalists consider him to be the father of the Arabs and credit him and Abraham with having built the Ka’ba in Mecca, a sanctuary they built to honour and worship the One God,³³ and which serves as the destination of Muslims performing the *hajj* (pilgrimage).

The political significance of enslavement is, as noted earlier, a sign of victories. It differentiates between winners and losers, and in this case, ISIL’s victories against the infidels, which the group promoted with pride (*al-Naba’* 47/Sept. 2016: 13). When the article in *Dabiq* (mentioned earlier) that first reported the capture of Sinjar and the enslavement of Yazidi women and children, it proudly remarked that:

This large-scale enslavement of mushrik families is probably the first since the abandonment of this Shari’ah law. The only other known case – albeit much smaller – is that of the enslavement of Christian women and children in the Philippines and Nigeria by the mujahidin there.³⁴

Umm Sumayyah develops this political theme further to argue that enslavement is a sign of successful statehood, that the caliphate is real ‘with everything it contains of honour and pride for the Muslim and

humiliation and degradation for the kafir/infidels.’³⁵ Perhaps Umm Sumayyah’s most powerful contribution in defending ISIL’s enslavement is her own personal embrace of the practice:

Therefore, I further increase the spiteful ones in anger by saying that I and those with me at home prostrated to Allah in gratitude on the day the first slave girl entered our home. Yes, we thanked our Lord for having let us live to the day we saw kufr/unbelief humiliated and its banner destroyed. Here we are today, and after centuries, reviving a prophetic Sunnah practice, which both the Arab and non-Arab enemies of Allah had buried. By Allah, we brought it back by the edge of the sword, and we did not do so through pacifism, negotiations, democracy or elections. We established it according to the prophetic way, with blood-red swords, not with fingers for voting or tweeting.³⁶

Although one cannot accuse ISIL of political correctness, it is unlikely that ISIL women would have easily digested such a statement had it been uttered by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. *Dabiq* therefore enlisted the voice of a woman to paint a colourful picture of sex slavery, giving equal, albeit different joy, to both the men and women of ISIL. Towards the end of the article, it becomes increasingly apparent that Umm Sumayyah has no patience with any of the voices that promote women’s rights. At the time when the article was published, Barack Obama was still President of the United States; Umm Sumayyah assured her readers that were President Obama to be in a powerful position that would allow him to establish a caliphate, ‘surely the slave markets will be established against the will of the politically “correct”! And who knows, maybe Michelle Obama’s price won’t even exceed a third of a dinar, and a third of a dinar is too much for her!’ The point she is seeking to convey is about political power, namely that the founding of strong states, even by liberal presidents

32 Ibid., p. 47.

33 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His life based on the earliest sources*, Cambridge: the Islamic Texts Society, 2002, p. 3.

34 *Dabiq* 4: 15.

35 *Dabiq* 9: 46.

36 Ibid., p. 47.

like Obama, is always tied to enslavement, including sex slavery.

ISIL also pointed to an additional political consideration in support of sex slavery, namely that it is one of the signs in Islamic eschatology preceding the epic battle just before the Day of Judgment. Although this theme is not consistently promoted in ISIL's publications on the topic, it is nevertheless highlighted in the English article that first reported the enslavement of the Yazidis. Referring to a report attributed to the prophet Muhammad, the article states that 'one of the signs of the Hour was that "the slave girl gives birth to her master"' (*Dabiq* 4/Sept.-Oct. 2014: 15). Almost a year later, the same article was translated in the French *Dar al-Islam* (5/Jul.-Aug. 2015: 24).

Challenges to sex slavery

As noted earlier, ISIL women did not easily accept polygamy, and it stands to reason that they would have also resisted sexual slavery. It is ironic that in order to tame ISIL wives' resistance to sexual slavery, some articles took to describing the virtues of being kind to sex slaves. One article in the weekly Arabic magazine (*al-Naba'* 47/Sept. 2016: 13) chastised wives whose jealousies caused them to 'hit and curse' the slave girls. It is not clear if this was limited to hitting and cursing the slave girls or whether it extended to assaulting their husbands.

In an attempt to counsel wives mistreating sex slaves, the article cites lengthy passages from Scripture calling on Muslims to treat men and women in bondage (*raqiq*) kindly; and it also draws on classical sources that show that it is lawful for men to engage in sexual relations with sex slaves. The article reminds 'the Muslim sister' that it is 'incumbent upon her to educate and counsel slave girls when they act inappropriately ... instead of daring to assault them by hand or verbally!'

A close reading of the material preaching kindness to men and women in bondage, it becomes quickly apparent that ISIL is not interested in developing its own 'Geneva Convention', as if it is concerned with

the rights of prisoners of war. Rather, sex slavery introduced domestic complexities that went beyond what wives could have anticipated. This is evident when the same article warns those wives 'who are annoyed with their husbands for providing separate homes for their slave girls' that the fault lies with the wives themselves. 'Had she stopped nagging her husband and his slave girl,' the article explains, 'such that the husband was comfortable enough at home [to enjoy the company of his sex slave], he would not [have resorted to having a separate home for his *jariya*].' This is significant: while Islamic law compels the husband to provide separate homes for each of his wives, it does not obligate him to do so with respect to the *jariya*.

The reality of this domestic model is somewhat Hobbesian. It is a *war of women against women*, wives against other wives, wives against sex slaves. For sex slaves, this dark reality is compounded, having to endure the verbal and physical assaults of jealous wives and the physical abuse of the men who claim possession over them.

Women in combat

Some policy analysts, particularly in the counterterrorism field, have considered the possibility that ISIL's territorial losses may cause the group to enlist women as fighters. Some media reports have even concluded that, 'The jihadist plan is to use women to launch the next incarnation of ISIL.'³⁷ The rest of this section examines the role of ISIL women in combat in the broader context of the group's worldview, particularly its emphasis on segregation of the sexes.

37 Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick, 'The jihadist plan to use women to launch the next incarnation of ISIL,' *The Washington Post*, 26 November 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-jihadist-plan-to-use-women-to-launch-the-next-incarnation-of-ISIL/2017/11/26/e81435b4-ca29-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html?utm_term=.e5ebobe3c433; see also among other Elizabeth Pearson, 'Why ISIS Female Suicide Bombers Mean The End Of The Caliphate Dream,' *Newsweek*, 18 July 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/why-isis-female-suicide-bombers-mean-end-caliphate-dream-637892>; Jack Moore, 'ISIS is Increasingly Trying To Attract Women Fighters In Iraq And Syria,' *Newsweek*, 4 September 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-increasingly-trying-attract-women-fighters-iraq-and-syria-659181>

ISIL on women's jihad

It is worth noting that the classical legal doctrine of defensive jihad (*jihad al-daf'*) makes it incumbent upon both men and women to fight when the enemy enters Muslim land, but jihadi ideologues and leaders excluded women, as soldiers, from combat.³⁸ They have justified this on the basis that it would be impractical to allocate *mahrims* to accompany women fighters. The classical doctrine does not stipulate the presence of a *mahram* since defensive warfare signifies extraordinary circumstances. This exclusion, therefore, represents an internal incoherence in jihadi ideology, and undermines the validity of their claim to defensive jihad.³⁹ A distinction should be made, however, between female combatants and suicide bombers. Jihadi ideologues and leaders do not object to the use of women as suicide bombers on ideological grounds. Since a suicide mission can be carried out while conforming to the rules governing segregation of the sexes, a woman could be escorted to her mission by her brother, father, son or husband, and she would not risk her modesty by mixing with men without the company of her *mahram*.

Jihadi groups, including al-Qa'ida and ISIL, acknowledge and praise the women who took part in combat in Islamic history, particularly alongside the prophet Muhammad, but they have not permitted women to do the same. Instead, they have consistently argued that women's jihad is in the home, through supporting their husbands, having children, and bringing them up on the love of jihad. They have also called on women to exercise their jihad through preaching, e.g., electronically, in print and in person, by inciting their husbands, sons and male relatives to take up jihad and to shame them if they do not. Perhaps the strongest reference to women and combat in jihadi literature came from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (killed in June 2006), the leader of the parent group of ISIL, when he uttered that "*war has broken out ... if you [Muslim men] are not going to be chivalrous knights in this war (fursan al-harb), make way for women to wage*

38 For an extensive discussion on this, see Nelly Lahoud, 'The Neglected Sex', pp. 781-9.

39 Ibid.

it. ... Yes, by God, men have lost their manhood."⁴⁰ When the entirety of his public statement is read, it becomes evident that he was not calling on women to join men on the battlefield, he was instead shaming men who are too cowardly to fight.

It would be difficult to see how ISIL could reconcile its rigid stance on segregation of the sexes with allowing men and women to fight together on the battlefield. This would necessitate mixing between the sexes. In this respect, ISIL does not depart from the position that other jihadi groups have taken concerning women's role in combat. In the publications covered in this study, there is one reference to ISIL allowing women to fight, and it is limited to the specific circumstance 'when the enemy enters her home or residence'; only then does 'jihad become an obligation upon women just as it is an obligation upon men.' When this happens, '[she should repel] the enemy with whatever she can muster' (*al-Naba'* 59/Dec. 2016: 15).

It is likely that ISIL enlisted women to enforce public morality (*hisba*), e.g., to arrest women if their dress violates the code set by ISIL. Some female defectors and victims reported this in interviews, relating that ISIL formed women only groups to implement its public morality policies, but this did not translate into a combat role for women.⁴¹

ISIL aura of women combatants

Unlike other jihadi groups ISIL stands out in projecting an aura of an ISIL female warrior. To start with, ISIL has enjoyed a greater support from women online and on social networks. For example, Ahlam al-Nasr, described on jihadi forums as the 'poetess of the Islamic State,' and her mother Dr Iman Mustafa al-Bugha, are both active online in support of ISIL. Leaked ISIL internal documents describe Dr al-Bugha as an 'ideologue,' but her writings have not appeared

40 Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, "Ilhaq bi-al-Qafilah" [Join the Caravan [of Jihad]], <http://www.rouqyah.com/showthread.php?t=8853>, last accessed 10 January 2018.

41 Asaad H. Almoammad and Anne Speckhard, 'The operational ranks and roles of female ISIL operatives: From assassins and morality police to spies and suicide bombers,' International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 23 April 2017, <http://www.icsve.org/research-reports/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-ISIL-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>

in ISIL publications.⁴² Although Umayma al-Zawahiri, the wife of the current leader of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has written a few missives addressed to women that were posted online, her writings have been limited compared to the prolific record of Ahlam and Dr al-Bugha. A further distinction is that, whereas the tone of al-Zawahiri's letters is measured, the tone of Ahlam and Dr al-Bugha's writings can be combative at times (against ISIL enemies and critics).⁴³

Some women expressed their explicit desire to fight with ISIL. For example, Ahlam al-Nasr expressed her desire to engage in jihad, 'all types of jihad: spiritual jihad (*jihad al-nafs*), the jihad of preaching and education, the jihad of [raising] money [to advance our cause], and the jihad with weapons also [emphasis added].'⁴⁴ She did not report having done so, but she did share her joy of having married 'one of the soldiers of the Islamic State', proudly stating that the marriage took place in an ISIL Islamic Court,⁴⁵ to highlight that ISIL had established state institutions. In February 2018, she authored an article using the additional name of 'Umm Usama al-Dimashqiyya,' indicating that she gave birth to a son and named him Usama.⁴⁶

More specifically on the question of militancy, as ISIL was in its ascent, pro-ISIL media outlets took to posting pieces whose titles suggested that women should get ready for the battlefield. These, it should be stressed, were not ISIL's official media outlets, but ones that supported the group. The pieces they posted include magazines or manuals that have racy titles, e.g., 'Mighty Steps for She who Wants to Depart to the Battlefield' (*Khutuwat Jabbara li-man Aradat al-Nafir*), and 'A series [of pamphlets designed] to Train

and Prepare the Muslim woman [for jihad]: Prepare to Depart for the Battlefield' (*Silsilat al-I'dad li-al-Muslima: Ista'iddi li-al-Nafir*).

Upon reading the titles of these publications, women desiring to play a role in this alternative state would be forgiven to think that ISIL was going to welcome them, not just as wives of its fighters, but also as soldiers in its ranks. The content of these publications, however, does not live up to the promise of the title. At most, women are encouraged to watch a video that has some basic training in weapons for self-defence, but no serious training for combat is included. Much of the focus is on domestic issues, assigning women traditional roles, and including many tasty recipes to prepare for the jihadis.

There are two instances (thus far), however, that ought to be highlighted concerning ISIL's position on women's role in combat. The first concerns an attack carried out in the name of ISIL in September 2016 by three women against a police station in Mombasa, Kenya. The attack was welcomed by ISIL in *al-Naba'* (Issue 47/Sept. 2016), featuring it as the lead headline on its front page. However, *al-Naba'* described the women as *munasirat* (supporters) of the Islamic State, in contrast to 'soldiers', which the group reserves to its male fighters and male attackers such as Omar Mateen (who opened fire in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida) and Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel (who killed 84 people in Nice, France, by driving a lorry down a crowded promenade on Bastille Day).⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the use of the description '*munasirat*' instead of '*jundiyyat*' (female soldiers) did not appease ISIL's supporters. One member of the jihadi website *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam* that is supportive of ISIL questioned whether women are going to be permitted to participate in combat. In his view, this would open the door to Muslim women imitating the ways of 'infidel women', including having to seduce the enemy by 'pretending to be in a romantic relationship with him. [This way] she would be able to bait him, until he is on his own in an [isolated] place when

42 See document posted by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi in his article 'Stories of the Mujahideen: Unseen Islamic State biographies of outstanding members', 24 August 2016, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/19132/the-archivist-stories-of-the-mujahideen-unseen>. The document only mentions Dr al-Bugha's sons who died fighting for ISIL, without mentioning her daughter, Ahlam al-Nasr.

43 This theme is developed in Nelly Lahoud, 'Can women be soldiers of the Islamic State?' *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* February–March 2017, pp. 61–78.

44 Ahlam al-Nasr, 'al-Irhab ... al-Hayat al-Haqiqiyya', al-Ghura'ba' Media, 2014, p. 11.

45 Ibid.

46 Ahlam al-Nasr (Umm Usama al-Dimashqiyya), 'Kurru La Tafurru,' *Mu'assassat al-Wafa' al-I'lamiyya*, February 2018.

47 On the Kenya attack and the reaction on jihadi forums, see Nelly Lahoud, 'Can women be soldiers of the Islamic State?' February–March 2017, pp. 65–68.

she or another Muslim could kill him?’⁴⁸ This question generated a heated debate revolving around the importance of protecting women’s chastity.

The second instance is a video released in February 2018, produced in both Arabic and English by ISIL’s AlHayat Media Center, featuring women fighting against the ‘Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)’. Entitled ‘Heaven Lies under the Shade of the Swords,’ the viewer gets to see men on crutches and in wheelchairs, carrying rifles, getting ready to fight what the narrator describes as ‘the deceitful atheist Kurds’ who have established ‘a racist secular pseudo-state ... Rojava.’ To defeat this enemy, the narrator tells that ‘the sons of the Khilafa rose as one body despite their wounds (emphasis added).’ In a gendered order, *‘following them the chaste mujahid woman journeying to her Lord with the garments of purity and faith seeking revenge for her religion and for the honour of her sisters in prison by the apostate Kurds ... they launch the battle to avenge the chaste women. It is a campaign that commences a new era of conquest with Allah’s permission.’*

The women in the video are all dressed according to ISIL’s dress code, so the viewer cannot ascertain whether they are indeed women or men dressed in women’s clothing. Nevertheless, ISIL sought to show that women are fighting in its ranks. Does this video then signal that ISIL will, in practice, allow women to become fighters? Or is it seeking to project empowerment of women without translating it into reality?

When the video is analysed with a critical eye, it is doubtful that ISIL is serious about giving women a role in combat. Firstly, and from a practical perspective, women cannot be expected to fight efficiently while dressed in a loose ‘*abaya*’, in compliance with ISIL’s dress code, as they appear in the video. The point of showing women fighting in the video is not about highlighting their capabilities as warriors, instead the viewer gets to see in the following order: crippled and disabled men, even women, *following them*, headed to

48 The forum discussion was under the heading ‘As’ila hawla ‘Amal al-Nisa’ bi-al-Jihad’ (Questions Concerning Women’s Role in Jihad), Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam, following A’maq’s reporting of the Mombasa attacks on 13 September 2016.

fight to put an end to Rojava, a region in Syria where Kurdish women are known to exercise political leadership. In the visual media memory of many, Kurdish women fighters were on the frontlines in the fight against ISIL, particularly in Kobani (2014-2015).

The broader message of the video is the need for all Muslims to translate their religious commitment into tangible sacrifice, and martyrdom operations would be the most desirable. The ending of the video vividly illustrates this point. It also illustrates the way in which ISIL uses a single story to convey multiple messages that cater to different audiences. The video concludes with Abu ‘Abdallah al-Shami, a man in a wheelchair getting ready to carry out a suicide operation while assuring his tearful daughter, visibly emotional at the imminent loss of her father, that he is headed to paradise. Also by Abu ‘Abdallah’s side is a little boy, Hamza, emotional but more composed than the girl, and the viewer gets to see and hear Abu ‘Abdallah telling Hamza that ‘whoever asks, tell them that my uncle *a’taqani* (i.e., he freed me).’ The word ‘*a’taqani*’ indicates that the little Hamza, now freed, was a slave who had become the property of Abu ‘Abdallah either as a spoil of war or purchased from someone else.

On one level, the clear message of this emotional ending is the following: if a disabled man is showing resolve to carry out a martyrdom operation, able-bodied men and women have no excuse not to do the same; in fact, they are being shamed for not doing the same. ‘*I call on you to carry out martyrdom operations*’ were Abu ‘Abdallah’s departing words. On another level, the same scene may appeal to those who want to own a slave, and as ISIL fighters, they can have not just boy slaves, but girls and women as slaves too. On yet another level, the viewer gets to see that Abu ‘Abdallah is kind to his slave as he gifted him his freedom before he went on his mission. For those who think that ISIL is all about violence, then this scene will likely generate in them some unexpected emotions.

Notwithstanding the propaganda value ISIL could gain out of this video, the scene of women fighting may cause the group some problems among some of its supporters, and among its jihadi enemies. In

principle, ISIL may finally be reconciling what jihadi groups, including its parent group ISI, had failed to do, namely allowing women in combat under conditions of defensive warfare. As noted earlier, according to the law of war in Islam, under conditions of defensive warfare (*jihad al-daf*), a call to arms (*naḥr ‘amm*) follows, and all Muslims, including women, minors and slaves, have an obligation to fight (*fard ‘ayn*) to defend their religion. But that is not the context in which women are presented in this video. Instead, the narrator in the video claims that this is all part of a new era of ‘conquest’ (*fath*). This would mean that the fighters

are not on the defensive; instead they are operating under conditions of offensive warfare (*jihad al-talab*). The laws governing offensive warfare prohibit women from being combatants! It is possible that the group is too embarrassed to admit that it has lost its territorial caliphate and is now in a defensive phase, but this editorial faux pas may prove ideologically costly for the group.

III.

CONCLUSIONS

Sections I and II sought to address the question driving this study, namely how could a group that explicitly espouses a worldview that promotes women's subjugation and sex slavery, appeal to and seemingly offer tools of empowerment to women?

While ISIL's English and French magazines featured articles purportedly authored by women defending and embracing ISIL's worldview, the actual content of ISIL's messaging did not offer women any tools of empowerment. The voice of women in ISIL official publications projected agency when the actual messaging promoted policies that subjugate women, while promoting the segregation of the sexes and sexual slavery. To this end, the group used women and (purportedly) women's voices and experiences as tools to promote the group's worldview, in particular a rigid social order and the subjugation of women.

Nonetheless, while women's agency does not feature in ISIL's writings or worldview, it can be gleaned – even in those most difficult of circumstances - from articles that chastise women for their resistance to polygamy, sex slavery, and their non-compliance with ISIL's dress code. For obvious reasons, we don't get to hear women's own voices on these issues, but a close reading of the magazines allows the reader to hear the whisper of their discontent.

Beyond this, the systematic analysis of ISIL's own writings provides a new opportunity to pose different questions concerning two key themes. The first concerns the way in which policies should be formulated to address the threat and appeal of groups such as ISIL among women. More specifically, should ISIL's messaging be countered, and if so, how? The second concerns assessing women's potential to be weaponized by ISIL.

Empowerment versus Subjugation: How appealing is ISIL's messaging?

Much of the secondary literature assessing ISIL's appeal among women projected a sense that ISIL may be providing women with a degree of empowerment that other jihadi groups have not. If empowerment and adventurism account for women joining the Islamic State, then counter-messaging should heavily rely on making ISIL's worldview known for what it is, for neither empowerment nor adventurism are on offer. Even its English and French publications, despite the different messaging they adopted, could not conceal the elaborate regulations in place to enforce segregation of the sexes, the subjugation of women, and the group's open embrace of enslavement and sexual slavery. ISIL's own publications make it evident that its policies faced resistance by women.

It is therefore important to be mindful that exaggerating and sensationalizing ISIL's appeal to and empowerment of women is counter-productive. It could serve to mislead women seeking empowerment either to carry out attacks in the name of ISIL or to think that by joining this start-up state, they could exercise leadership and/or actively contribute to ISIL's combat mission.

Assessing women's role in combat

Despite releasing a video showing fighters dressed in women's clothing (ISIL dress code), it is difficult to see how the group could reconcile its segregation of the sexes policy with deploying women in combat or even putting them in positions of leadership. Thus women who join ISIL assume traditional roles and are expected to support ISIL men as wives, sisters, daughters and mothers, and by adding their voices to the discourse sanctioned by the group. This should not exclude the possibility that some women would not

act on their own in support of the group, just as the women who attacked the police station in Mombasa did. But the risk emanating from such a threat is the same as that emanating from men who are inspired by ISIL and decide to carry out a terrorist attack on their own initiative.

To be clear, women can be extremists, terrorists, and fighters, and in turn cause security threats to the international community as much as men. But in the context of jihadism, and specifically within ISIL, women's role in assuming a military and leadership

role is conditional on the group recognizing women's equality and agency. If ISIL were to pursue that, it would cease to be the jihadi group that we know. For now, then, jihadi groups may use women as tools of militancy, e.g., suicide bombers, they will continue to depend on them for their domestic family needs, and ISIL will continue to promise its fighters access to sex slaves as reward for military victories. In short, ISIL will continue to make us hear women 'roar' – ISIL sounds of course – but it is highly unlikely that women will join ISIL men on the battlefield.

APPENDIX 1:

AL-NABA', DABIQ, DAR AL-ISLAM AND RUMIYAH

The magazines *al-Naba'* (Arabic), *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (English), *Dar al-Islam* and *Rumiyah* (French) are all 'official' ISIL online publications. This is to say that they are produced by ISIL, and as such, their content represents the official views/narratives of the group on the subjects they cover. In this sense, they are distinct from publications produced by media outlets that are supportive of ISIL, including online postings by pro-ISIL individuals, social networks and forums.

Al-Naba' is ISIL's official weekly Arabic magazine. As its name '*al-Naba'*' (i.e., 'news') suggests, the magazine is designed to cover the group's news. The focus is on ISIL's triumphs, both in the 'land of the caliphate,' including the various *wilayat* (provinces) ISIL proclaimed around the world, and the blows and defeats it inflicts on its enemies. Among other things, *al-Naba'* features interviews with various ISIL leaders, eulogies of fallen fighters, and editorial articles that draw on religious teachings to set the moral code that governs the conduct of the caliphate's subjects. Most articles do not exceed one page and they are anonymous. Several ISIL media outlets posted photos of *al-Naba'* being distributed to fighters stationed on the frontiers of ISIL territories. This suggests that ISIL considers Arabic speaking male fighters as the primary audience of *al-Naba'*.

Dabiq (English), *Dar al-Islam* (French) and, as of September 2016, *Rumiyah* (English and French) are monthly magazines. They cover news of the caliphate, but in a more thematic style. The name '*Dar al-Islam*' is the Arabic for 'the abode of Islam,' and is meant to signify a tangible geographical territory where Islam is the sovereign religion of the land; '*Dabiq*' is the name of an area in Syria where, according to Islamic eschatology, the final apocalyptic battle will be fought (*Dabiq* 1/June-July 2014: 4); and *Rumiyah* is a reference to Rome, home

to the Vatican, and the title is meant to suggest that the group is on track to conquering the spiritual centre of Christianity. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (killed in 2010), the Minister of War of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the parent group of today's Islamic State, promised that only when the group captures Rome would its fighters take repose from jihad. The name of the magazine is a homage to Abu Hamza's promise, as his words are inscribed in the heading immediately below *Rumiyah*.

Whereas *al-Naba'* features granular coverage of battles and other events, the focus of the English and French magazines is more on what ISIL is doing in the land of the caliphate. In addition to including sections on caliphate news, they tend to feature longer articles covering the activities of ISIL state institutions that show how the group is translating Islamic teachings into reality. They also feature articles designed to give *educational* guidance to the citizenry about Islamic political norms (e.g., *Imama/caliphate*) and personal ones (e.g., prayer, fasting).

If *al-Naba'* preaches to the 'converted' and caters for Arabic speaking ISIL fighters, the messaging of the English and French magazines was initially designed to turn sympathizers into converts. More precisely, the messaging started out by appealing mainly to those interested in being part of an alternative state. Thus, the recurring theme of *hijra*, 'emigration' that one encounters on the pages and addressed to both men and women (*Dar al-Islam* 3/Mar.-Apr. 2015: 10; *Dabiq* 8/Mar.-Apr. 2015: 32-7), is an invitation to English and French speakers to travel to the land of the caliphate. In time, these magazines would also focus on issues that matter to both insiders residing in the caliphate and to outsiders in the hope of convincing them to join the group.

APPENDIX 2:

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study is based on a systematic reading of ISIL's official messaging communicated through the group's Arabic, English and French magazines. These are *al-Naba'* (Arabic), *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (English), *Dar al-Islam* and *Rumiyah* (French). All magazines are dated following the *hijri* calendar; in this study, the dates are converted into their Gregorian equivalent.

The analysis covers the magazine issues produced all the way through to February 2017, a period that covers the highs and lows of the Islamic State as far as its territorial expansion, contraction and losses. The months of September-October 2016 surrounding the production of the first issues of *Rumiyah* in both English and French, replacing *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*, coincides with the period when ISIL was undergoing rapid territorial decline. Thus, the magazines covered in this study consist of the following:

- The first issue of the weekly Arabic magazine *al-Naba'* is dated 18 October 2015. By February 2017, 70 issues were produced, and all relevant articles are analysed in this study. At the time of completing this report (January 2018), the group was continuing to produce *al-Naba'*.⁴⁹
- The first issue of the English monthly magazine *Dabiq* is dated June/July 2014.

The group produced a total of 15 issues, the last one appearing in July-August 2016. All relevant articles in *Dabiq* are analysed in this study.

- The first issue of the French monthly magazine *Dar al-Islam* is dated December 2014-January 2015; the group produced a total of ten issues, the last one appearing in August-September 2016.
- The first issues of English and French *Rumiyah* were both dated September-October 2016, and by February 2017, the group had produced six issues of each. All relevant articles are analysed in this study. The group has thus far produced 13 issues of *Rumiyah* in English and 13 in French. Since October 2017, *Rumiyah* has not appeared in any of the languages, and at the time of completing this report, the last English and French issues were those dated September-October 2017.

In summary, as far as ISIL's official publications are concerned, this study covers 70 issues of *al-Naba'*, 15 issues of *Dabiq*, 10 issues of *Dar al-Islam*, 6 issues of English *Rumiyah* and 6 issues of French *Rumiyah*. In addition, and where relevant, this study analyses publications that were produced by pro-ISIL media outlets.

49 It should be noted that *al-Naba'* has gone through several iterations, the first one having appeared in May 2010 when the group was still called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). For the purpose of this study, I am analysing the last (and ongoing) iteration, the weekly production, as recognized by the group itself. See 'Ahammu al-Marahil fi Masirat Tatwir Nashrat al-Naba'', 12 May 2016. The article was posted on Justpaste it, hard copy is available, but the link no longer functions.

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