

## *Women in Jihadist Organizations: Victims or Terrorists?*

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**M**any scholarly works on women in jihadi organizations emphasize women's lack of agency.<sup>1</sup> Authors of these works argue women have fallen victim to these male-dominated organizations and thus have lost control over their actions. However, certain groups of women in some jihadi organizations—for example, Islamic State (or IS), Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham—enjoy a degree of agency within the scope of their duties.

This policy brief examines the extent to which women in jihadi organizations have agency—that is, to which extent they are able to make independent decisions. Understanding the conditions under which women have agency, allows policy makers to recognize the diversity of roles and contributions of women within jihadi organizations and design appropriate policy responses.

The prevailing view that jihadi organizations marginalize women dovetails well with conventional feminist thought more broadly on the role and position of women in international relations and security. This line of scholarship asks, “Where are the women?”<sup>2</sup> Such scholars assert that women are shut out of roles in security matters, and they decry this exclusion. They explain this state of affairs as arising from a dichotomy between roles in the public sphere, which the male hegemony find unsuitable for women and claims for itself, and the private spheres of household and family, where women are expected to remain.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of security as belonging to the male sphere is derived from “men’s organizational knowledge, [which] grew out of their position in the family ...”<sup>4</sup> In this view, a male-dominant division of labor developed into the modern global structure of international relations and security, designed by men for their own benefit and grounded in the exclusion of women.

Although feminists highlighted the public/private dichotomy to bring attention to the marginalization of women in politics, international relations, and security, “its uncritical use across cultures and contexts has reinforced the view that women have no power or political agency and that they are totally dependent on the existing social and political structures.”<sup>5</sup> It is also argued that “implicit in this dichotomy of public/male, private/female is the assumption that power, viewed as belonging to the public political domain, is a male monopoly and that women, confined to the domestic sphere, are powerless.”<sup>6</sup> This view has spawned a body of literature in security studies that views women “as victims of conflict, and therefore tends to overlook, explicitly or implicitly, women’s power and agency.”<sup>7</sup>

Similar arguments of women as victims have sloshed over into studies of women in jihadi organizations. Scholars who see only a realist, male-dominated approach to security, coupled with observations of the social restrictions that a conservative interpretation of Islam and traditional value systems impose, have little use for studies of women’s agency in jihadi organizations. This work is therefore largely sidelined, and jihadi organizations are depicted as paying no significant attention to the roles and power of the women within them.

## Women as Victims

Much of the literature on women in jihadi organizations deals with sexual violence these organizations perpetrate against minority women, including Yazidis, Alawites, Christians, and Shi'as. The focus is often on the women who are sexually abused rather than on female perpetrators. There are a number of explanations given for this violence against women. Groups such as IS use sexual violence to create a "hyper-masculine" image of themselves and to subordinate and degrade minorities.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars argue that jihadi organizations view women as a commodity to be used for male fighters' sexual satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Some assert that the sexual brutality of groups such as IS can be viewed as a strategic approach to create a "brand" for their organization that will distinguish them from other jihadi groups in terms of strength and power.<sup>10</sup> Boko Haram has been studied using the same lens. It is noted that Boko Haram uses sexual brutality (especially rape) as a political tool against Christian women in Nigeria.<sup>11</sup>

"Jihadi brides" have also become an issue of great interest in the popular and academic literature. The term refers to women who migrate to territories where jihadi organizations operate to become wives of jihadi fighters. The literature on jihadi brides includes claims that some women have embarked on a radical political campaign against the West.<sup>12</sup> Yet much of the same literature reduces women's position in jihadi organizations to being tools for the sexual satisfaction of male jihadi fighters and for producing children to fight in the front lines.

These women are mostly portrayed as passive, even in their everyday lives. It is often argued that jihadi organizations use online propaganda that romanticizes jihad while masking its violent nature in order to lure the women to join.<sup>13</sup> Women affiliated with these organizations are also portrayed as coming from emotionally disturbed backgrounds, with abusive parents or a sheltered upbringing.<sup>14</sup>

## Women as Terrorists

This policy brief does not deny the validity of arguments that emphasize women's victimization in jihadi organizations, but it does attempt to shed light on a lesser studied aspect—namely, women's agency in jihadi organizations.

In fieldwork conducted between May 2015 and January 2017 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and along the Syrian borders in southern regions of Turkey, I interviewed Syrian and Iraqi refugees, government and security officials, social activists, local journalists, and academicians. The data collected from these sources indicate that IS, Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham have systematically provided a favorable environment for a limited number of women to exercise a relatively higher degree of agency within the roles assigned to them.

Women in these organizations exercise this agency through gender-segregated parallel institutions. These organizations succeeded in establishing *de facto* states (caliphates) in parts of Iraq and Syria, complete with institutions to govern them. In order for them to address relevant women's affairs, almost every existing institution in these *de facto* states has a section where only women are assigned.

Gender-segregated parallel institutions encompass education, healthcare, administration, police, military, finance, and service provision. These sections are run wholly by women, and their communication with male counterparts is minimal. By minimizing this interaction, the organizations offer Muslim women a utopian alternative to living in secular societies that allow opposite-sex interaction and thereby make living as a pious and righteous Muslim impossible.<sup>15</sup> The organizations promise Muslim women who are marginalized for orthodox religious and ideological beliefs in secular societies a chance to exercise their agency by engaging in a variety of professional fields while adhering to their strict religious interpretation of Islam.<sup>16</sup>

Iraqi and Syrian refugees interviewed for this research, as well as Iraqi and Turkish security and military officials, confirmed the existence and functioning of these institutions across the territories run by IS, Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

For example, all schools and universities in territories run by jihadi organizations in Iraq and Syria are segregated by gender. According to Aliyyah, a 45-year-old teacher who fled Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's territories in Syria and currently lives with her family in Istanbul, even kindergartens were gender segregated. Thick curtains were hung behind the entrance of the girls' schools, and no man was allowed to enter the premises.<sup>17</sup> Nur, a 35-year-old former resident of Mosul, said IS asked female teachers to wear long black robes and gloves while at school. According to her, some female teachers also played the role of matchmaker, introducing their students to IS male jihadists.<sup>18</sup> Mahmoud, a 31-year-old former resident of Mosul who currently lives in Debaga Refugee Camp near the city of Makhmur in northern Iraq, reported that female teachers receive an IS salary. They teach an IS-designed curriculum mostly based on religious studies that includes readings from the Quran and *fiqh*. Students are taught how to be religiously and ideologically dedicated mothers to the future generation of jihadists.<sup>19</sup>

IS, Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham pay special attention to healthcare, and gender segregation is imposed on healthcare centers throughout their territories. Kolthum, a 42-year-old woman who fled Mosul and currently lives in the Debaga Refugee Camp, explained that a section within the Mosul General Hospital is allocated to female patients for visiting female doctors and nurses. Female doctors may only take off their face veils beyond the closed doors of their offices.<sup>20</sup> The same pattern has been observed in territories controlled by the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in the Idlib Governorate in Syria. Hassan, a 48-year-old former resident of Idlib who left for Istanbul, noted that in a few main health centers of Idlib, the use of medical facilities was divided by hours between men and women. Female doctors and patients could use the facilities for only a few hours a day. Within this period, female doctors and nurses had full control of the facilities and were under the supervision of senior female doctors and nurses.<sup>21</sup>

A functioning caliphate also needs to generate revenue. Taxes account for up to 50 percent of IS total revenue, while the share of oil income is less than 43 percent. IS tax revenue sharply increased from \$350 million in 2014 to over \$800 million in 2015.<sup>22</sup> Female employees collect these revenues. According to Amal, a 28-year-old woman who left Raqqa in late 2015 and currently lives in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep, her aunt is a doctor in one of Raqqa's main hospitals and receives regular visits from female IS tax collectors. She pays *zakat* (religious tax) and income tax monthly. According to the aunt, the tax collectors wear long black robes and their faces are covered. Upon receiving the tax, they issue her an official receipt of payment.<sup>23</sup>

The same exercise of gender segregation is evident in police forces within the territories controlled by IS, Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Shortly after IS was established, it announced the formation of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, "a women-only vigilante force that patrols cities like Raqqa and Mosul while enforcing strict Islamist rule."<sup>24</sup> According to Mohammad, a 43-year-old former shop owner in the town of Tell Abyad in Syria and now a refugee in the Turkish city of Şanlıurfa, IS pays Al-Khansaa members a monthly salary of \$100 to \$150.<sup>25</sup> Kolthum also noted that Al-Khansaa members are in complete charge of women's affairs throughout IS territories. They regularly visit girls' schools or hospitals to ensure teachers, students, doctors, and nurses are observing sharia law, specifically in terms of the dress code.<sup>26</sup> Osama, a 44-year-old Syrian refugee in the border city of Kilis, Turkey, reported that Al-Khansaa arrested one of his female relatives for dress code violations and that female interrogators who were not Syrian nationals interrogated her harshly, insulting and slapping her. They took her picture and forced her to sign a paper vowing she would never again break sharia law.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the avenues provided for women through the gender-segregated parallel institutions, women exercise their agency through *hijrah* (migration) as well. The global invitation for all Muslims, *Da'wa*, encourages Muslim men and women, regardless of race or nationality, to make *hijrah* to the true land of Islam—the caliphate—to form the real Islamic *ummah* (global community). Women making *hijrah* to jihadi-run territories exercise agency at two levels. At a personal level, *hijrah* gives women a measure of control over their lives, frees them from parental control, and allows them to escape societies in which they are marginalized for their religious beliefs.<sup>28</sup> At the organizational level, and in the absence of other means of legitimacy such as suffrage, women who make *hijrah* give jihadi organizations legitimacy in their challenge of the position of women in Western and secular Arab societies and in their advocacy of an alternative society for women based on gender segregation.

### **Victims or Terrorists?**

The work of women in gender-segregated parallel institutions established by IS, Jaish al-Fatah, and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham challenges the feminist definition of agency. Women's agency is commonly understood as women's ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes.<sup>29</sup> Agency so defined ultimately leads to empowerment and enables women who exercise it to question, challenge, or change regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate their subordination.<sup>30</sup>

Does this definition apply to women in jihadi organizations? Not from the feminist viewpoint. Feminists would view women's participation in gender-segregated parallel institutions as a new form of repression rather than a means for agency. Women in these institutions would be considered as ultimately subordinate to the jihadists' patriarchal system of governance and therefore an instrument to strengthen the patriarchy's control over women's affairs. The incorporation of these women into parallel institutions contradicts basic liberal democratic values that feminism has historically endorsed.

But what can the actions of women within gender-segregated parallel institutions be called if not an exercise of agency? What do the arrests, interrogations, and torture of women by a member of the Al-Khansaa brigade demonstrate if not agency? Can the informed actions of a female teacher transmitting ideology to female students not be explained as an exercise of agency? Women in jihadi organizations do not all recognize the rights of other women. Moreover, they make efforts to deny the rights, and even threaten the existence, of other women.

“If a certain person, or a group, does not fulfil the criteria of liberal democracies, their agency cannot be recognized or has to be reduced to conform to Western standards,” one scholar argues.<sup>31</sup> Reducing women’s agency in jihadi organizations for failure to conform to Western standards gives many feminist scholars license to uncritically attack “narratives of enemy masculinities.”

Others criticize the emphasis on victimization of women in jihadi organizations as well as “the very inclusivity and non-judgment by which feminists seek to relate to all women, everywhere.”<sup>32</sup> Jacoby argues that women in organizations such as IS engage in some behaviors akin to feminist activism. For example, women making *hijrah* are sometimes rebelling against patriarchal families and home societies, an activity that in secular societies would be considered as practicing agency.

In sum, while it is important to note that incorporation into jihadi organizations may increase women’s status in the eyes of the organization, this status does not translate into equality or freedom. Women’s performance of roles outside their homes in gender-segregated jihadi institutions would not be considered as a conventional exercise of agency. Yet neither is it victimization. The roles and behavior that women demonstrate in jihadi organizations call for a widened definition of the scope of women’s agency and a new lens for studying women within jihadi organizations.

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*See also Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown, “Women, Gender and Terrorism: The Missing Links,” WIIS Policybrief, July 2016; Jeannette Gaudry Haynie, “Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment,” WIIS Policybrief, September 2016; Jeannette Gaudry Haynie and Chantal de*

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