



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention

CHARLIE WINTER

CO-EXISTENCE

Contents

Overview	3
Introduction	4
Jihadi Convention	5
ISIS on Women Before 2017	8
ISIS on Women After 2017	10
Is Anyone Listening?	12
The Full Series	14

OVERVIEW

This paper explores the question of whether or not women can participate in combat operations, something that has been hotly debated by jihadis for decades. Generally speaking, jihadi groups across the ideological spectrum have held that this is permissible, but only in certain highly restricted circumstances. Despite this, to date, most have steered clear of mobilising women, and for this reason, the idea that jihadi women do not fight is now widely accepted as conventional wisdom. This contention could now be inaccurate, though; indeed, because of recent developments in Iraq and Syria, female supporters of jihadi groups today are more likely than ever to engage in violence.

The idea that jihadi women do not fight is widely accepted, but, because of ISIS, women are more likely than ever to engage in jihadi violence.

The views of the author do not necessarily represent those of the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether or not women can participate in combat operations has been hotly debated by jihadis for decades.¹ Generally speaking, a broad consensus has emerged that it is permissible for them to fight, but only in certain highly restricted circumstances. Despite this, to date, most jihadi groups have steered clear of mobilising them for battle. For this reason, the idea that jihadi women do not fight is now widely accepted.² While its credence might once have been justified, this myth no longer stands. Indeed, because of recent developments in Iraq and Syria, female supporters of jihadi groups today are more likely than ever to engage in acts of violence.

No organisation has broken with jihadi convention more cleanly—or with greater fanfare—than ISIS, which first celebrated its purported deployment of women on the battlefield in early 2018, after years of hinting that such a turn of events was on the horizon.³ This paper explores ISIS’s rhetorical evolution in the run-up to this moment, tracking developments in the so-called caliphate’s female-focused propaganda over the last few years. It concludes by discussing the influence of jihadi rhetoric on jihadi reality, calling into question assumptions about how and why propaganda impacts—or, indeed, does not impact—at the individual level.

1 See, for example, Nelly Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis’ Exclusion of Women from Jihad”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 780–802; David Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad?”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 375–384.

2 Notable exceptions include the Riyadh us-Salihin Battalion in Chechnya and al-Qaeda in Iraq. See, for example, Jessica Davis, “Evolution of Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4, 2013, 279–291; Trina Mamoon, “Black Widows: Women as Political Combatants in the Chechen Conflict”, in *Embracing Arms - Cultural Representation of Slavic and Balkan Women in War*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012).

3 For a detailed account of this, see Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State”, *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (2017).

JIHADI CONVENTION

A rich tapestry of theological literature deals with the question of female participation in battle.⁴ Generally, jihadis have coalesced around the view that women should not engage in combat, with exceptions under extenuating circumstances. This position is derived from a doctrine dating back to the early years of Islam, something that has been revisited and revised by Islamic and Islamist scholars many times in the years since.

One of the most important of these revisionists was Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member who was a chief ideologue to the earliest incarnations of al-Qaeda. Azzam cleared the ideological way for women combatants in the 1980s.⁵ Essentially, he stated that defensive jihad—combat operations geared towards protecting the *dar al-Islam* (Muslim lands) from non-Muslim invaders—was a personal duty for all Muslims, men and women.⁶ This was not a blank cheque for women to participate in combat; rather, his position held that female Muslims should fight only when the jihad was unambiguously defensive.⁷ Other ideologues reached a similar conclusion to that of Azzam, arguing that women could hypothetically fight, but only ever if it was in defence of Muslim lands.⁸

In other words, an uneasy convention exists which effectively states that women are not meant to fight, but that there are specific conditions under which it theoretically becomes permissible. Few groups have ever actually followed through on this dogma. Aside from the so-called ‘black widows’ of Chechnya’s Riyadh us-Salihin Brigade and Boko Haram (now ISIS’s West Africa Province), the most famous example is al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—the antecedent to ISIS—a group that was a trailblazer when it came to

4 See Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex”; Cook, “Women Fighting in Jihad”.

5 Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex”, 782.

6 Ibid. For the original Arabic text, see Abdullah Azzam, *The Defense of Muslim Lands: The Most Important of Individual Duties*, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, 1984, 21.

7 Youssef Aboul-Enein, *The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam’s Books: Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim Land through Jihad* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010).

8 See Lahoud, “The Neglected Sex”, 786. For the original Arabic text, see Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, *Treatise on the Pillar of Preparing Oneself for Jihad in the Way of Allah the Almighty*, 29.

mobilising women for terrorist attacks.⁹ Indeed, during the second half of the 2000s alone, it dispatched dozens of female supporters on suicide missions.¹⁰

A few months before the first female-perpetrated suicide attack took place in Iraq in 2005, AQI's leader, a Jordanian that went by the name of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had specifically alluded to the possibility that it would happen. Declaring that the occupation of Iraq presented extenuating—and, crucially, defensive—circumstances, he called on women to take a more proactive role in supporting his group's 'resistance.'¹¹ Among other things, he hinted at their potential deployment as suicide attackers, noting that "many mujahidah sisters in the Land of the Two Rivers [had been] requesting to perpetrate martyrdom-seeking operations".¹²

He did not clarify whether any of these 'requests' had been accepted, but history shows that at least some were. Four months after his statement, a woman "dressed like a man" detonated an explosive device outside a United States military base near Tal Afar in northern Iraq.¹³ She was later commemorated in a statement by AQI's then spokesman, who declared her "a noble sister" who had acted "heroically in the name of her religion".¹⁴ A few days later, AQI reported another such attack, this time a double suicide bombing in Mosul in which a woman and her husband attacked

9 See Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Black Widows and Beyond: Understanding the Motivations and Life Trajectories of Chechen Female Terrorists", in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organisation*, ed. Cindy Ness (London: Routledge, 2008), 100–124; Elizabeth Pearson, "Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber", in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency*, ed. Jacob Zenn (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), 33–52.

10 See Davis, "Evolution of Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq".

11 Author's translation, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Will the Religion Wane While I Live?", 7 July 2005.

12 Zarqawi, "Will the Religion Wane While I Live?", 20.

13 See Jackie Spinner, "Female Suicide Bomber Attacks U.S. Military Post", *Washington Post*, 29 September 2005.

14 Author's translation, Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi, "The al-Qa'idah Organization Claims Responsibility for the Martyrdom-Seeking Operation on a Recruitment Center for Apostates in Tal'afar", *The Media Section for al-Qa'idah in the Land of the Two Rivers*, October 2005.

separate convoys. The statement read that the “wife—and what a wife she was—destroyed an armoured vehicle, killing everyone within it, thanks be to Allah and His Grace”.¹⁵

These operations and those that followed prompted furious intra-jihadi debate regarding women’s engagement in violence. AQI rarely fared well, and the taboo ended up remaining a taboo; by the end of the 2000s, the jihadi moratorium on female combatants had once again been reinstated.

¹⁵ Author’s translation, Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi, “A Martyrdom-Seeker and His Wife Carry Out Martyrdom-Seeking Operation in Mosul”, The Media Section for al-Qa’idah in the Land of the Two Rivers, October 2005.

ISIS ON WOMEN BEFORE 2017

ISIS, which emerged in the 2010s from the ashes of al-Zarqawi's movement, did not immediately follow in his footsteps. Indeed, in the months after its lightning advances across Syria and Iraq in 2014, it went so far as to draw a line in the sand regarding women's engagement in combative jihad, stating unequivocally that there was no place for female supporters on the battlefield because its war was no longer defensive.¹⁶

The first time the issue was brought up in this specific context was in early 2015, when an organisation purporting to be the media wing of ISIS's all-female al-Khansa Brigade released a 10,000-word manifesto setting out the ideal role of women in the caliphate. The document spoke at length about what women were and were not permitted to do while living in the so-called Islamic state. It also criticised, at length, the "Western construction" of feminism, describing it as a scourge that had infected the minds of Muslims the world over.¹⁷ The "fundamental role" of female Muslims was, it held, to be wives, child-bearers and homemakers.

The manifesto did note, however, that there were some exceptions to this rule. Select women could become teachers or provide medical care, and besides that, they could, in some strictly defined circumstances, take up arms. Indeed, the authors stated that women not only could but should engage in combative jihad "if the enemy is attacking her country, the men are not enough to protect it, and the ulama have given a fatwa for it". In other words, it reiterated jihadi convention. Hence, for the time being at least, ISIS's position was that women were at best a rearguard to combative jihad, not protagonists in it.

Later in 2015, a new, similarly themed document began to circulate among ISIS supporters online. Produced by a female-focused pro-ISIS media agency, the Zura Foundation, and dealing head-on with the question of whether women could engage in combat, the treatise began by repeating the above consensus. It said that it was, in general, neither desirable nor permissible for women to engage in combative jihad.¹⁸ However, it too pointed out

¹⁶ See Charlie Winter, "Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the al-Khansa' Brigade", Quilliam, February 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

that there were certain defensive contexts in which it would be possible, such as if there were not enough male fighters to defend against enemy incursions. It went on to suggest that female jihadis should prepare for this eventuality by engaging in weapons and explosives training.

This idea re-emerged in December 2016 in an editorial of ISIS's official newspaper, *Naba*. For the most part, the article encouraged women to remain at home, where they could contribute to the jihad as mothers and wives. However, in the concluding paragraph—almost as an afterthought—the author noted that combative jihad is “just as necessary” for women as it is for men “if the enemy enters [the woman's] abode”.¹⁹ It should be noted that the word *bayt*, not *dar*, is used here. While the Arabic *dar* is more commonly associated with geographic territories (such as *dar al-Islam*, the abode of Islam), the word *bayt* can also be used in this way (for example, *bayt al-maqdis*, which is one of many ways to refer to the city of Jerusalem). For this reason, the word “abode” as it appears in this context could be interpreted as referring to more than the woman's literal home.

To summarise, prior to 2017, ISIS's position on the deployment of women was in line with what most other jihadi organisations thought: women are not meant to fight, but they can and should if defensive circumstances demands it. By the beginning of 2017, these circumstances had not yet materialised. However, this was set to change.

18 Author's translation, al-Zawra' Foundation, “Valuable Advice and Important Analysis on the Rules for Women's Participation in Jihad”, August 2015; see Charlie Winter (@charliewinter), “2. In August, #ISjers circulated this clarification on permissibility of women & fighting. Here's my translation.”, Twitter, 19 November 2015, <https://twitter.com/charliewinter/status/667326295706050560>.

19 Author's translation, “I Will Die While Islam Is Glorious”, *Naba* issue LIX, December 2016, 15.

ISIS ON WOMEN AFTER 2017

The first time some sort of female deployment seemed imminent was in the summer of 2017, when an article in ISIS's propaganda magazine *Rumiyah* noted that the time had come for female followers to take their support for the caliphate to the next stage.²⁰ The author stated that women should

*rise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah. Among those blessed women were Umm Amarah Nasibah Bint Kab al-Ansariyyah. Adh-Dhahabi reported she witnessed [the battles of] Uhud, Hdaybiyah, the day of Hunayn, and the day of Yamamah. She fought with courage and her hand was cut off in battle, and the Messenger of Allah said about her, "Indeed the status of Nasibah Bint Kab today is better than the status of so-and-so and so-and-so" (Siyar Alam an-Nubala).*²¹

The analogical meaning of this passage is not difficult to discern. Readers were being prepared for the eventuality that women could at some point soon be called on—or, at the very least, permitted—to volunteer to fight for ISIS. Still, some analysts disregarded it, contending that the group remained “strongly opposed” to the idea of women fighting.²²

This position—that ISIS was “strongly opposed” to the idea of women fighting—was shown to be incorrect in October 2017, when further clarification was released on the matter, this time in the form of an Arabic-language editorial in *Naba* entitled “The obligation on women to engage in jihad against the enemies”.²³ In the 1,200-word essay, the author stated that women were now obliged to engage in jihad on behalf of the caliphate. By way of justification, they drew on the example of the women that had fought at the time of the Prophet Mohammad and implored female

20 “Our Journey to Allah”, *Rumiyah* issue XI, 12–15.

21 *Ibid*, 15.

22 Simon Cottee and Mia Bloom, “The Myth of the ISIS Female Suicide Bomber”, *Atlantic*, 8 September 2017.

23 “The Obligation on Women to Engage in Jihad against the Enemies”, *Naba* issue C, October 2017, 11.

supporters to follow in their footsteps, in much the same way as the July issue of *Rumiyah* did. In subsequent issues of *Naba*, a series of follow-up articles reiterated this new norm, repeatedly asserting the need for women to replicate the actions of their forebears by engaging in combat.²⁴

Some still doubted that ISIS would ever actually follow through on this rhetoric, and when grainy footage of a niqab-clad fighter in eastern Syria surfaced in January 2018, it sparked consternation but was not taken as definitive proof.²⁵ Any ambiguity regarding ISIS's position was dispelled just three weeks later, when a video entitled "Inside the *khilafah* 7" emerged on the messaging app Telegram.²⁶ Produced by ISIS's official al-Hayat Media Centre, it featured footage of fighters wearing women's garb in eastern Syria. The video's narrator referred to them as "chaste *mujahid*" women who were "journeying to [their] Lord with the garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for [their] religion and for the honour of [their] sisters imprisoned by the apostate Kurds".²⁷ Even though there is no guarantee that they were actually women or that, if they were, their deployment was on a large scale—after all, they could only be glimpsed fleetingly, and always from afar—the significance of their appearance here cannot be overstated: ISIS was unambiguously stating that it had lifted the moratorium on female combatants.

The issue was thus laid to rest. "Inside the *khilafah* 7" seemed to unequivocally illustrate that the caliphate's recent communiqués on the permissibility of women's engagement in battlefield operations were being put into practice. While, at the time of writing, ISIS has since been silent on the matter, the reverberations of this embargo being lifted could prove to be transformative.

24 "Stories of the Jihad of Women I", *Naba* issue CII, October 2017, 9.

25 Charlie Winter (@charliewinter), "10. Having looked back through my archive, I think - emphasis on think - that they might be referring to this video, which was released by the A'maq News Agency on 19 January.", Twitter, 13 February 2018, <https://twitter.com/charliewinter/status/963417471385591808>.

26 "Inside the *khilafah* 7", Al Hayat Media Center, February 2018.

27 Ibid.

IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Whether it came about as a tactical response to territorial collapse or was prompted by some other consideration, ISIS has now made clear its position on the permissibility of women's engagement in combat—both conventional and terrorist. However, the question remains: is anyone listening?

To be sure, a number of women have been involved in terrorist attacks or attempted attacks since its first official call to female arms. Among them is Puji Kuswat, who, along with her nine- and 12-year-old daughters, detonated a bomb in an Indonesian church in May 2018. That alone does not demonstrate a *causal* link between what the caliphate says and what supporters of the caliphate do.²⁸ After all, women have been involved in ISIS terrorist plots since as far back as 2015, which is long before the moratorium was lifted. For example, the June 2018 sentencing of Safaa Boular, the teenage girl at the heart of what is widely regarded as the UK's first all-female terrorist cell, was in relation to a plot first conceived in early 2017. That was more than half a year before ISIS's policy change—and that is not to mention other high-profile female-led plots of years gone by, like those of Tashfeen Malik in San Bernardino in 2015 and Ines Madani, Sara Hervouet and Amel Sakaou in Paris in 2016. With this in mind, female participation in jihadi terrorism today is as likely to be a continuation of already entrenched norms as it is to be a direct response to new organisational instructions.

In any case, even if the tactical impact of this shift is not significant in the immediate term, its strategic reverberations will likely be felt for years to come. That is because with the release of “Inside the *khilafah 7*” in particular, ISIS strayed into territory that no other jihadi organisation has ventured into. AQI, Boko Haram and the Chechen Riyad us-Salihin Brigade integrated women into their respective war efforts, but only as asymmetric tools—they were used in terrorist operations or suicide bombings—while conventional fighting was always left to male supporters. However, the women that appeared in “Inside the *khilafah 7*” were neither terrorists nor suicide attackers; they were framed as conventional

²⁸ See, for example, Kate Lamb, “The Bombers Next Door: How an Indonesian Family Turned into Suicide Attackers”, *Guardian*, 19 May 2018.

battlefield fighters—adjuncts to, not anomalies in, ISIS’s military machine. Moreover, and even more controversially, the battles they were said to be fighting in were not framed as defensive; rather, they marked “the beginning of a new era of conquests for the *khilafah* [caliphate]”—that is, of aggressive expansion. This flies in the face of accepted jihadi wisdom.

Even if ISIS’s recent signalling does not manifest in a mass mobilisation of female fighters, it is likely to have a long-term impact. The visual depiction of fighting women left many pro-ISIS jihadis shocked at best and disillusioned at worst, and if the reception of “Inside the *khilafah* 7” proves to be lastingly negative, there is a distinct possibility that it could be the first and last time ISIS boasts of its female combatants. However, even if this is the case, that does not negate what has already come to pass, and absent a full retraction of this new policy position—which would be unlikely but not unprecedented²⁹—the group’s rhetorical stance on the permissibility of *mujahidat* still stands. In view of that, counter-terrorism practitioners must not disregard the potential threat posed by female jihadis; indeed, it could be significantly more substantial than the conventional wisdom states.

²⁹ See, for example, Cole Bunzel (@colebunzel), “If this doc is genuine, IS has just retracted it’s more extreme position on takfir issued last May--on latter see <https://www.memri.org/reports/dispute-over-takfir-rocks-islamic-state>.”, Twitter, 15 September 2017, <https://twitter.com/colebunzel/status/908732003994017794>.

THE FULL SERIES

Find all the papers in the series at:

- [Debunking Myths on Gender and Extremism](https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/debunking-myths-gender-and-extremism)
(<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/debunking-myths-gender-and-extremism>)
- [ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention](#)
- [Boko Haram's Split on Women in Combat](#)
(<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/boko-harams-split-women-combat>)
- [Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence](#) (<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/why-men-fight-and-women-dont-masculinity-and-extremist-violence>)
- [White Widows: The Myth of the Deadliest Jihadi Women](#)
(<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/white-widows-myth-deadliest-jihadi-women>)
- [Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE](#)
(<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/do-mothers-know-best-how-assumptions-harm-cve>)
- [Neither Feminists nor Victims: How Women's Agency Has Shaped Palestinian Violence](#) (<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/womens-agency-palestinian-violence>)

The idea that jihadi women do not fight is widely accepted, but, because of ISIS, women are more likely than ever to engage in jihadi violence.

FOLLOW US

facebook.com/instituteglobal

twitter.com/instituteGC

instagram.com/institutegc

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

info@institute.global

FIND OUT MORE
INSTITUTE.GLOBAL

Copyright © September 2018 by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

All rights reserved. Citation, reproduction and or translation of this publication, in whole or in part, for educational or other non-commercial purposes is authorised provided the source is fully acknowledged. Tony Blair Institute, trading as Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (registered company number: 10505963) whose registered office is 50 Broadway, London, SW1H 0BL.