Women Fighters in the “Islamic State” and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis

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1 Introduction

What role do women play in areas afflicted by terrorist violence? In much of the academic literature on terrorism, they tend to be overlooked. It is often assumed that members of non-State violent political groups using terrorist tactics are men, without acknowledging that women, too, may play an important role. To give just one rather prominent example, one of the leading scholars of terrorism studies calls terrorist cells “bunches of guys”, as if they consisted exclusively of men (Sageman 2008). If the role of women is taken into account at all, more often than not they are depicted as victims of violence. Some publications also look at women as potential actors for non-violent conflict resolution and peacebuilding, often insinuating more or less explicitly that women are more prone to non-violent modes of conflict management than men. The fact that in many conflicts, women, too, are perpetrators of violence is omitted by most academic studies on terrorism. This is not to say that publications on the role of women in violent conflict and war do not exist. Scholars of feminist security studies, feminist international relations as well as conflict and terrorism studies have examined the role of women in violent political movements for decades. However, these scholars’ voices remain marginalised in their respective disciplines, and their findings are rarely translated into public and political discourses, media reports or even practitioners’ publications on the topic of women and violent conflict. This is highly problematic as it is essential to fully understand the actors involved in violent conflict, their tactics and their strategies in order to be able to respond, either from a peace studies or peace activists’ perspective.

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In the case of the so-called “Islamic State” (IS), women and girls joining the organisation have received an unusually high amount of attention in the European media. Since the emergence of IS in the summer of 2014 numerous newspaper headlines have evoked “female fighters” or “jihadists”. Despite these misleading headlines, until very recently there were no confirmed cases of IS women being involved as fighters. First indicators of a change towards women’s active involvement in combat activities could be detected in autumn 2015. In February 2016 the first reported case of IS women fighters was confirmed. This shift from women supporting IS only in non-combat roles to their direct involvement as fighters constitutes a significant change, particularly given IS’s focus on women’s domestic roles and gender segregation. How can this change be explained? Why did IS start involving women in combat at this particular time? Are these first cases of women’s involvement as combatants with IS an exception or can we expect a continuation of this new trend? Will these first incidents develop into a broader phenomenon and spread to the heart of IS-controlled territory or is it more likely that they will remain limited to Libya where the only confirmed deployment of female IS fighters has taken place?

IS is not the first Islamist-inspired armed group employing female fighters. For instance, women have been included as combatants in Palestinian Hamas, Chechen insurgent groups and Sunni groups in Iraq. Some of the groups have repeatedly and extensively relied on women as fighters, either as suicide bombers or, in some cases, in more traditional combat roles. In order to explain the phenomenon of female fighters’ inclusion, this paper compares IS with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The two groups lend themselves to such a comparative analysis since they have both operated in the region of Syria and Iraq, share a very similar ideology and, indeed, history.2

1 I consider a fighter or combatant an individual who directly perpetrates politically motivated violence, either as a suicide attacker or in more complex military operations, such as deployment on the battlefield, involvement in ambushes or other attacks. While it is true that other forms of engagement with violent groups, such as logistic, moral and financial support, are also of paramount importance to these organisations’ survival, and women have been actively engaged in these activities (Von Knop 2007, p. 409), women’s involvement in actual combat constitutes another level of involvement. The highly contested nature of women’s participation in combat makes this specific question particularly relevant.

2 Al-Qaida in Iraq, an offshoot of Al-Qaida Central (AQC), was one of several Sunni jihadist groups operating in Iraq. “Most observers agree that AQI formally ceased to exist in November 2006” when it formally pledged allegiance to the group Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) and announced full integration of all AQI members into ISI (Tonnessen 2015, p. 50). ISI operated under this name “until early April 2013 when it took the name ‘Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIL)” (Hegghammer / Nesser
This paper will show that the main reason why AQI included women in combat was a tightened security context and the perception of being under extreme pressure from opposing military forces. Other factors, such as women’s individual motivations, organisational characteristics and societal aspects only played minor roles. Each one of these has, in principle, the potential of preventing, or at least obstructing, female involvement in combat activities; however, they were trumped by the security context. The parallels between AQI and IS are striking. There is evidence that IS learned from AQI’s use of female fighters. Currently, IS also finds itself under increased pressure due to the international military campaign. Thus, unless the security context in IS-controlled territory changes in favour of IS, an increased participation of women as combatants is to be expected.

This paper consists of five sections, the first being this introduction. In the second section, the status quo of women in IS will be analysed. Current roles and functions of women will be highlighted and the gradually increasing involvement of women in combat will be stressed. We will look at how the current situation can be explained. The third part of this paper is dedicated to the role of women in AQI. Along with an overview of known facts and figures, we will examine the reasons for women’s involvement in military operations in Iraq, analysing individual, organisational, societal and security factors. In the fourth part of this paper, we will look at whether or not this shift from women’s supportive roles to their involvement in combat activities with AQI can help us understand what currently seems to be happening within IS. We will see whether it is possible to tentatively predict any probable future developments. In the conclusion, along with a summary of finding, a brief outline of possible strategies to prevent and counter female radicalisation will be provided.

2 Women’s Roles in IS: The Situation Until Now

Women had not been confirmed as being involved as fighters with IS until February 2016 when the first recorded use of female combatants occurred in Lybia. According to newspaper reports, seven female IS militants were placed...
in custody and at least three were killed in connection with an incident in which one woman attempted to carry out a suicide attack (Osborne 29.02.2016). The women, it was reported by local military officials, had been fighting alongside IS men (Trew 29.02.2016). Shortly afterwards, in early March 2016, there were unconfirmed reports of women taking part in the IS attack on Ben Guardane in Tunisia (Mideastwide 10.03.2016). Unconfirmed reports of female IS supporters fighting in Syria date back as far as July 2014 (Abouzeid 20.07.2014), and there have been unverified reports of IS training female suicide attackers since early 2015 (Argentiere 02.04.2015). However, the attack in Libya is the first confirmed use of female combatants with IS. In the following section, we will examine what women’s roles within IS have been so far and explore to which extent women have been pushing to be involved more directly in combat activities.

According to UN figures, 25,000 people from more than 100 countries have joined IS as of summer 2015 (Ali 2015, p. 4). Up to 4,000 of these are Western Muslims and circa 550 of them women (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 8; Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 4). The percentage of women joining from other parts of the world are comparable to those numbers. Most of the Westerners joining IS are second generation Muslim immigrants and some are Western converts (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 495). “There is significant diversity within the profiles of women radicalised and migrating to ISIS territory” which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify a general profile of women joining IS (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 69). One common characteristic is the women’s young age, with many of them being in their late teens or early twenties (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 16). Many of them are younger than male fighters joining IS from abroad (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500). While many of the women’s families “place significant emotional pressure on women not to migrate to territories under ISIS control” (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 18), some women join their husbands, brothers or fathers (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 10-11; Saltman / Smith 2015: 9). Some women travel on their own, sometimes with young children, or in all-female groups (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 10, 19).

The diversity in women’s backgrounds is reflected in their highly complex and multi-causal motivations for joining IS (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 17). It is contested to what extent women joining IS are victims who were lured into joining or confident young women guided by feminist principles (Jacoby 2015, p. 537-541; Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500). However, overall, men’s and women’s motivations for joining IS seem to be very similar, if not the same, especially with regard to push factors (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 9; see also Ali 2015, p. 15; Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500; Neumann 2015, p. 9). Push factors include feelings of isolation in the West, the perception that Muslims worldwide are being attacked and frustration over a lack of international action (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 9-13). Pull factors, i.e. positive incentives to
join IS, include the desire to fulfil the perceived religious duty of helping build the Caliphate State, ideals of belonging, identity and community as well as a romanticisation of life under IS (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 13-17). Differences in men’s and women’s motivations seem to exist notably on the level of financial incentives which are claimed to be of less importance to women (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500) and perhaps with regards to romantic ideas about their participation in IS’s struggle which women might have more often than men (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500-501).

In terms of women’s roles within IS, both women’s social media accounts and a semi-official document published by a group of supporters of the IS-branch Al-Khanssa Brigades help shed light on the topic (Winter 2015). When State-building became a goal, IS began to actively encourage Muslim women to join them in their newly-founded “Caliphate”, as an “Islamic state would be impossible without wives and mothers who, alongside their male fighters, would breed future generations and accomplish domestic duties upon which ISIS’s vision of society depends” (Jacoby 2015, p. 535). According to this vision, women have predominantly domestic roles, such as carrying out household tasks and raising children (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 22; Winter 2015, p. 17-18). Their mobility outside the home is restricted (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 23). Other than their domestic roles, women, and especially those coming from the West, act as recruiters, propagandists and inciters (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 33-34). Online platforms allow them to contribute to the group’s recruiting and propaganda activities without violating the group’s rules about gender segregation and female visibility in public spaces. In public IS communications, women take a role much more prominent than in any previous Islamist armed group (Ali 2015, p. 5; Klausen 2015, p. 16), both as addressees and contributors to the group’s propaganda (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 18). Women are being included in order to “make extremism appear like a normal life-style decision” (Klausen 2015, p. 17). The very fact that women join IS voluntarily helps legitimise the group’s struggle (Jacoby 2015, p. 535; Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500) and, indeed, the potential impact on IS sympathisers is feared to be considerable (Ali 2015, p. 15; Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 30-31, 34). Some women also maintain limited official roles, such as nurses, doctors or teachers. “ISIS requires a certain number of female roles to cater to female medical and educational needs, given strict laws on gender segregation” (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 14). These official roles include women’s participation in the two all-female groups with limited policing responsibilities, the Al-Khanssa Brigades and Umm Al-Rayyan (Jacoby 2015, p. 536). It is contested whether the formation of these units “could be seen as a first step in women’s attempt to achieve a more militant role, or if it represents the limit they can achieve and it was mainly created to intimidate other women and gain social control” (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 502).
There is evidence suggesting that at least some of the women would want to take up arms themselves and actively join the male fighters of IS. Analyses of the social media accounts of Western women who have joined IS show that the women in the sample unequivocally support violence carried out by IS (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 28). They celebrate beheadings of civilians taken hostage by IS and justify these acts according to their interpretation of the Islamic Law (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 28-29). Via their social media accounts, they express their “deep antipathy towards the West and a desire for bloodshed there” (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 30-31). Some of the women go beyond glorifying the violence perpetrated by the men of their group and express a desire to carry out violent acts themselves. “In response to a question asking her [online] what she thinks about the killing of Steven Sotloff, Umm Ubaydah [a female follower of IS residing within the jurisdiction of the group] responds ‘I wish I did it.’” (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 31). Peresin / Cervone (2015, p. 501) claim that especially some of the Western women’s “expectations seem to be quite different from the projects that current ISIS leadership has for women”. Moreover, women being trained in the use of fire arms (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 26), wearing weapons for self-protection (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 502) and joining the Al-Khanssa Brigade indicate that at least some of the women are interested in activities related and relevant to combat activities. In fact, this mirrors the finding that women’s motivations to join IS are highly similar to men’s motivations. “Women have no fewer motives than men for engaging in jihad. They share the same political motives and may have additional personal reasons […]” (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 497). Some of them argue on a religious level, as this statement by a Syrian female fighter who was fighting in the ranks of another Syrian jihadist group and planning to join IS in the summer of 2014, reflects: “Is there anything in Islam that says I should sit at home? I hate this ignorance. Convince me through my religion and I will accept it” (Abouzeid 20.07.2014). At the same time, it is important to put the comments of individual women in context. Women wanting to fight remain a minority. “The others, while supporting the violence of ISIS, do not express an explicit desire to be directly involved. Furthermore, the very women who describe their desire to fight also emphasise the importance of their domestic role” (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 31). This goes hand in hand with IS’s official position on women’s role within the organisation, according to which their roles as mothers and wives are to be prioritised over other possible activities (Winter 2015, p. 22).
3 Female Fighters in AQI

A number of Islamist-inspired armed groups worldwide have resorted to women as fighters. Chechen insurgents and violent Palestinian organisations are two of the most prominent examples. However, one group that lends itself particularly well to comparison with IS is Al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), a local branch of Al-Qa`ida Central (AQC) that operated in Iraq in the early 2000s. Similarly to IS, Al-Qa`ida is a violent Islamist group with a global agenda and adheres to a very similar ideology (e.g. emphasis on violent jihad, strict gender segregation and takfir, i.e. declaring other Muslims to be infidels). In fact, the two groups have a common history, as IS emerged from an ideological schism between AQC and AQI’s successor organisation Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) (Novenario 2016, p. 2), with the division mostly being a result of disagreements over questions of strategy and tactics as well as rivalries between the AQC and AQI leadership (Ganor 2015, p. 60).

Women participated as fighters from the very beginning of the war in Iraq. Most of them were employed as suicide attackers. In fact, the very first suicide attackers in Iraq were two women who blew themselves up in 2003 on behalf of a group of supporters of Saddam Hussein. It was reported “in May 2009 that the Iraqi Interior Ministry released figures showing over 50 female suicide bombers conducted operations between 2004 and 2008. In 2008 alone, 32 were recorded” (Dearing 2010, p. 1098). Between 2003 and 2011, 62 suicide attacks were perpetrated by women (Davis 2013, p. 286). AQI claimed responsibility for four of these attacks which took place between 2005 and 2007 (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 160). “While difficult to determine, as many attacks went unclaimed, the majority of female suicide bombers in Iraq are related to Al Qaeda in Iraq. This hypothesis is consistent with the targets that they have primarily attacked” (Davis 2013, p. 287). It is also upheld by other researchers working on the topic (Dearing 2010, p. 1085; Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 160) and supported by the fact that in autumn 2007, the leadership of AQI announced the creation of a brigade of female suicide bombers (Davis 2013, p. 282-283). An element of AQI based in the province Diyala was tasked with recruiting potential female suicide attackers (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 160). The organisation specifically targeted female converts from Europe, with up to 47 of them being directly contacted (Cunningham 2008, p. 94-95). AQI was the first AQ branch to use female fighters. Amongst the four attacks claimed by AQI were attacks by the Belgian convert Muriel Degauque (who had adopted the first name Myrium and her husband’s last name Goris) and by Sajida Rishawi who attempted to blow herself up at a wedding reception in Jordan (Cunningham 2008, p. 165-167). Both Degauque and Rishawi were married to fellow AQI members, and Rishawi’s brother had been a senior aide to Zarqawi in Iraq.
where he had been killed two years prior to her attack, which points to the importance of family networks when trying to understand involvement in terrorist violence (Von Knop 2007, p. 403).

This shift from women’s involvement in mere supportive roles to their active participation in combat could be surprising considering AQI’s ideology and the gender image the group upheld. Similarly to IS, the role of women in AQI according to the group’s ideology was mostly a domestic one. Women’s roles as wives and mothers superseded any other responsibilities they might take up. Full gender segregation as well as women being required to remain fully veiled and confined to the home, unless movement outside the home was deemed “necessary”, rendered women’s active involvement in the group’s public activities difficult. Nevertheless, women participated actively in recruitment and spreading AQI propaganda, mostly via the internet (Von Knop 2007). In this, AQI followed a very similar strategy as IS, with the latter taking women’s participation even further. In fact, women’s presence in social media accounts of IS is more widespread than in the campaign of any other Islamist-inspired group. AQ, on the other hand, had its own women magazine, al-Khansaa, which was launched in August 2004 and in which, amongst other things, the role of women in jihad was discussed (Cunningham 2008, p. 93). The emphasis continued to be on women’s indirect support of violent jihad, as this quote by a female AQ supporter in al-Khansaa magazine shows:

A Muslim woman is a female Jihad warrior always and everywhere. She is a female Jihad warrior who wages Jihad by means of funding Jihad. She wages Jihad by means of waiting for her Jihad warrior husband, and when she educates her children to that which Allah loves. She wages jihad when she supports Jihad when she calls for jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer. (Umm Badr, Obstacles in the Path of the Jihad Warrior Woman, al-Khansaa, cit. in von Knop 2007, p. 397)

However, by conceptualising jihad as fard-al-ayn, an obligation for every individual Muslim, as opposed to fard-al-kifaya, a duty on the community as a whole, the authors of al-Khansaa declared jihad obligatory for women, too (Cunningham 2008, p. 93). This declaration constituted an important step towards women’s involvement in combat, as it made way for their participation on an ideological level. Interestingly, even though AQC’s leading ideologue Zawahiri had recently declared his stance to be opposed to female suicide bombers, in 2009 an open letter by his wife was published in which she encouraged women’s participation in jihad, including in the form of suicide attacks (Davis 2013, p. 283).

Another aspect linked to AQI’s organisational characteristics was its long-standing and exceptional history of brutality. Zarqawi, AQI’s leader, was noto-
rious for being particularly ruthless and, in the words of one researcher, known to be “innovative in his tactical style” (Cunningham 2008, p. 95; Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 162-163). It was Zarqawi who made a name for himself and his group by carrying out spectacular beheadings of hostages and sharing the video-recordings of these online. This brutality, along with increased attacks on civilians and Shia Muslims, even led to a dispute with AQC and bin Laden, who disagreed with Zarqawi on his tactics and was worried that they might alienate local populations (Cunningham 2008, p. 95; Novenario 2016, p. 2). For a group that has already crossed the limits of usually employed war and terror tactics, involving female combatants might just be yet another taboo being broken.

Unusual, spectacular terrorist tactics promise to garner above-average attention by the media, the general public as well as the groups’ opponents and potential rivals, which can be crucial for terrorist groups who often depend on this attention to a high degree. In the case of women terrorists, it has been claimed that female terrorism “receive[s] eight times the media coverage” compared to attacks carried out by men (Bloom 2011, p. 7). Indeed, when the very first female suicide attack conducted by AQI got above-average media attention, it was followed by more attacks within just a six-week period, which could be an indicator that the group recognised the efficiency of employing female operatives (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 163). By using female combatants, the group also stresses its determination (Bloom 2005, p. 144) and shames men into action. Bloom claims that AQI did exactly that when they “exploit[ed] the image of a desperate Iraqi woman throwing herself into battle because there were not enough brave men to step up” (Bloom 2011, p. 210). Non-State violent organisations do not operate in a vacuum. Many of them learn from each other, either indirectly by observing and imitating or directly through training (Cunningham 2003, p. 172). In this context, the fact that AQI started employing its first female suicide attackers in 2005, two years after this tactic was tried out for the first time in Iraq in 2003, is telling. It is highly likely that AQI learned from its predecessors’ successful operations and thus decided to emulate them. Another aspect of inter-group relations is individual groups’ attempts to distinguish themselves from rivaling groups (Crenshaw 1987, p. 24; Oots 1989, p. 148). In this regard, it is likely that AQC’s opposition to the use of female fighters constituted an additional motivation for AQI to employ women attackers (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 161-162).

Even the most secretively operating terrorist groups are, to a certain degree, dependent on society’s approval of their operations, even if it is only tacit approval. In most societies combat is seen as a male domain. This perception of men’s and women’s roles in combat can change during conflict; however, society’s resistance still constitutes one of the bigger challenges for armed groups.
planning to include female fighters. Backlash from society has pushed other non-State armed groups, such as Hamas and the Afghani Taliban, to review their use of female fighters and to retract claims over attacks carried out by women (Cunningham 2008; Dearing 2010, p. 1095, footnote 12). AQI overcame this challenge by way of two tactical moves. First, women’s participation was framed as fard-al-ayn and backed with religious evidence. Second, the organisation mainly focused on targeting European converts in its recruitment strategy (Cunningham 2008, p. 94-95). That way, resistance from the local population was kept to a minimum, as it was not their daughters, sisters and wives who were selected to carry out the very non-traditional role of a female suicide attacker. On the other hand, using European converts also carried the advantage of gaining increased media attention, especially by Western media outlets, and thus spreading the group’s message. On an individual level, many converts (especially if their conversion is recent) tend to be particularly eager to live up to the standards of their newly chosen religion and are, due to their lack of knowledge, often disproportionally vulnerable to religious manipulation.

Lastly, any analysis of an armed group’s decision-making would not be complete without taking into account the impact the particular security context the group was facing. Dearing’s theory is particularly helpful in this context (Dearing 2010). He states that a permissive security context (in which an armed group’s mobility is not restricted, they have safe havens to retreat to, and their manpower is not limited by their male operatives being incarcerated or eliminated) is not likely to lead groups that are, by way of their ideology and the attitude of their host society, reluctant to include women fighters and to increase female participation in military roles. According to Dearing, this was the case for the Taliban in Afghanistan during the US-led war on them in the early 2000s. The pressure they were facing from their military opponents was simply not high enough to lead them to review their war tactics so radically as to include female fighters.

Compare this situation with Al Qaeda operatives in Diyala province, Iraq during 2007–2008. U.S. Special Forces became exceedingly efficient at liquidating mid-level Al Qaeda commanders, breaking apart the structural alignment of the organization to the point that commander of the Joint Special Operations Command, Lt. General Stanley McChrystal said, “We sensed that Al Qaeda was going to implode.” Female combatants were a logical response to an effective U.S. counterinsurgency strategy that led to the elimination of a number of male Al Qaeda fighters and the reduction of their support base. This became especially pronounced in 2008, when female suicide bombers reached the highest level in Iraq with 32 killing themselves (Dearing 2010, p. 1085).
For AQI, including women was a tactic of last resort (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 161). In principle, female participation in combat contradicted the group’s ideology. The way to women’s inclusion in military operations was only cleared by a reframing of women’s roles in jihad, as we have seen above when we discussed the role of ideology. The aim was to improve the group’s tactical advantage in a difficult security context, to garner increased media attention and thus shame men into joining. And indeed, when the first female suicide attack officially claimed by AQI garnered the desired media attention, more attacks followed within just a six-week period (Stone / Pattillo 2011, p. 163). Possible backlash from society and a lack of local volunteers was avoided by focusing on the recruitment of European converts, and the divergent stance of AQC on female involvement was ignored. In other ways, AQI found ways to overcome (or at least outweigh) individual, societal and organisational factors when the group’s leadership found that the security context necessitated the inclusion of female fighters. IS shares many similarities with AQI, and women already play an important role in the organisation. Does that mean we can also expect an increase in the use of female IS fighters, maybe even in the main territory controlled by the group?

4 Female Fighters: A New Trend in IS?

In terms of ideology, IS is closer to AQI than most other groups operating in the area the two organisations have been active in. This ideological proximity is, for example, expressed in their support for full gender segregation, highly restrictive norms of gender relations, violent jihad, takfir, their opposition to local secular political leaders and foreign military operations in the area. Both organisations competed and disagreed with AQC, mostly over tactical questions such as, amongst others, the timeline for the declaration of an Islamic State and Caliphate. Despite the disproportional space given to women in the group’s social media strategy (Ganor 2015, p. 59), so far, based on the content of its propaganda material, the current IS leadership seems to have been against women’s involvement in fighting (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 33). However, in the Manifesto on Women published by members of the Al-Khanssa Brigade in 2015, the possibility of women joining the fight once external circumstances change (as they did in Chechnya and Iraq, two cases explicitly mentioned in the Manifesto) is invoked, and at least some voices on social media seem to be in favour of extending women’s participation (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 31). While it is difficult to quantify these voices, their very existence points to the fact that there is debate, or at least diverse positions, about these questions within IS. Many accounts of former members of IS and other jihadist groups in Syria report (some)
ideological divisions between European and local IS members, as illustrated by this quote by a Syrian female fighter with another jihadist organisation fighting in the war: “They just didn’t want me to do it. The Syrian mujahedeen choke, they’re pained when they see a female fighting. It affects them deeply. The foreign fighters don’t.” (Abouzeid 20.07.2014). The fact that some IS members are in favour of female participation in combat, or at least do not seem to mind women taking up more active roles in the fight, does not mean that women’s inclusion in military operations will follow immediately, but it shows that the idea is not entirely foreign to at least some members of the group. Some scholars expect that women coming from societies where their participation in public life is relatively common, in particular, might request to get involved in armed combat (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 501), even though at the moment it seems they are content with the more traditional roles ascribed to them.

We have seen above that the history of brutality AQI could look back on was conducive to the inclusion of female fighters. The group had already tried out unusual and spectacular tactics and had witnessed how these increased the media attention most non-State violent groups are very eager to receive. The same is true for IS. In the past two years since the group’s emergence, IS have continuously used “cruelty and brutality to assure compliance and suppress opposition” (Ganor 2015, p. 60). In fact, by including mass rapes, enslavement, genocide and public immolations to their repertoire of war atrocities, they have outdone AQI in terms of brutality and taken their innovation of unusual and spectacular war tactics to another level. There are even examples where AQC have clearly distanced themselves from attacks carried out by IS members (Karmon 2015, p. 73). Considering this history of brutality and transgression of previously accepted limits of violence and war tactics, including female fighters would simply be another taboo broken by the group.

Competition between different groups, or more specifically rival branches of the same group, the so-called outbidding, played a role in AQI leader Zarqawi pursuing the new tactic of involving female fighters. Today, IS are also in competition with other locally operating jihadist groups and networks (Novenario 2016, p. 1). IS is increasingly focusing on outbidding, which may be linked to its continuing competition for recruits with other rebel factions (Novenario 2016, p. 10). In this context, using female fighters could serve as a clear marker to distinguish IS from other groups and to stress its members’ determination, in line with its already practiced strategy of maximum brutality. Another inter-group factor that would speak in favour of IS employing female fighters is the fact that even though IS and its membership has evolved in recent years, some AQI influence remains (Tonnessen 2015, p. 50-54). In fact, the statement on women in IS published by members of the al-Khansaa Brigade (Winter 2015) in which the group directly invokes the experience of jihadists in Iraq shows...
clearly that current IS members are aware of this part of the group’s organisational history and tactical decisions made by AQI in the past.

As discussed above, terrorist organisations do rely on a certain degree of support by the community they are based or operating in. IS, however, is relatively isolated from the local community (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 24-25). Its systematic use of cruelty and brutality has suppressed most open opposition and resistance in the territories controlled by them (Ganor 2015, p. 60). Moreover, as we have seen in the case of AQI above, one way of managing the risk of alienating local populations is to recruit foreign women instead of local ones. In fact, this might be one of the main reasons why IS has been so open to Western women joining them (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 500). Also, many of the foreign IS supporters moving to IS-controlled territory are not very well regarded by local populations. It is thus much less likely that members of the local communities will stand up against their participation in combat. In practice, this means that were IS to decide to continue and expand their use of female fighters, it is unlikely that resistance of the local population would stop them.

Lastly, one of the main reasons AQI decided to employ female fighters in Iraq was the tightened security context which pushed them towards using women as a last resort. As of early 2016, IS continues to control large parts of Syria and, to a lesser degree, Iraq. “They rule an area larger than the UK, with a population of 8 million people” (Ali 2015, p. 7). Even though much of this land is desert, it provides them with a vast hinterland and refuge. Female combatants are simply not needed, as men can move about freely and reach their targets without fear of detection. In this context, it is noteworthy that the first recorded use of female fighters with IS took place in Libya were the group’s territorial control is much less far-reaching than in Syria and Iraq. With the data available at the moment, it is hard to come up with a definite explanation; however, the fact that women were involved in at least one complex operation in Libya might be an indicator for the group trying out this new tactic in Libya where not only the security context is more challenging, but where IS is also struggling more to keep the local population under control. Whether or not IS will decide to continue and expand the use of female fighters to Syria and Iraq might depend to a large extent on the security context. In the face of an international coalition and military campaign as well as increasing competition by other jihadist organisations operating in the area (Ganor 2015, p. 57, 61), the pressure on IS is likely to continue. If this were to be the case, the likelihood of IS employing more female fighters would increase, as it did in the case of AQI facing extreme pressure and a rather successful military campaign by US forces in Iraq.
5 Conclusion

The main reason why there have, until recently, been no women fighters with IS is the relatively permissive security context. The organisation had not been not under extreme military pressure by external forces, it had sufficient male manpower and received a high level of attention by the media and (potential) supporters. Women fighters were simply not needed. As far as the individual, organisational and societal levels are concerned, there are only minor barriers to women’s involvement in combat. Individually, women have largely the same motivations as men to join IS and there are at least some women, including supporters of IS, who would be interested in fighting and partaking in combat activities. This initial motivation is likely to increase as the conflict intensifies and the women increasingly experience bombing raids and are exposed to the realities of life in a war zone (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 26, 37). Women’s involvement with the Al-Khansaa Brigades is also likely to prepare them for combat roles, as even if Al-Khansaa members do not actually participate in combat, they do nevertheless carry out highly violent activities, including the killing of civilians not deemed in compliance with the group’s morality standards. If Western women who might have been expecting to be involved in actual fighting once they join IS continue to push for more active roles (as indicated by the al-Khansaa manifesto on women, see Winter 2015), a “compromise could be achieved by expanding the authority of the all-female ‘morality police’ and by giving them more police power over the overall population on the occupied territories” (Peresin / Corvone 2015, p. 502). Regardless of what happens on the ground in IS-held Syria and Iraq, radicalised female returnees or women who are unable to join IS but who nevertheless seek to fight for the group could pose a considerable threat to European societies (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 37; Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 496). These women could take the initiative and carry out smaller attacks alone or in small groups, even if only inspired and not directly instructed by IS (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 504); when acting in small groups or even as “lone wolves”, they are much less bound to group-related constraints which an organisation like IS is exposed to. The first cases of this sort are already being reported, such as the knife attack of a female IS supporter in Germany in autumn 2015 (Spiegel Online 15.04.2016).

On an organisational level, IS ideology does not promote women fighting; however, as the comparison with AQI has shown, there are ideologically very similar groups which did, after initial reluctance, include female combatants. There is also evidence for an inner-IS debate about the role of women in the group. On the societal level, due to its campaign of terror, IS has been largely successful in repressing any open opposition. The group remains rather isolated from local populations, and many of its female members who are willing
to fight are not locals. It is likely that if IS were to decide to continue the employment of female fighters, that, similar to AQI, it would focus on recruiting Western Muslims. The parallels with the situation of AQI are striking and it is highly likely that, like AQI, IS would be able to overcome possible barriers on the individual, societal and organisational level, if, from the group’s perspective, the security context was perceived as changing in favour of IS’s opponents. The fact that the first recorded use of female IS fighters took place in Libya is telling as this could be an indicator of the group trying out a new, contested tactic in a peripheral area of the territory under its control. Whether or not this is indeed the case remains to be seen.

As we have seen above in the section on individual motivations, the profiles of women joining IS are so diverse that it is difficult to draw generalised conclusions. IS members, both male and female, “come from a great range of cultural, ethnic, familial, educational and even religious backgrounds” (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 51). If measures aimed at preventing and countering female radicalisation are to be effective, they must take this diversity of the population that is at risk or already affected into account. “Various local and national prevent programmes have been criticised in the past for seeming to profile audiences based on ethnic or religious backgrounds” (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 55) which carries the risk of further alienating young Muslims in the West, many of whom already feel that their ethnic or religious affiliation places them under suspicion. To this date, most governments and societies struggle to come up with effective prevention and de-radicalisation mechanisms (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 51; see also Cunningham 2007). Most experts call for a comprehensive approach, including military and judiciary measures but also programmes addressing ideological factors and personal circumstances (Peresin / Cervone 2015, p. 505).

However, there is not always consensus on how to implement these measures in practice. Examples of best practice or lessons learned are rare. Most experts call for a focus on education, critical media skills and counter-narratives (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 56). As far as de-radicalisation is concerned, there is disagreement on whether programmes should mainly address ideological factors or social and emotional issues (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 58). In terms of key actors, former extremists, communities and families are believed to be central in the counter-radicalisation process (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 56-57; Peresin 2015, p. 506). Relations between the government, the private sector and civil society are believed to be central, too (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 57). Different European States have developed first approaches of how to deal with radicalisation and involvement with extremist groups (Saltman / Smith 2015, p. 59-67); however, too few of these programmes focus on women’s particular circumstances. If female radicalisation and involvement with terrorist and
extremist groups is to be challenged by their home countries, the development of female-specific counter-radicalisation programmes is paramount. As practitioners working on the prevention and countering of radicalisation and political violence, we simply cannot afford to pretend that women are only victims of political violence and extremism when in reality in many groups, directly or indirectly, they contribute to the spreading of extremist content as well as the infliction of political violence.

Bibliography


List of Abbreviations

- AQ: Al-Qaida
- AQC: Al-Qaida Central
- AQI: Al-Qaida in Iraq
- IS: “Islamic State”
- ISI: Islamic State in Iraq
- ISIL: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
- UN: United Nations
- US: United States (of America)