

# Women In Jihad: Militant Leadership Monitor Special Report

## Personalities Behind the Insurgency

QUARTERLY SPECIAL REPORT - MARCH 6, 2019

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Shamima Begum

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This Special Report includes articles from Terrorism Monitor, Jamestown's Global Terrorism Analysis publication.



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*The Jamestown Foundation is proud to have had a reoccurring analyst such as Halla Diyab continually write on the timely, and vastly understudied, issue of Women in Jihad. The Jamestown Foundation is excited to release this single compilation of her work to the public, with an introduction by Alison Pargeter. Halla Diyab is the Founder & Director of Liberty Media Productions which focuses on cross-cultural issues between Britain and the Middle East. She is also a columnist at al-Arabiya English, writing on Syria, Islam and Middle East political affairs.*

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## Introduction

*Alison Pargeter*

With the Islamic State (IS) Caliphate in tatters, the prospective return of a number of female members of IS to their home countries has catapulted the issue of women and jihadist militancy to the fore. Despite the important scholarly work that has been carried out on female radicalization and recruitment to militant groups over recent years, the main focus has been on what to do with male returnees, with little public attention afforded to their female counterparts. Yet cases like that of British teenager, Shamima Begum—who left her east London home to join the Caliphate but who is now asking to return to the UK—have attracted a cacophony of media attention, throwing the issue directly into the spotlight.

These cases raise serious questions, as well as uncomfortable moral dilemmas, for Western governments and societies. While some of these women have greeted the collapse of the Caliphate and their subsequent capture with claims that they were victims, duped into joining IS by their husbands or other male relatives, others, including Begum, appear to be holding fast to their ideological beliefs. At least some of these returnees pose potential security threats, therefore, to their home countries.

Yet these threats should not be overstated. Although it is impossible to judge exactly what will happen given that Western states are still grappling with how to respond, those individuals we know about will almost certainly be investigated and either face prosecution, or at the very least be monitored upon their return. A number of European countries—including the UK, Netherlands, Germany, and France—have already adopted tougher stances towards female returnees, and now investigate and risk-assess both men and women alike. [1] There is little scope, therefore, for these individuals to act freely.

Although those female returnees we do not know about clearly pose a greater security risk, one should be cautious before assuming that there will be a rush of women seeking to perpetrate terrorist attacks on Western soil. Despite repeated assertions by the media and scholars alike that IS has broken with the jihadist tradition of viewing females as little more than sexual objects and breeding machines, and now promotes them as active militants who should engage in violent acts, we still don't know whether this represents a real or sustained ideological shift on IS' part, or whether it is more about propaganda than anything else.

This isn't to diminish the threat of female militants carrying out attacks on Western soil, as the disrupted plot in Paris in 2016, in which a cell of radicalized French women, allegedly guided by IS commanders in Syria, tried to detonate a car bomb next to the Notre Dame demonstrates. However, the number of women who have actually engaged in such roles, including inside IS territory, appears to have been very limited, and the promotion of females as active combatants may have been more of an opportunistic tactical change in response to a particular set of circumstances at a particular time.

As such, it still isn't clear whether the use of women in this way marks a genuine shift in Sunni militancy, let alone how any such shift may play out in the future. IS has yet to digest the collapse of its Caliphate and the ramifications of such, and as with any revolutionary movement that is facing its own downfall, it is impossible to predict where the group will turn next.

What is arguably of greater concern, however, is the birth of new narratives that will accompany these female returnees. For all the horrors of life under the Caliphate, there is a romanticism that almost borders on the fetishization of these women and their personal trajectories. The media stories and snippets of anecdotal or often autobiographical information that tell of love stories and marriages to heroic martyrs; of the sacrifice of leaving behind the comforts of living in the West to serve the higher cause; and of being empowered as females within the jihadist milieu, could well serve as a potent radicalizing force for potential young female recruits.

Such narratives will be all the more compelling if these women returnees are incarcerated and deprived of their children upon their return. This will enable these women to be portrayed and instrumentalized by militants as heroic figures who have fallen foul of unjust imperialist powers that are intent on destroying Islam and that are willing to victimize young women in order to do so. As such, they could become a focal point for sympathy and future radicalization.

While this is concerning enough for Western nations, the issue is arguably more pressing for states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region itself. While the narrative will be somewhat altered, the image of persecuted females who sacrificed themselves for the higher cause of jihad will likely prove even more powerful in societies where there are constituencies that are more open to militant ideologies. For some, these women will be perceived as having not only defended Islam against corrupt regimes, but also defended the Sunni cause against the advances of Shi'ism. Such a narrative will feed and sustain militancy in the region as well

as further afield.

This collection of articles on females in jihad by Halla Diyab touches on a hugely important topic, therefore, and one that clearly requires further study. In these articles, Diyab focuses on a number of women—both from the MENA region and beyond—who joined IS and other militant organizations, and sketches their stories. She depicts their routes to radicalization, as well as their experiences in the Caliphate, and in some instances their fate once the Caliphate has fallen. In so doing, Diyab looks at the shifting role of females in the jihadist scene, examining how and to what effect they have departed from traditional gender norms in contemporary Islamic activism.

As such, these pieces represent a timely commentary on an increasingly pressing topic. They are a reminder, too, that there is no single pattern or easy generalization to be made about these women and their experiences. Indeed, Diyab's work highlights the urgent need to understand these women and their motivations better. It is only by moving beyond the kinds of caricatures that are being peddled in the media and by looking more seriously at these female returnees both in the West and in the MENA region that we will be able to understand and contextualize their experiences and how they may impact security in the future.

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## Notes

[1] Shamima Begum: how Europe toughened its stance on women returning from Islamic State. Elizabeth Pearson. The Conversation. 20 February 2019.

## Ahlam al-Nasr: Islamic State's Jihadist Poetess

*Halla Diyab*

Finally, God granted me al-samaha [allowance to enter the caliphate land],

Oh, my comrade, I've shook hands with arms

I've lived [in] the caliphate and its excellencies

(al-Quds al-Arabi, October 14, 2014)

With these lines, Syrian revolutionary poetess turned Islamic State propagandist Ahlam al-Nasr announced her performance of al-nafir (the call to arms or to mobilize) by finally arriving at the Islamic State's stronghold, Raqqa, and visiting an arms shop. [1] Through her subsequent marriage to another of the Islamic State's key propagandists, Muhammad Mahmoud, al-Nasr is one half of a jihadist propagandist power couple. Unlike the traditional roles that women occupy within other terrorist groups, (where women are kept in the shadows away from their partner's acts of terror), the prominence of al-Nasr's voice significantly widens the reach of the jihadist couple as it overtly refutes the stereotypical archetype of the oppressive husband and therefore serves to influence Muslims who aspire to live the same "idyllic" life. In addition to al-Nasr using her poetry to personalize the experience of jihad, this public coupling has allowed her public profile to rapidly gather global momentum (particularly on social media), amassing followers from across a vast variety of demographics. Her voice gives the Islamic State a wider reach, particularly to women who can, in some cases, relate to the portrayal of al-Nasr's character and are attracted to the "pure life" she is living in the Islamic State.

Poetry has deep roots in Arabic culture and tradition, yet al-Nasr's poetry is not an expression of devotion to Islam, but rather the utilization of a cultural art form to make the personal identity of terrorists resonate with the wider public. Her meticulously-crafted poetry shows the Islamic State's efforts to shift the image of jihadists from barbaric and savage archetypes to eloquent and intelligent individuals. This not only reflects the changing face of the Islamic State's jihad, but gives the organization a seemingly unique angle, allowing them to easily reach out to the wider public and become closer to "ordinary people."

**Personal Life**

Ahlam al-Nasr, which means dreams of victory/triumph in Arabic, is not the poetess’ real name; she and many others who spoke against the Syrian regime resorted to aliases to hide their identity for safety and security purposes. Very little is known about her personal life, but she is believed to be only 15. She was raised in Saudi Arabia where she attended a private school in al-Khobar (al-Marsd.com, October 23, 2014).

Al-Nasr is the granddaughter of Shaykh Mustafa al-Bugha, the Syrian imam renowned for his public support of Bashar al-Assad by—in the Eid prayer’s khutbah (sermon)—depicting al-Assad as a fair imam and one of the first seven chosen by God to be given God’s blessing on the Day of Judgment (Middle East Broadcasting Center, October 23, 2014; YouTube, April 17, 2011). Al-Nasr significantly rebelled against the subdued stance of her grandfather towards the Syrian civil war by influencing and radicalizing her mother, Dr. Iman al-Bugha, a university professor of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). It was Iman who encouraged al-Nasr to learn poetry from an early age (al-Hayat, October 24, 2014; al-Marsd.com, October 23, 2014). Iman al-Bugha declared allegiance to the Islamic State last October, and published a six-page pamphlet titled “I am [an] ISIS [the previous name of the Islamic State] believer, a ‘Daeshi’ before ISIS was founded” (Orient News [Dubai], October 27, 2014).

After several failed attempts to enter Syria, in October of last year, al-Nasr successfully managed to make the journey back to Syria, accompanied by her brother.

**Path to Radicalization**

During the time of the Syrian uprising in 2011, al-Nasr’s name was comfortably listed among those of other Syrian revolutionary poets. Her early poems, dated between 2011 and early 2012, were accompanied by audio recordings of her voice and images of the Syrian revolutionary flag. They were charged with revolutionary spirit, often directly denouncing Bashar al-Assad and his suppression of the people’s uprising:

Oh Homs, our pride and dignity, to you I send my salaam (greetings)

The city of courage and intrepid sacrifices

Bashar and his gang to be crushed!

Who gets away with their kufr (disbelief) and criminality?

(YouTube, March 25, 2012)

Subtle Islamic references laid the undertone to some of her earliest poems, which depict what is known as the Dara’a Massacre, allegedly committed by Syrian security forces against 15 children who spray painted anti-government graffiti in the southern city of Dara’a in March 2011 (BBC, March 5, 2011; Human Rights Watch, June 1, 2011). She wrote:

O you people have been deprived of Islam,

You devoted Muslims are oppressed!

O you people who hope to fulfil your dreams,

Which will be green under the shadow of Islam!

(7alaby2.wordpress.com, March 2011)

As the civil war went on, more Islamic imagery began to pervade her poetry. The shift in al-Nasr’s rhetoric reflected the gradual process of her radicalization, and by 2014, it was apparent that the enemy was no longer al-Assad but the “unseen,” meaning the unbelievers. The references to “freedom,” which had dominated her earlier works, steadily began to dissipate, with her 2012 poem “How can we accept dialogue?” deeming any verbal attempts for resolution between the Syrian rebels and the Syrian regime to be hopeless:

We swear we will live free forever,

Is it when we have rebelled, you feel threatened

And so proposed reform?

No to dialogue between us, ever

We [Syrian people] are heroes

Get out you savages!

This is our free land

For which, we will sacrifice our souls

(YouTube, February 7, 2012)

Her passionate narratives were no longer set in Syrian cities, instead referring to other cities, such as Mosul and Baghdad.

Her conscious shift reflects the Islamic State's concept of jihadism as geographically-borderless and separate from national identity, instead replaced by a universal, Muslim identity. This echoes al-Baghdadi's claims that "Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The State is a state for all Muslims. The land is for the Muslims" (SITE, July 1, 2014). Similarly, al-Nasr shifted away from defining herself as Syrian to instead identifying solely with the broader Muslim identity, allowing herself to identify with the suffering of all Muslims globally and giving herself the freedom to take her empathy from the oppressed Syrians and instead apply it to violent Islam and the Islamic State's *al-nafir*:

Oh folks, let's build our Islamic state together,

And bring back glories to Islam!

(YouTube, August 15, 2014)

It is believed that al-Nasr's radicalization was initiated over the Internet under the influence of Muhammad Mahmoud (a.k.a. Abu Usama al-Gharib), who encouraged her to travel to the Islamic State, and to whom she was wed soon after her arrival (Klmt.net, October 14, 2014; Vetogate.com, November 11, 2014). Al-Nasr's coupling with Mahmoud perpetuates the Islamic State's "jihadist couple" illusion, which revolves around the attraction that is formed between a controlling male fundamentalist and the female he has radicalized. [2] These couplings are formed using an Islamic State-approved template in which a woman (who is in most cases progressive, powerful and liberal) will typically be paired with a radical jihadist fighter, with the relationship's dynamics and destiny wholly controlled by the wider group. The Islamic State will then project the image of these "happy" and "power-balanced" relationships to the wider public as a tactic to influence young Muslims into thinking that the idyllic jihadist lifestyle exists and will be available to them too, should they join. The fantasy couple that is peddled by the Islamic State promises complete equality between men and women and effectively works to destroy the accusations of slavery, misogyny and sexual abuse attached to the terrorist organization.

Upon her arrival to the Islamic State and marriage, al-Nasr's new online-posts addressed her ideal life and relationship:

For the first time, I slept well at night,

I did not feel worried when I saw a policeman.

Observing all this respect to Islam in the Islamic State,

You cannot but pray for the caliph, asking for stability in his leadership.

(Arabi21.com, October 14, 2014)

By idealizing the Islamic state and its new state power dynamics in her praise of the police and the leadership, al-Nasr is departing from her rebellious spirit, which demanded the dismantling of the oppressive Syrian regime, to endorse and praise the structure of a new oppressor, the caliph. Her radicalization has meant her regression from a voice that, in the name of equality, challenged those in power, to a voice that blindly submits to the power of the caliph by praising it and even acting as its mouthpiece.

## Poetic Style

Al-Nasr's aesthetic syntax is constructed to personify and humanize the jihadists behind acts of terror by eliminating the emotional distance between jihadists and the wider public. The imagery used to depict them has evolved to become more complex, detailed and meticulous in production.

In her poem lamenting the death of the Chechen jihadist leader Doku Umarov, she declares him a "hero" and a "model for our generation" in an attempt to divert the public gaze from his violent acts. While she adopts a confrontational tone when celebrating the resilience and courage of Umarov—"You who defeated Russia/and you were as an axe that cuts through its trunk"—she uses softer language when depicting female jihadists, with the aim of garnering public sympathy (Ahlam-alNasr.blogspot.co.uk, January 20, 2014). This can be seen in her poem on the Saudi terrorist Haila al-Qaseer (a.k.a. Um al-Rabab). [3] Al-Nasr uses maternal imagery in an attempt to gain the wider public's sympathy, so they no longer see al-Qaseer as an evil terrorist, but as a mother:

Release Haila al-Qaseer,

From the darkness of a bitter prison

She has been calling Rabab [reference to al-Qaseer's daughter]

From the bottom of a broken heart

(YouTube, September 11, 2014)

On both occasions, al-Nasr is very sympathetic to these militants, and she uses her rhetoric to beautify and even legitimize their acts of violence and terror. In a steep

contradiction to her poetic and soft side, there is a violent side to al-Nasr that allows her to identify and sympathize with these jihadists in order to write beautifully about them. This sympathy originates from her expressive intention to lead an act of terror herself. The Islamic State's media center (al-Ghuraba Media) published a long letter written by al-Nasr upon her arrival to Syria, in which she says that there is no third option left for her when she stands before God, and is asked about her work, her stance on the Islamic State and her efforts on behalf of the state. Her position, she claimed, gave her only two options: either to lead a suicide bomb attack against an American military base in the Gulf, or to perform al-nafir to the Islamic State. She chose the second option (al-Hayat, October 24, 2014).

By moving back to Syria, acquiring her role as an Islamic State propagandist devoting her poetic talent to the militant cause, al-Nasr manifests the image of the female militants within the Islamic State who strongly challenge the traditionalist archetype of the unyielding, and muted, female terrorists that had been portrayed throughout the history of al-Qaeda. These other female militants were expected to serve the cause by bombing and destroying their bodies. Al-Nasr has replaced this image with one of a poetic, eloquent female jihadist who serves the militant cause through the power of her words, which can manipulate the minds and hearts of young girls and potentially cause them to become sympathetic to the Islamic State's terrorist cause.

### Conclusion

It is apparent that the Islamic State is waging a war against culture by converting poetry, a traditional medium of expression among Arabs, into a weapon. Al-Nasr serves as a figurehead of this cultural weapon, whose writings act as a vehicle for the Islamic State's cultural propaganda, and her image alone is utilized to effectively manage the reputation of the group by heralding her as a living refutation of the claims that the Islamic State is suppressing women. Today, the Islamic State owns al-Nasr's voice; YouTube videos of her poems no longer feature her voice, but are instead sung by a male munshid (singer) to jihadist popular rhythms (YouTube, August 15, 2014). Her transformation from a revolutionary to a terrorist who wishes to "bomb a kafir's [unbeliever] head or behead a heretic" demonstrates how the Islamic State's war has transformed from being a territorial conquest into a full-blown cultural war to conquer hearts and minds (al-Awsat, November 9, 2014).

### Notes

1. Al-nafir is a call to arms issued by the Islamic State to travel to the group's self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq for the purpose of jihad and fighting in support of the Islamic State. In his first audio message, self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent a message to Muslims in July 1, 2014 titled "A message to the mujahideen and the Muslim ummah in the month of Ramadan," in which he invited Muslims to perform al-nafir by immigrating to the Islamic State (SITE, July 1, 2014).

2. A similar analogy is the French couple Hayat Boumeddiene and Amedy Coulibaly. Coulibaly, along with the Kouachi brothers, committed several terrorist acts in Paris in early 2015. He was allegedly mentored by Djamel Beghal, a former lieutenant of Abu Hamza, and subsequently influenced and radicalized the liberal Boumeddiene, who had been known to comfortably wear a bikini (Daily Mail, January 13). She has subsequently sought refuge in the Islamic State.

3. The wife of al-Qaeda member Muhammed al-Wakeel, who was killed in a terrorist operation in Saudi Arabia, Haila al-Qasser was arrested by the Saudi government in March 2010 and sentenced to 15 years in prison for her involvement in terrorist activities and dealings with al-Qaeda, including harboring and recruiting terrorists, and financing terrorist operations (NDTV, October 30, 2011; National Yemen, March 16).

## Umm Adam: The Architect Behind the Islamic State’s Matchmaking Network

*Halla Diyab*

Fatiha Mohamed Taher Housni al-Mejjati (a.k.a. Umm Adam), is a member of the Islamic State’s media committee and therefore one of the most powerful women in the organization (The Africa Channel, January 15). Wearing black from head to toe with a strong, bulky physique and deep, sonorous voice, she is single-handedly shaping a new form of terrorist female militancy by skillfully manipulating both gender restrictions and roles to carve out a new role of female power within the ranks of jihadist male militants. In her public discourse, Fatiha is a master of the art of manipulative rhetoric, alternating between a language of victimization and of tyranny. With language awash with references to her as a victim who has been subjected to all kinds of injustice by the authorities, Fatiha knows how to win sympathy and support from her male listeners. It is this uniquely manipulative rhetoric and oratory that makes her an important female militant in the Islamic State organizational structure.

### Background

Aged about 55, Fatiha was the first wife of Karim Thami al-Mejjati, a Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group militant with allegiance to Osama bin Laden. She grew up in a popular area of Casablanca, in a family who practiced moderate Islam. In an extensive interview for the French television production “La Veuve Noire,” Fatiha spoke of how she would wear short skirts and high heels as a young woman (YouTube, October 10, 2009).

Her path to radicalization started after the Gulf War erupted in 1990, when she was a law student in Paris (Morocco World News, July 10, 2014). Fatiha was greatly affected by what she considered to be an unjust war; she began to question everything and went through an identity crisis. Feeling disillusioned and let down by the West, she became radicalized at the age of 30. She returned to Morocco and got a job as an assistant manager at a management school (MEMRI, September 14, 2005). A few months later, she asked if she could come to work wearing a hijab, and when the school refused her permission, she quit. In response, some of the school’s students began a petition to support her; one of these was the 24-year-old French-Moroccan Karim al-Mejjati, a secular educated graduate of a French high school

who married Fatiha in September 1991 (YouTube, October 10, 2009).

After accompanying Fatiha to a jihadist conference in Paris, Fatiha persuaded Karim to follow the path of jihad, and in 1992, just a year after they were married, Karim left to fight in Bosnia as a soldier of al-Qaeda. Fatiha justified her husband’s acts as a response to the suffering of Muslims in Bosnia, which was the catalyst for him leaving everything and beginning his international missions and ascension into the ranks of the jihadist group (MEMRI, September 9, 2005).

### Continuous Jihad

In 2001, Fatiha, Karim and their two children relocated to Afghanistan, where Karim was to become an explosives expert. For Fatiha, one of her sweetest memories was being bought her first Afghan chador—a cloth wrap worn around the head and upper body by Muslim women—which she described as “C’était le plus beau jour de ma vie” (the most beautiful day of my life) (Maghress, May 30, 2005). After Afghanistan, Karim took Fatiha and the children to Pakistan, with the goal of meeting Osama bin Laden, before settling in Saudi Arabia as a midlevel field operative for al-Qaeda. On March 23, 2003, Fatiha and her son Ilyas were visiting an eye clinic there when they were arrested, incarcerated and interrogated about her husband’s terrorist activities solely in relation to the United States (The National, March 23, 2010). She said they subjected to torture, including sleep deprivation. They were transferred to Morocco for interrogation on June 20, 2003, and were held there until March 2004. However, the Moroccan government denies that Ilyas and his mother were ever detained (Maghress, June 3, 2005; Justice Morocco, May 31, 2012).

Her husband, Karim, was killed together with their 11-year-old son, Adam, by Saudi authorities in a series of raids in April 2005, for his alleged involvement in the Riyadh compound bombings and the 2003 Casablanca bombings, as well as masterminding the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 London bombings (Morocco World News, July 10, 2014).

Sometime after Karim’s death, Fatiha Islamically married a man she never met—the Moroccan detainee Omar al-Omrani Hadi. Hadi is a Salafist-Jihadist activist who was sentenced by the Moroccan government to 14 years in Tiffelt prison on terrorism charges. The Moroccan government neither acknowledged her marriage to Hadi, nor granted her permission to visit him in prison, on the grounds that they did not have a civil marriage contract (Najdland). This resulted in her leading a series of protests in front of the

prison demanding his release (Maghress, July 11, 2014).

### Human Rights Activism in Morocco

In October 2010, Fatiha founded the Committee of Truth in Morocco to defend the freedom of opinion and expression of faith (Maghress, January 1, 2013). Through her activism, Fatiha advocated for the rights of detainees, denouncing the sudden disappearances, torture and ongoing human rights violations in Morocco's Temara secret detention center. However, the Moroccan government repeatedly denied the existence of the facility (Arab Times Blogs, April 2011). She claims to have worked on several cases of former detainees who were tortured in Temara, most of whom are said to not want to talk about it after their release due to the taboo and shame associated with their imprisonment (YouTube, May 27, 2011).

Fatiha also claims that the facility is a secret American proxy run by the Moroccan government, and that she and her son, Ilyas, who was 10 at the time, were held in compulsory detention in Temara for nine months (YouTube, May 27, 2011). She claims that she and her son were subjected to emotional and psychological torture, which left her son traumatized and resulted in a permanent psychological condition and a hormonal disorder that caused extreme obesity. In 2010, she brought a case against the Moroccan government for the unlawful detention of her son in 2003, claiming that detention had left him mentally damaged (Foreign Policy, April 9, 2010).

For a woman who despises democracy and Western values, advocating for human rights and freedom of expression is a somewhat stark contrast. However, her allegiance to al-Qaeda and its anti-Western stance shaped her views that the secret detention of some Islamists is done to serve the CIA and to help import American-style democracy to the Muslim world (YouTube, October 10, 2009). Also, through human rights advocacy, Fatiha has again found a way to manipulate others and draw support to her cause, especially those desperate for political change in Morocco. Her human rights activism was at its peak in 2011-2012, which coincided with the Arab Spring that was sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa.

With the Arab Spring, Fatiha seized the opportunity to be heard on a wider public platform. An example of this is her filmed speech in support of the 20th February Movement, which led the protests in the streets of Morocco from February 20, 2011 through the spring of 2012. [1] She spoke on behalf of those in Moroccan prisons, whom she referred to as "detainees" rather than "Islamist detainees,"

intentionally aiming to engage with the freedom protesters who related to her cause on the basis of human rights rather than Islamist support. Throughout the speech, she altered her language to relate to the Freedom Movement, stating that "we want a free Morocco, in which we can live with dignity and freedom." She then called on the protestors to support her cause, as they share the same beliefs and ethos, adding that "the regime builds barriers between us [i.e. the Islamists and the freedom protesters] by calling me a terrorist, but I am part of you and you are part of us, and we will support you until we liberate Morocco" (YouTube, April 22, 2011).

### The Road to Syria

Fatiha announced her allegiance to Islamic State leader and self-declared caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after her arrival in Raqqa, Syria on July 5, 2014; in an image posted to her Twitter account, Fatiha posed in front of the court in Jarabulus, a small Islamic State-controlled town near Syria's border with Turkey. Her arrival abroad put an end to the Moroccan government's concerns about her insidious influence in Morocco; the government had placed her under constant surveillance by secret police officers in Casablanca because she encouraged youth to perform jihad in Syria and Iraq, wage jihad against the United States, and pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, which Fatiha views as the fulfilment of the "promise of Allah" to Muslims (Maghress, July 11, 2014). She went to Syria to marry al Baghdadi's aid, and her son Ilyas acted as a middleman between his mother and the jihadist suitor (Jeune Afrique, November 24, 2014). It is reported that her suitor's job within the Islamic State is to replace Haji Bakr within al-Baghdadi's entourage.

The Islamic State's media arm subsequently led an online-media campaign on Twitter and Facebook called the "Nafir (call to arms) of our mother, Umm Adam, to the Islamic State," celebrating Fatiha's arrival to the Islamic State. Fatiha is now the trainer of Islamic State women, the "mother of believers" (al-Arabiya, July 10, 2014; Le Parisien, June 15, 2014).

### Manipulative Tactics

Fatiha's manipulation tactics are part of her strategy to access a wider audience for her jihadist cause, and to be accepted and heard especially by men. Her black full-body covering facilitates this access as if, by choosing to be totally covered from top to toe—even wearing black gloves and thick spectacles—Fatiha has divorced herself from her femininity, and so cannot be judged on it. She does not want to be seen as a woman, as this could discredit her ideological influence,

especially among Islamist men. She wants to be seen as an intelligent voice and active Islamist militant equal or even superior to her male peers. However, Fatiha's manipulation centers on rhetoric, which she shapes according to the situation, choosing when she wants to be seen as a woman who deserves sympathy, and when not.

This strategy is explicit during her May 2011 videoed speech, in which she testifies about the existence of Temara prison. In the video, Fatiha manipulates the emotion of her attendees and viewers by toning down her voice and beginning to cry when she talks about her detention in Temara with her son. Toward the end of her speech, she raises her voice in an authoritative tone when she denounces the Moroccan government (YouTube, May 27, 2011). In another video, titled "A state against a woman," Fatiha calls on the Moroccan government to execute her, allow her to relocate to another country or else grant her the freedom to remarry and work like other citizens. She cries during her video appeal and then raises her voice in an authoritative tone to explain that the problem the government has with her is that she wants Shari'a in Morocco, again employing her tactics of manipulation to gain support for her cause (YouTube, August 5, 2012). It is this manipulative strategy that has made her an appealing militant for the Islamic State, a woman who can draw a lot of support and sympathy to the group's cause.

Fatiha is in control of her emotions, never expressing yearning or sadness unless it is to manipulate others for the sake of the jihadist cause. There were occasions when Fatiha publicly expressed her emotions, but these were exercises in crowd manipulation. Fatiha has openly expressed her sexuality by opposing the court decision to not let her remarry because she lacked evidence of a civil divorce from the Moroccan detainee Omar al-Omrani Hadi, to whom she claims to have been married (YouTube, August 5, 2012). Still, she views emotional expression as vulnerability, which she protects herself from with her black covering and emotional detachment.

### Women and Jihad

Fatiha is vocal about her sexual urges, with terms like "marriage" dominating her discourse and expressing her right to get married after her claimed divorce from Hadi. Previously married to two men, and still expressing her urges for a new marriage, Fatiha is very sexualized and passionate in her quest for male company and love. These stated sexual urges can be easily redirected to another male jihadist after widowhood and divorce. Contrary to the traditionalist Islamic narrative, which is discreet about sexual urges,

Fatiha represents a breakthrough—a new frontier of female jihadists who are very explicit in expressing their sexuality. Challenging the conventional norms of what is expected to be heard of a fully covered Muslim woman in a burqa, Fatiha's jihadist activism affords her the freedom to express her sexuality under a structured religious legitimacy.

By empowering someone like Fatiha and giving her a role as a leading female militant in the organization, the Islamic State is establishing a new role for female jihadist militants, different to that of jihadist women who are viewed as a means of reproduction to guarantee the survival of the organization. Unlike Fatiha, these romanticized jihadist women, such as the Malaysian militant Shams (a.k.a. Umm al-Baraa), do not reach the higher ranks of the organization or attain leadership roles. [2]

Another unusual aspect of Fatiha's role within the Islamic State is her effort to control the more vulnerable and weaker female militants through her involvement in matchmaking. For example, Ahlam al-Nasr's marriage to Abu Usama al-Ghareeb was facilitated by Fatiha; al-Nasr is one of the Islamic State's foremost poets and al-Ghareeb is a propagandist, making the pair the Islamic State's media power couple. [3] This allows her to cement her position as a key player in the jihadist organization's couple dynamics. Fatiha's operational authority over the al-Khansaa brigade, the Islamic State's female special militant brigade, through which she recruits women in Raqqa in Syria, represents another level of the dynamic of her hunting for vulnerable women.

### Conclusion

Fatiha symbolizes a new dimension of the Islamic State's female militancy, one that transcends the traditional Islamic female roles of "breeding machines" or sexual objects into a new definition of female power and mastery of extremist rhetoric. At present, the female jihadists' role is to offer their bodies as a sacrifice, which the Islamic State can then present to the male jihadists, and on the other end, the male jihadists offer their bodies to the jihadist cause through fighting and dying for their belief. While both genders of jihadists are under the impression of being equal players within the organization, they are both being manipulated by the Islamic State. Fatiha perfectly fits within the Islamic State's reinvented manipulative dimension of female militancy, where women within the organization can still serve the continuity of the organization by reproduction, but at the same time be emotionally detached from the male jihadists in order to accept the fact that he will inevitably be killed or imprisoned. In short, they can define themselves by their roles as widows

rather than wives. As a result, female militants can gradually develop a relationship of dependence not with their husbands, but with the jihadist cause, which will provide them with a new husband after they are inevitably widowed, just as Fatiha has done.

### Notes

1. The movement demanded political reform, and for a new constitution to be implemented to bring democracy to Morocco.
2. Shams documents her sentiments towards her new jihadist husband on a Tumblr called Diary of a Muhajirah at <http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com/>.
3. For more on Ahlam al-Nasr, please see “Ahlam al-Nasr: Islamic State’s Jihadist Poetess,” *Militant Leadership Monitor*, June 2015, [http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/article\\_id=44108&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=157055bb7b66cf1ddfcf60df344edf42](http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/article_id=44108&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=157055bb7b66cf1ddfcf60df344edf42)

## The Most Dangerous Women in Jihad – Part I: Nada al-Qahtani

*Halla Diyab*

The rising number of foreign female militants and recruiters among the ranks of the Islamic State is a direct result of the ongoing manipulation of gender norms within the State’s jihadist framework. With female jihadist recruiters deviating from prescribed norms and bypassing the shame normally attached to any such unconventionality, more and more female militants are drawn to the group and a new role for these militants is being carved out. The deviation of these three women from gender norms and traditional roles not only highlights why they are considered to be the most dangerous militants in the Islamic State, but also highlights how the role of female militate is evolving within the terrorist group. This multi-part series profiles three such women.

### Nada al-Qahtani

One of the most influential women in jihad at present is Nada Al-Qahtani (also known as Umm Saif Allah), a Saudi woman who, on November 30, 2013, tweeted her arrival in Syria and her intent to join the Islamic State. Considered to be one of the Islamic State’s most dangerous militants (ajel. sa, August 17, 2014), al-Qahtani is also the group’s first ever female Saudi militant – the involvement of Saudi women within jihadist groups is rare. Two notable exceptions are Saudi terrorist Haila al-Qaseer (AKA Umm AL Rabab) and Wafa Al-Shihri, al-Qaeda’s female wing recruiter (Al Arabiya, September 11, 2011) [1]. However, unlike these female militants whose roles are restricted to providing financial, moral, and logistical support, Nada’s actions, from the very beginning of her allegiance to the Islamic State, have challenged accepted jihadist norms. In particular, her journey to Syria unaccompanied by a muhram (male companion/guardian who accompanies Muslim women) – in conjunction with her leaving her husband and children behind in Saudi Arabia – breaks with the kind of female behavior typically sanctioned in jihadist circles.

Nada’s husband, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Azdi, is a passionate supporter of the Islamic State and author of a book supporting the group, titled “The Status of the Opponents of the Islamic State” (assawsana.com, December 4, 2013; Al Arabiya, June 4, 2015). Since his wife’s departure, al-Azdi, who is known to Saudi authorities and was arrested on several occasions, has come under heavy criticism for allowing his wife to travel unaccompanied to Syria. Nada’s

subsequent public declaration of her desire to participate in a suicide attack sparked yet another controversy in Saudi Salafi-jihadi circles, where the participation of Muslim women in combat operations, including suicide attacks, is forbidden, as confirmed by prominent Salafi-jihadi scholars like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (vd.ag, January 25, 2014).

Using the name Jalbib (Ukht Jalbib), Nada Al Qahtani took to Twitter to respond to her critics. Her tweets revealed that she is the older sister of Abdul Hadi al-Qahtani (Jalbib al-Muhajir), a well-known Saudi militant and one of the 16 most-wanted by the Saudi government for alleged involvement in the Qatif and Dammam mosque bombings that took place in May of 2015. Jalbib, who was only 18 when he traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State in 2012, reunited with Nada upon her arrival to Syria. Following a report by Al Arabiya identifying al-Qahtani as Jalbib's sister, Nada launched a series of menacing tweets directed at the television station, threatening that "tomorrow will be worse than today for the Saudi"/"You, are scared of a 19-year-old [Jalbib], and the story of a Muhajirah [herself], so how will you react when the Islamic State's armies invade your lands?" (Al Arabiya, June 5, 2015). In her final tweet to the station, she pledged to carry out a suicide attack targeting Saudi Shias as well as Al Arabiya's site in Saudi Arabia. The "Nada call-up," however, began to trend on social media websites as early as 2013 (almashhad-alyemeni.com, December 15, 2013). Islamist Twitter activists began to rally around Nada; the most notable example was Iman al-Bugha, who was first to respond to al-Arabiya's article on Nada stating, "Oh dear sister, do not worry about what your people say, what God (Allah) decided will happen whether they approve or not" (Al Arabiya, June 4, 2015) [3].

Nada's use of threatening language in her public discourse is another manifestation of female militants deviating from accepted gender norms. The violent and inflammatory tone she adopts in her tweets is in stark contrast to the aura of muted invisibility that usually surrounds Saudi women. Instead, Nada's tone is a masculine affirmation; she is strong and outspoken, openly berating male authority figures (such as that represented by the Saudi media outlet).

This phenomenon does not stop at rhetoric, with gender boundaries also being actively breached in relation to physical violence. Female militants are no longer objects or victims of violence, but have become the active perpetrators of violence. These transformed gender norms facilitate Nada al-Qahtani's mission to draw women to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State. Her recruitment rhetoric expresses a clear deviation from the male-dominated radical Islamist

mentality and is openly and aggressively critical of Muslim men – specifically Saudis, who typically do not join the Islamic State's jihad in Syria. Using a tactic of manipulative taunting, Nada accuses these men of shirking their male duty and leaving women like her no option but to join the Islamic State in their stead. Verbally emasculating the men, she turns her rhetoric to the women to whom she passes the recruitment mission; "urge your husbands and sons O women. I swear by Allah that every meter of [the land of] Al-Sham needs a mujahid" (oximity.com, December 4, 2013).

The dismantling and destruction of traditional family values is another area in which female militants' deviation from entrenched norms is increasingly apparent. Nada publicly expressed her separation from her family: "since I left the [Arabian] Peninsula, I could barely see [with my eyes] from the excessive tears [knowing] I will be departing from my family for the rest of my life" (themuslimissue.wordpress.com, December 5, 2013). However, the dissolution of the family unit is being openly endorsed through Nada's departure from her family and children in lieu of the jihadi cause, affirming her belief that by performing jihad in Syria, she will be rewarded through her reunion with them in Janah (paradise) that is "as wide as the heaven and the earth" (Al Arabiya, June 4, 2015; MBC, November 4, 2014).

### Conclusion

Departing from the traditional Muslim family structures of their home countries where they face a lifetime of predictable humdrum domesticity with one husband and unquestioning loyalty to the wider family unit, these women are opting to become the architects of their own fate, instead signing up for a future of uncertainty and adventure. They are embracing the excitement of guns and power, of world exposure and innumerable potential martyred husbands, of a world where the state and the fight supersede tradition and rules, and an existence in which they can write their own versions of Islamic law and write themselves into the historic rise of the Islamic State.

### Notes:

[1] The wife of al-Qaeda member Muhammed al-Wakeel, who was killed in a terrorist operation in Saudi Arabia, Haila al-Qasser was arrested by the Saudi government in March 2010 and sentenced to 15 years in prison for her involvement in terrorist activities and dealings with al-Qaeda, including harboring and recruiting terrorists, and financing terrorist operations (NDTV, October 30, 2011; National Yemen, March 16); Wafa Al-Shihri issued a call in May 2010 to Saudi

women to join al-Qaeda. It is reported that she wrote in an article published by al-Qaeda's media outlet: "If your man is unable to defend and take care of you, come and enjoy the hospitality and protection of the best fighters in the Arabian Peninsula" (english.aawsat.com, June 5, 2014).

[2] Diyab, Halla, "Ahlam al-Nasr: Islamic State's Jihadist Poetess," *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 30, 2015,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/article\\_id=44108&no\\_cache=1#.Vqe11mzcvMw](http://www.jamestown.org/single/article_id=44108&no_cache=1#.Vqe11mzcvMw).

## Love as a Propaganda Machine: A Profile of Islamic State's Jihadist-Love Culture Propagandist, "Shams"

*Halla Diyab*

The Islamic State's (IS) construction of a revolutionary jihadist-love culture and its perpetuation of a narrative that stands in deep contrast to the barbaric atrocities of the group demonstrates the organization's attempts to romanticize the jihadist experience to gain sympathy and support from a wider audience.

A key propagandist of this tactic is Malaysian militant "Shams," who leads an online operation romanticizing and idealizing the jihadist experience from hijrah to martyrdom.

### Background

Under the moniker of Bird of Jannah, the 27-year-old doctor left her middle-class life in Malaysia behind to perform hijrah to Syria in February 2014. [1] Her social media posts indicate that she traveled to Syria via Turkey and that her parents, who were at first upset about her travel to Syria, quickly grew "supportive and happy" (Astro Awani, September 19, 2014).

While working on an orthopedic ward in Raqqa, Shams fell in love with a Moroccan-born jihadist known as "Abu Baraa." Since she did not speak his language, the star-crossed lovers communicated through dictionary apps that they had both downloaded to their phones. In April 2014, she married him with the help of a female matchmaking militant (Astro Awani, September 19, 2014).

Pregnant with the child of her new jihadist husband, Shams then decided to lead an intensive online campaign exclusively in English to promote life in the Islamic State on her online tumblr, "Diary of Muhajirah." Her blog gained 277,000 followers and became a place where she documented her inner sentiments towards Abu Baraa, detailing each moment of the couple's love story, from her first sight of him to their wedding day. [2] It is this uniquely manipulative, romanticized, hypnotizing oratory that makes Shams an important part of this popularized culture, yet also one of the most dangerous female militants in the Islamic State's recruitment structure.

### “Marriage in the Land of Jihad; Till Martyrdom do us Part”

With a Tumblr written in the style of a romantic novel, glorifying a whirlwind love and the perils of fighting and martyrdom, Shams’ account of her marriage is very propagandistic in style. She mixes reassurance with phrases like “people have misconceptions about marriage there.” She references female freedom (“they can choose whether to marry”), offers marital advice (“but it is better to marry to avoid fitnah”), and makes references to being surrounded by family and friends; Shams mentions the happiness of her parents, writing about “mother joyfully shouting on phone and father consenting,” and states that her best friend is like her mother and that her husband is just like her father (MannWaSalwah Tumblr, September 14, 2014).

Shams’ detailed description of her sentiments prior to her first meeting with her jihadist husband is woven in a way to build up excitement, suspense, and anticipation in order to captivate the emotional vulnerability of the readers: “I made my little steps. Sat. I was trembling. Nervous. Scared. My emotions were mixed... I had palpitation[s] that [were] faster than the speed of light (Al-Arabiya, September 18, 2014). The rhetoric is overcharged with seductive visuals of being affectionately close with her jihadist husband, yet physically distant from him, including images such as “sit on another sofa that isn’t far from him” and “after few minutes, I flipped my Niqab. He looked at me, our eyes catch each other’s” (Al-Arabiya, September 18, 2014). The powerful visuals humanize the jihadists for the readers.

The narrative is heavily overlaid with romance, such as eyes meeting, nervousness, palpitations, expectancy, and falling in love. The density of Shams’ narrative seems to liberate the two jihadists temporarily from their affiliations with the barbaric terrorist group, and portrays them as humans like us—capable of innately human experiences such as nervousness and affection. This narrative aims to manufacture an image of the jihadists not as savage or uncivilized creatures, but rather as the very same people we see in our normal daily lives.

### Love as a Propaganda Machine

While female jihadist brides are always covered in black or invisible in her visual posts, there is a heavy focus on the physical presence of the male jihadist in Shams’ posts. He is always visible and engaged in emotional expressions to his bride, seen cuddling her, kissing her forehead, and holding her hand. This is mainly a tactic to alter the public perception

of the jihadists as murderers and barbaric killers, hoping to humanize them by presenting them as romantic men who love and care for their women.

Although Shams’ declaration of love may seem romantic, behind her gushing stands the leering shadow of the jihadist cause, which controls the jihadist couple’s union. Shams will expect to see the name of her husband on the list of martyrs one day. Therefore, love is arranged and perpetuated as a temporary state that inevitably leads to eventual martyrdom. The rhetoric of love is constructed within the jihadist narrative and is manipulated by the jihadist cause, which possesses the power to end, dismantle, or reconstruct the ties between the two lovers at any time. The ties the jihadist couple has to the jihadist cause are stronger than the ties they have to each other; the jihadist is “married to Jihad before” he is married to Shams. As Abu Baraa puts it: “Jihad is my first wife, and you’re my second” (Al-Arabiya, September 18, 2014). On the other hand, Shams is equally as ready to sacrifice her husband: “He [God] took everyone away from me [...] He gave me world’s most amazing gift—a baby in my very own womb” (Omermaricar80 Tumblr, September 28, 2014).

### Emotional Manipulation

Shams masters the craft of manipulative rhetoric, alternating between the language of romance and of the shrewd realism of the jihadist cause. Her tactic of manipulation operates on rhetoric that she shapes according to the message of the terrorist group, choosing when she wants to be seen as a woman publicly documenting her fairy tale of a marriage. This strategy is explicit when she tones down her poetic language, shifting to practicality in one of her online posts. Glorifying the Islamic State, Shams lists ten facts “from the Islamic State that everyone should know.” The list includes “free housing” to “monthly groceries supplies” and a “free medical checkup... etc.,” a message that succeeds in garnering mass readership and public attention that she previously gained through telling her romantic tale (KSN, January 20, 2016).

Shams’ mode of operation is to linguistically manipulate her spectators to entice them to join the group. Her strong use of poetic rhetoric is what supports her manipulative tactics; she first attracts readers with the promise of a captivating and relatable romantic tale, and then integrates her jihadist recruitment messages into that very same blog. For example, in one particular blog post, she utilizes the story of her marriage to explain perceived misconceptions about the Islamic State: “I hope it would clear the misconceptions that many have regarding marriages that take place in Shaam”

(MannWaSalwah Tumblr, September 14, 2014).

Shams' manipulation tactics are part of her recruiting strategy to access and groom a wider audience for her jihadist undertones, especially women readers. Her online visibility—but opaque identity—enables her to perpetuate the fantasy of living and loving in the Islamic State.

## Militant Discourse

After gaining loyal followers, Shams' rhetoric shifted from romantic narrative into militant discourse, evidence that her narrative was simply a structured propagandist online campaign to promote the message of the group. In March 2015, Shams' tweets started to become explicitly militant, calling Muslims who live in the lands of Kufr [reference to Europe and the West] to carry out attacks against non-Muslims, glorifying the territorial expansion of the Islamic State: "Good news for all of you. Islamic state [sic] is expanding" (RFE/RL, March 20, 2015).

Shams grew to be more direct and explicit in instructing other Muslims to carry militant operations aiming "to take control of local lands." Suddenly, her romanticized poetic and linguistic metaphors faded away and were replaced by direct, imperative, violence-inciting verbs such as "get stronger," "gain power," "take control over," "learn from your brothers in Libya" and "terrorize them as they terrorized us" (RFE/RL, March 20, 2015).

Shams not only propagated and glamorized the traditional roles of women as lovers and wives within the group, but used her rhetoric to evoke a rebuttal against the image of the archetypal female jihadist militant as submissive and demeaned sexual objects. She promoted the fact that there is the possibility of a career in the terrorist group, stating that the Islamic State is planning "more programs which sisters can benefit from" and that women "are also allowed to work [...] as teachers, doctors and nurses" (Al-Monitor, December 23, 2014).

## Conclusion

The danger of Shams' narrative lies in the fact that she has a story to tell, and people are captivated by stories. She has an ongoing tale of love, loss, sacrifice, and yearning—all of which made her appealing and possible to identify with, despite her categorization as a militant jihadist. Shams craftily manipulates her love story in an effective strategy to toy with the emotions and desires of vulnerable young Muslims who crave an idealized romantic adventure in a remote land.

## Notes:

[1] Hijrah is performing the call to arms (al-nafir) by traveling to the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq for the purpose of jihad and fighting in support of the terrorist group.

[2] Shams' tumblr, "Diary of Muhajirah," which garnered 277,000 followers, was deactivated. However, her posts have reblogged on several tumblrs, under different names including, "Bittersweet: The life of a Muhajirah" (<http://alrashidk1.tumblr.com/diary-of-a-muhajirah>), "The Reblogs of Diary of Muhajirah" (<http://zakarias79.tumblr.com/post/111757456768/diary-of-a-muhajirah-4>), and "Just Me" (<http://omermaricar80.tumblr.com/>), among others.

# The Most Dangerous Women in Jihad – Part 2: Umm Layth

*Halla Diyab*

A world overflowing with social media provides Islamic State (IS) supporters with a golden opportunity. The Internet revolution has not only restructured extremist discourse and its accessibility, but also changed the role female militants play within IS: indeed, their online roles are a far cry from their counterparts in other terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. The evolving female role has also sparked a rejection of the archetypal images of female militants in modern jihadism. The Islamic State's online jihadist recruiters represent a transition in this archetype, with female militants becoming more vocal and visible online, and overtly expressing emotions of nostalgia, yearning, love and hatred, ultimately revolutionizing the norms of female terrorists, who are never thought of as people who can express their feelings like the rest of us.

## From University Dorms to Online Jihadist Recruitment

The tumblr blog of Umm Layth, operated by 21-year-old Aqsa Mahmood, a former radiography student from Scotland turned IS online recruiter, is a prime example of how social media gives female militants visibility and presence. By regularly using social media, Umm Layth propagates radical messages, including her call for copycat attacks following the Boston Marathon bombing and the murder of Lee Rigby. In another blog post, the 20-year-old described the Bloody Friday terror strikes in Tunisia, France, and Kuwait as “revenge” and “a day that will go down in history.” The hate-filled poem read: “In 3 different locations a family was born. Its name was change, freedom and revenge. Kuwait, France and Tunisia is where they reside” ([Almuhajirat.tumblr.com](http://Almuhajirat.tumblr.com), April 5, 2015).

Aqsa Mahmood's dramatic trajectory from quiet university student to belligerent online recruiter for IS highlights the path from silent spectator and follower to globally active performer. From Pollokshields in Glasgow, Aqsa studied at a private girls' school and then the Shawlands Academy. She went on to start a course in diagnostic radiography at Glasgow Caledonian University before dropping out and travelling to Syria through Turkey in November 2013 ([fox6now.com](http://fox6now.com), September 6, 2014).

It was only after a four-day absence that her family realized

she had left to join the Islamic State in Syria. Upon arrival at the Syrian border, Aqsa phoned her mother to let her know of her decision telling her, “I will see you on the day of judgment, and I want to be a martyr.” A month later, Aqsa married a jihadist in Syria ([alquds.co.uk](http://alquds.co.uk), September 13, 2014). Often referred to in the media as “Umm Layth” or the “Jihadi Bride,” Aqsa is an example of how joining the terrorist group created a space of global visibility for this “bedroom radical” as her parents described her. In publicly documenting her inner feelings about the jihadi cause, Aqsa has found a visible public space where she can draw attention to herself and win followers to her cause.

## The Militant Discourse

As a prominent female voice, Umm Layth's importance within the organization not only reflects a rupture with gender norms. Her visibility breaks with the traditional roles of Muslim women that center around family, marriage, and community life by giving her an authoritative voice in religious jurisprudence aimed at Muslim women – usually exclusively the domain of Muslim male clerics. Through this jurisprudence, Umm Layth justifies and legitimizes rebellion against the traditional roles of Muslim women. On her tumblr blog, she advises that Muslim women can travel without a muhram (male companion/guardian who accompanies Muslim women), as long as they are performing the hijra (migration) to a Muslim land (the Islamic State), where temporary guardians will be appointed for women who wish to marry fighters but do not have religious permission. After being asked about the details of finding a husband, she writes: “finding a brother isn't difficult, and if the Wali (guardian) doesn't approve then Doula (the Islamic State) is able to provide them with a Qadhi (judge)” ([news.siteintelgroup.com](http://news.siteintelgroup.com), 30 July, 2014).

Umm Layth's jurisprudence redefines traditional female roles within families and communities, recasting them to the new lifestyle of the Islamic State, which now assumes the guardian role. This underlines the break with traditional family roles, with the state replacing the role of a Muslim father or guardian. The emphasis is instead on a new lifestyle under the rule of the Islamic State where female jihadists celebrate life and concern themselves with acquiring makeup, jewelry, and luxury products – in stark contrast to the barbaric behavior of the group whose beheadings, summary shootings, and torture are widely publicized. The opinion of the father or the family is diminished within this narrative. If the female jihadist decides to marry, she can contact the “Wali ... over phone, skype, WhatsApp, email etc. So him being abroad can't stop you [the female jihadist],” as advised by Umm Layth in a July 26, 2014

Twitter exchange with a prospective recruit. Umm Layth also notes that women whose families are broadly in support of their actions can also turn to electronic means to obtain permission to marry ([almaghribtoday.net](http://almaghribtoday.net), February 23). The online jurisprudence practiced by Umm Layth facilitates her recruitment, as female jihadists more likely to identify with her interpretations than with those of a male cleric.

Umm Layth also published a guide on “How to Reach Syria” in which she gives tips to female jihadists who want to join the Islamic State. The guide was published on the Islamic State’s online outlets in which she warns the female wannabe-jihadist to prepare psychologically before they perform the hijra, as “we the jihadist brides are going to hear the death of our husbands anytime, and their success of granting shahadah (martyrdom).” In her guide, she advises women to be ready emotionally for what is coming after the loss of their jihadist husbands ([alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net), November 26, 2015).

Umm Layth’s influence extends beyond being a prominent online recruiter. Through her posts, she breaks down the traditional role of women in marriage and the family unit. As she redefines these concepts, love and marriage are temporary, and the state is the only permanent thing. For many of the young women embarking on a jihadist marriage, it is their first experience of an intimate relationship, and this naivete provides fertile ground in which the Islamic State can plant their definition of the notion of temporary love. In a way, that entirely contradicts the basic tenets and traditions of Arab and Muslim culture, where people “marry for life” with the intention of building long-lasting lives together. Female jihadists are instead indoctrinated to think of the death of their husbands as a necessity and a catalyst to their own, personal attainment of jihadi glory. It could be argued that the temporary nature of these relationships is also a major factor of appeal for these women. It liberates them from traditional Islamic expectations, which would require them to occupy the roles of wives and mothers for the remainder of their existence, while affording them public religious approbation.

The evolution of female militants’ roles is a dynamic of their gender deviation. These roles are not static and traditional, but rather embryonic and continuously finding shape and form. For example, in Umm Layth’s evolving online recruitment role, she goes from offering friendly, sisterly advice and general tips to the female jihadists regarding their female duties towards their jihadist husbands ([memri.fr](http://memri.fr), May 13, 2014). After a two-month absence from online activity, Umm Layth’s posts become more militant; she publishes innocuous visuals such as an idyllic scene of a market in Syria, while praising the virtue of the jihadists in

Syria and justifying the presence of women in the Islamic State. The tactics she employs to entice vulnerable women to the Islamic State are aimed at harnessing religious fervor while being laced with the lure of adventure: “If there weren’t women willing to sacrifice all their desires and give up their families and lives in the West in order to please Allah, then who will raise the next generation of lions?” ([m.arabi21.com](http://m.arabi21.com), October 13, 2014; [rollingstone.com](http://rollingstone.com), March 25, 2015).

Umm Layth is an example of the masculinization of female militants on an intellectual level. This masculinization of the female role, however, can be seen operating on multiple levels. Developments of the female role in Islamic terrorism have real implications for the future of countering violent extremism.

### Conclusion

Out of the shadows of her small bedroom in Glasgow and onto the world stage, Internet and social media give Umm Layth a global visibility that would otherwise have been impossible for her to achieve. The digital sphere provides her with a platform to act in a fast evolving power dynamic where she quickly shifts from documenting her daily life to brandishing machine guns; she went from wielding rhetoric to wielding the new generation of jihadist recruits.

The deviation of Umm Layth from the archetypical female role not only highlights why she is considered to be one of the most dangerous militants in the Islamic State, but also highlights how powerfully the newfound role of female militant is evolving within the Islamic State.

## The Most Dangerous Women in Jihad – Part 3: Umm Anas (a.k.a. Hajiah)

*Halla Diyab*

Female militants' roles within the Islamic State (IS) have recently evolved, breaking from their more conventional functions as recruiters and online propagandists for the jihadist cause. Increasingly, women act as vehicles of oppression against other female militants within the group. This departure from the traditional dynamic of oppression, a dynamic in which men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed, manifests as a new dynamic of gender movement within IS. Here women's roles shifted from being victims subjected to oppression, to the perpetrators of oppression. This shift indicates a steady movement toward more operational roles for women within IS.

This slow female manumission within the group has catapulted some female militants right to the top of the IS leadership hierarchy. Umm Anas (a.k.a. Hajiah), considered to be one of the most influential and the most dangerous woman in IS, is one such woman ([shaamtimes.net](http://shaamtimes.net), February 21). Umm Anas is the chief officer of IS' al-Khansaa Brigade, which includes 50 female militants, the majority of which are foreign female fighters, while a few are Iraqis who joined the group. The brigade also includes foreign female militants who are married to IS jihadists and foreign jihadists' brides. Born in 1966, the 50-year-old Iraqi militant is married to a senior IS official in Diwan al-Hisbah, the branch of IS in charge of enforcing Islamic doctrine ([islamist-movements.com](http://islamist-movements.com), February 20).

### Al-Khansaa Brigade

Umm Anas, who resides on al-Quds Street in Mosul, is in charge of the al-Khansaa Brigade. With their faces concealed by lithams (black covers) and carrying heavy weapons, women in the brigade patrol IS' territory, receiving a reported monthly salary of 25,000 Syrian Pounds (about \$115) ([ajel.sa](http://ajel.sa), August 17, 2014). Assuming a role that is usually performed by men, such as that of the Islamic Religious police in Saudi Arabia, Umm Anas has a powerful command over the policing of female militants. Under her instruction, they arrest any Iraqi woman who dares to sit in front of the door of her house, whose clothes do not conceal her body, or even any woman who lifts up her Niqab in the street ([muttahidoon.org](http://muttahidoon.org), February 22).

Reports indicate that Umm Anas drives around in her Hyundai H1 Star X's on the streets of Mosul to arrest women who use their mobile phones to record videos or make calls to report the situation inside the city. She goes to great lengths to arrest those women who do not adhere to the self-proclaimed Caliphate's rules. Her prisoners are sent to female-only detention centers. The majority of prisoners are never released alive, their bodies left physically deformed after being beaten and whipped to death ([atranaya.net](http://atranaya.net)).

Umm Anas, who is known for torturing women to death, instructs al-Khansaa Brigade's female militants to use two metal instruments – “the biter” and “the clipper” – to punish female detainees, then whip and beat them to death ([basnews.com](http://basnews.com), February 21). By instructing the use of these instruments to punish her fellow women, Umm Anas acquires masculinized physicality, thereby becoming an agent of violence and an oppressor of other women in IS. This very violent masculinity, which is usually associated with acts of torture orchestrated by IS' male jihadists, elevated Umm Anas in the group, positioning her evenly with males and pushing her up in the leadership hierarchy.

### Sadistic Militancy

Even in the context of IS brutality, Umm Anas' methods are far from tame. Imprisoned women are reportedly tortured with “the biter,” a metal device that has sharp serrated teeth-like edges. The saw-toothed edges of the bar are pressed into a restrained woman's chest, causing unbearable pain ([watanserb.com](http://watanserb.com), February 25). Umm Anas' methods reveal her sadistic militancy. By using a woman to torture other women, IS legitimizes violence and physical oppression against women within the group, moving women away from conventional roles as campaigners and recruiters toward a violent female militancy.

Unlike other militants in IS' leadership, Umm Anas has not gone through the gradual evolution from innocuous ideologue to a savage militant, as little is known about her background before her current involvement with the al-Khansaa Brigade. The merciless torture tactics that she employs to punish women are aimed at generating group support for punishing those who stray from the rules outlined by IS ideology.

Known as al-Hajiah, a label usually given to those who have performed Hajj (pilgrimage), an act of Islamic worship from which Muslims will return purified of their sins and misdeeds, Umm Anas is placed above her fellow women. Her label idealizes and purifies her, giving her the license to

be a vehicle and medium to purify other women through her methods of physical torture. Not preceded by a forename, Umm Anas is identified by her title as a “mother” (Umm), an identity that gives her authority over other women, making her authoritarian behavior and torture acceptable.

Umm Anas’ barbarism against women comes in parallel with IS’ territorial loss in the city of Mosul. The more loss incurred by the organization, the more violent and ruthless it becomes. Its violence against women in Mosul reportedly results from the departure of 200 jihadists who left to Syria and Libya, leaving their women and wives behind (alsabaah.iq, February 22). Umm Anas’ physical torture of women confines them not only within the walls of the city of Mosul, but also within the terrorist movement’s codes, in an effort to secure group survival through spreading fear among its people.

### Conclusion

Umm Anas’ aggressive militancy is an example of how violence has grown to be an internal facet of IS. The group has reversed the direction of its barbaric actions by adopting an inward violence toward its own people in order to peddle the illusion of female power within jihadism. Umm Anas is given the false impression that her role within IS gives her power that would otherwise be impossible to achieve within the bounds of traditional female roles. The Islamic State’s female militants are abandoning their traditional roles, a development that marks a new phase in the life of the organization.

## From University Professor to the Islamic State’s Chief of Public Education: A Profile of Dr. Iman Mustafa Al-Bugha

*Halla Diyab*

After her 15-year old daughter ran away from home to join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, Dr. Iman Mustafa al-Bugha, the Syrian scholar and renowned university professor, seized on the opportunity to carve out a role for herself within the ranks of the jihadist insurgency as the first female faqiha (Islamic jurist) and the Islamic State’s public education chief (alarabiya.net, July 19). By offering her three young children to the jihadist cause, al-Bugha not only has gained respect in the group, but also has succeeded in pushing her way up the hierarchy of the militant leadership.

### Background

Dr. Iman Mustafa al-Bugha is believed to be the daughter of the Syrian Islamic Imam Sheikh Mustafa al-Bugha (mbc.net, October 23, 2014). Dr. Mustafa al-Bugha is renowned for his public support of Bashar al-Assad (Youtube, April 17, 2011). Al-Bugha rebelled against her father’s stance toward the uprisings, declaring allegiance to IS in October 2014. After she left Saudi Arabia to join the group in Raqqa, al-Bugha went on to publish a six-page pamphlet titled “I am an ISIS believer, a ‘Daeshi’ before ISIS was created.” Subsequently, she moved to and settled in Mosul (Orient News [Dubai], October 27, 2014). It is reported that her family disowned al-Bugha in a tweet posted by her sister Dr. Hanan, stating that “Dr. Iman’s behavior does not represent the family as a whole, or the opinion of her father, Dr Mustafa al-Bugha, whom she neither consulted nor informed about her decision” (alhayat.com, October 22, 2014).

Born in Syria, al-Bugha is believed to be in her mid-forties. Her brother, Muhammed al-Hassan al-Bugha, has served as the Dean of Damascus University’s Faculty of Islamic Sharia’a since 2008, and her sister, Dr. Hanan al-Bugha, also studied Islamic Sharia’a at Damascus University before moving with her family to Saudi Arabia.

Al-bugha studied in Damascus, earning a Ph.D. in Islamic jurisprudence from the University of Damascus. She also has a postgraduate diploma in education from the University of Damascus. Al-Bugha was the chief of the cultural section at the International Commission on Scientific Signs in the Qur’an and the Sunnah in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. She also

taught at the College of Applied Studies and Community Service in Dammam, and she published several books, one of them on the state of women in Islam (islamist-movements.com, November 29, 2015).

### The Path to Jihad

Al-Bugha disappeared from Dammam in October 2014. It was reported that she resigned from her university post to join IS as a social-media recruiter in Mosul. Upon her arrival to Iraq, she posted on her Facebook page that she left her well-paying, prestigious university post to support the caliphate and fight tyranny. She also stated that terrorism is not a bad thing; it is, rather, a Muslim's duty bluntly ordered in the Quran, in surah (chapter) al anfal, verse 60: "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy" (alarab.co.uk, November 11, 2015).

Dr. Iman is a mother of three children. The eldest is IS propagandist poetess Ahlam al-Nasr, who joined the group in 2014. Her younger daughter is also married to an IS militant; she gave birth to his child at the age of 15 (alarabiya.net, July 19). Al-Bugha's youngest child, a 13-year-old son known as Abu al Hassan al- Dimashqi, was killed in August 2016 during fighting in which IS was engaged. Following his death, Dr. Iman wrote a poetic tribute to her dead son and published it on her Facebook account (Facebook, August 17).

Al-Bugha resigned her post at the University of Dammam to join the group, following her daughter Ahlam al-Nasr and her youngest son. With al-Bugha's entire family having joined IS, it is not clear who influenced whom, or who radicalized whom. However, it is reported that Ahlam and Abu al Hassan al- Dimashqi went first to join the group in Syria, and then al-Bugha followed them with her husband and younger daughter (al-marsd.com, October 23, 2014)

Al-Bugha despises the Syrian protests and its calls for democracy. She asked: "What was this revolution for, for which they want me to participate in a public outcry on Facebook? They led the uprising to call for freedom and equal rights; well, I do not need freedom or equal rights; freedom was never my request, something I will never demand/call for" (all4syria.info, November 29, 2015). She is known to have preached about jihad to female Islamic gatherings in Dammam, Khobar and Dhahran. [1] She tried to influence her female students with her jihadist views, in particular on two main issues: al-walaa (loyalty) and al-bara (disownment). [2] According to her posts on social media, al-Bugha focused her scholarly research during the last years

she spent in Dammam on understanding and analyzing the fight of jihad.

Al-Bugha's trajectory demonstrates a rejection of the Shafi'i Islamic heritage of her family; and her adopted extremist views eventually led to the penning of her six-page pamphlet, "I am an ISIS believer, a 'Daeshi' before ISIS was created."

### An Islamic State Believer Before the Group Was Created

In her six-page pamphlet, which was published in 2014 by one of IS' media outlets, alghuraba media ("alghuraba" means strangers), al-Bugha explained her views on jihad. She states that after reading the sirrah of Prophet Muhammad, the life of his companions, and the modern history with all its revolutionary uprisings, she realized that she was a member of IS even before group was created. She added that she has come to the conclusion that there is no solution to end Muslim people's tragedies other than jihad. For al-Bugha, the seed of jihad started in Afghanistan. She believes the Afghani jihad revived the Muslim ummah (da3msyria2.files.wordpress.com).

Al-Bugha defends the actions of the IS, stating that she did not find anything in their actions that conflicts with Islam. She also differentiates between two kinds of jihad, "modern" jihad and "real" jihad. As she defines it, "modern" jihad is what the West wants Muslims to adopt and believe in. For her, this kind of jihad is not the jihad that real Muslims should seek, because God will not grant the Muslims victory unless they are real Muslims who perform "real" jihad. She also backs up her argument about "real" jihad by quoting from the Quran, the Surah of al baqarah (the cow), verse 191, which states "kill them wherever you find them," interpreting it as God ordering Muslims to kill those who are aggressors against Muslims. According to al-Bugha, that is the definition of "real" jihad that Muslims should seek (da3msyria2.files.wordpress.com).

Providing her explanation as to why Muslim scholars criticize the Islamic State, al-Bugha says that for the last sixty years Muslim scholars could not talk about the duty of jihad in Palestine out of fear of Western demonization. Al-Bugha juxtaposes this with IS, who she says possess the courage to condemn the political, educational, and social corruption prevailing in Muslim countries, and strive to preserve what they can of Islamic sharia and basic Islamic teaching. Speaking about public fears, al-Bugha admits that she once feared public judgment. She says in her pamphlet that she he has been a supporter of the Islamic State since it announced its caliphate but fears of those who denounce

the Islamic State and jihad stopped her from immediately embracing the group (da3msyria2.files.wordpress.com).

## Jihadist Juristic Rhetoric

Al-Bugha' masters Islamic juristic rhetoric in her writings, alternating between the standard Arabic and the Syrian dialectic. It is clear that Salafi scholars like Sheikh Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab strongly influence her, and she believes al-Wahhab is the one who revived the fight for jihad for the sake of Tawhid (isla mist-movements.com, November 29, 2015). [3][4] She adopts a preachy tone in her writing, which points to her teaching background, implicitly assuming a permissible role of power by addressing her readers and followers both in her pamphlet and on her social media as "my brothers and sisters."

Al-Bugha has a strict control of her emotions, never expressing sentiments, yearning or sadness, not even in her tribute to her dead son. Using Syrian [Damascene] dialect, al-Bugha makes it easy for people to relate to her writing, especially if they are Syrians. Her shrewd speech uniquely weaves poetic rhymes, sarcastic rhetorical questions and a twist of Syrian sense of humor, with Quranic-backed oratory that makes her writings about the Islamic State a credible testimony to the group. These elements of her writing help to invoke compassion toward IS from her Muslim online readers, even inspiring some to join IS.

Through her writing, al-Bugha works to salvage the damaged public reputation of the Islamic State. Since moving to the Islamic State, al-Bugha has both provided juristic justification for atrocities committed by IS and praised IS support of civil infrastructure. She glorifies the group's militants, describing them as courageous men, who fear no one except Allah and only seek Jannah (paradise) (da3msyria2.files.wordpress.com). She speaks highly of the civil infrastructure of the Islamic State, praising the clean streets of Mosul, describing them as far cleaner than the streets in Dammam. She attributes that to the terrorist group's firm implementation of the sharia laws applied in the city, which she says is missing in Muslim and Arab countries.

Al-Bugha also justifies the IS' barbaric pillage of artifacts – from blowing up Mosul's public library to obliterating the world famous god statues in the captured Syrian city of Palmyra. She structures her defense under the religious pretext of destroying heresy that promotes idolatry. Al-Bugha also describes caring for ruins and artifacts as a "joke," and she considers archeologists liars. She believes caring for artifacts and archeological sites is an interest fed by the political dictators for years to satisfy the disbelievers, as they

fill the minds of all generations with an illusion that these "broken stones" and "ugly statues are signs of civilization" (amwaj.ca, October 20).

## Al-Bugha's in the IS Organizational Structure

Al-Bugha's role within the terrorist organization is not limited to her online recruitment. Reports indicate that she is the IS chief of public education (alarabiya.net, July 19). On her social media accounts, al-Bugha outlines the duration of public education in the Islamic State, which is only nine years: five years are devoted to primary education, and the other four years to post-primary education. "Artificial and taboo subjects" are not taught (zamanalwsl.net, June 3, 2015). The students in the Islamic State are to attend university at the age of fifteen and graduate by the age of eighteen. This allows them to start their working life at the peak of their youth so that they can start "what is good for [their] life and religion" (zamanalwsl.net, June 3, 2015).

Al-Bugha criticizes public education in Syria and other Arab countries where students start their baccalaureate study at the age of eighteen and graduate from the university at the age of twenty-two or twenty-four with no prospects of finding a decent job. In addition, she stated that IS will turn the table on Western plans for the young Muslim generation, as education will be essential to build a dignified civilization of the Islamic State (zamanalwsl.net, June 3, 2015). However, it is not clear whether or not al-Bugha's role includes contributing to curriculum development.

## Conclusion

Unlike other female militants in the IS leadership hierarchy who have been given aliases, al-Bugha is known by her real name. Moreover, public statements released by the group describe al-Bugha "a scholarly torch [that] supports the Islamic Caliphate state [as one of Ansar al-Caliphate]" (all4syria.info, November 29, 2015). These are both indicators that she is the most respected female militant in IS, and one of the most influential voices on the juristic Manhaj [methodology] of the Islamic State's ideology. Al-Bugha's status, operational authority, and extremely ideological influence over IS' public education means her voice will remain influential will influence the generation of militants to come.

## Notes

[1] Dammam, Khobar and Dhahran are cities located in the

Eastern province of Saudi Arabia

[2] In the Islamic context “al-walaa” means loyalty to God, and whatever He is pleased with, as well as friendship and closeness to the believers, while “al-baraa” is to free oneself from that which is displeasing to Allah and disowning the disbelievers (<http://ahmadjibril.com>)

[3] Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab is a Saudi scholar from Nejd, Saudi Arabia and the founder of Wahhabism, which is an extreme branch of Islam that is known in its contemporary usage as Salafism

[4] Tawhid means in Islam attributing oneness to God, by describing Him as being one and unique, with no partner or peer in His essence and attributes ([islamqa.info](http://islamqa.info)).

## Breaking the Female Militant Mold: A Look at AQAP’s Wafa al-Shihri (a.k.a Um Hajr al-Azadi)

*Halla Diyab*

The involvement of Saudi women with jihadist militancy is rare, and there are few examples of female militants carving out a new role, one different from the kind of feminine behavior usually sanctioned in jihadist circles. Among those few women is Wafa al-Shihri (a.k.a. Um Hajr al Azadi), one of the most influential al-Qaeda loyalists and the first-ever Saudi female-militant to perform hijra to Yemen in order to join the group. [1]

### Background

Wafa al-Shihri (a.k.a. Um Hajr al Azadi) left preparatory school at a young age to marry Saud al Saha’ al-Qahtani. Soon after their wedding, she gave birth to their first child, Yousef ([bluwe.com](http://bluwe.com), September 2, 2009). Now divorced from Wafa, her ex-husband al-Qahtani has stated that she had psychological issues and cited her religious extremism as the primary reason that led to their divorce. He has indicated that he found her to be psychologically disturbed and easily influenced by radical fatwas (decrees by Muslim clerics) ([awraqpress](http://awraqpress), August 20, 2013).

After her divorce in 2004, Wafa married Abdul Rahman Alghamadi, an al-Qaeda militant who was later killed by the Saudi security services in the al Huda incident in Ta’if, in Saudi Arabia’s Mecca Province, and she gave birth to a daughter named “Wasaf” ([alyaum](http://alyaum), September 3, 2009). Wafa is the sister of Yousef al-Shihri (not to be confused with her son who carries the same given name), a former Guantanamo detainee and an associate of fellow Guantanamo inmate Saeed bin Ali bin Mubarak al-Shihri (a.k.a. Sheikh Saeed Abu Sufian al Azdi). After they were both released from Guantanamo, they went through the de-radicalization program (al-Munasahah) run by the Saudi Advisory Committee of Counseling. Yousef persuaded his widowed sister to marry al-Shihri. Soon after, al-Shihri appeared in an al-Qaeda video carrying an AK-47, claiming to be a top al-Qaeda commander in Yemen and announcing his return to militancy after fleeing Saudi Arabia (YouTube, July 17, 2013; [alarabiya.net](http://alarabiya.net), September 2, 2009). Reports indicate that Wafa fell unconscious when she learned of her third husband’s escape to Yemen, and her mother (Um Faisal) has said that Wafa subsequently stopped eating from grief ([okaz](http://okaz), September 8, 2009).

In February 2009, Saeed al-Shihri was listed on the Saudi list of the 85 most wanted terrorism suspects (ctc.usma.edu, May 15, 2009). After arriving in Yemen, al-Shihri smuggled his wife, Wafa, to Yemen with the help of a trafficker named Abu Thabit al-Qasimi. Facilitating her move from Riyadh, al-Qasimi took Wafa to al Madina and then to Jazan, where she then crossed the border into Yemen. Upon crossing the border, Wafa was received by her husband Saeed, her nephew Abdullah al-Shihri and her brother Yusef al Shihri (al-Arabiya, September 2, 2009).

Saeed al-Shihri began operating out of Yemen, and is reported to have been the mastermind behind the 2009 assassination attempt targeting Saudi Crown Prince Nayef (rafha-news.com, September 4, 2009). In a phone conversation recorded between Prince Nayef and Abdulla al-Asiri, the suicide bomber who tried to assassinate him, Wafa al-Shihri's name came up. During the conversation, al-Asiri, who claims to have been de-radicalized through the al-Munasahah de-radicalization program, indicated that Wafa is safe with her children in Yemen. In response, Prince Nayef assured Abdullah that Wafa is welcomed to come back to Saudi Arabia with her children (YouTube, September 2, 2009).

### Escape to Yemen

After her husband fled to Yemen, Wafa persuaded her brother Yousef to go to the Prince Muhamed Bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Care in Saudi Arabia to get hold of a certified paper from the Interior Minister stating that Wafa could move freely and travel in Saudi Arabia without a mahram (male chaperon) in her husband's absence. However, his request was rejected. Subsequently, in March 2009, Wafa fled from her father's house in Alnaseem, an eastern suburb in Riyadh, to go to Yemen with her three children, Yusef, Wasaif and Shaza. She fled to join her husband in al-Qaeda's Yemen's branch. Hiding in caves, she began calling herself "Um Hajr al Azadi," and she changed the name of her daughter, Shaza, from al-Shihri to Hajr. After fleeing to Yemen, Wafa faced allegations by her first husband, Saud al Saha' al-Qahtani, that she kidnapped their son Yousef and her daughter Wasaif from her second marriage (lahamag, May 29, 2013). In response, the committee of investigations in Saudi Arabia made allegations against her and her husband al-Shihri, accusing them of smuggling the two children and exposing them to danger, as well as breaking border security laws. The biological father of the children and Wafa's father submitted these allegations to the committee. The Saudi government then tried to contact the Yemeni government to bring Wafa and the two children back to Saudi Arabia.

### Wafa's Disappearance

Wafa's disappearance has riveted the attention of the Saudi public, as her path to radicalization is surrounded with questions. There is a debate over whether she previously held extremist ideological views or she was put on the radicalization path by her marriages to al-Qaeda militants. Her parents, especially her mother, Um Faisal, accused Wafa's husband al-Shihri of kidnapping Wafa together with her children while she was on her way to visit the grandmother of her daughter Wasaif in Riyadh's al-Shifa. Her father, Muhammed al-Jubiri, supported the mother's claims by stating that in a call to her parents from Yemen, Wafa informed them that she had been forced by her husband to go to Yemen (okaz, September 8, 2009). This explains the support given to her case by the Saudi Government and Prince Nayef, who exerted effort to persuade the tribes in Ma'rib, situated to the east of Yemen's capital Sana'a, to bring Wafa back to Saudi Arabia, their attempts, however, failed. In Yemen, Wafa lived in the house of one of the tribes' heads in Ma'rib, and they have refused to hand her over to the Saudis without her consent (awraqpress, August 20, 2013).

Wafa's path to jihad started with conventional fundraising and securing donations for al-Qaeda jihadists in Yemen (aawsat.com, November 24, 2014). After her escape to Yemen, however, she developed an online presence, and her extreme rhetoric evolved as she became more vocal. Wafa pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in the al-Qaeda in Yemen magazine Sada al-Malahim. Then, in May 2010, she issued a call to Saudi women to join al-Qaeda. Using the name Um Hajr al Azadi, Wafa took her recruitment efforts to al-Qaeda's online media. In one article targeting potential female recruits, she wrote: "If your man is unable to defend and take care of you, come and enjoy the hospitality and protection of the best fighters in the Arabian Peninsula." That marked a major step forward in the evolution of al-Qaeda's female wing (aawsat.com, January 5, 2014).

Unlike Islamic State (IS), which entices women to perform hijra, al-Qaeda does not encourage their female militants to do so unless they are guaranteed the safety from the dangers to which jihadists are exposed. Al-Qaeda believes that the Muslim Umma (nation) is not ready for the Islamic Caliphate. The group believes there is an absence of Tamkeen for Muslims, which is not achieved by territorial invasion but when Muslims are given safety from the Kuffar (non-believers). Al-Qaeda bases its ideology on Ibn Taymiyyah, who said the first step of implementing Sharia is to ward off the aggression of non-believers toward Muslims (scribd.com). This concern for female safety is juxtaposed by IS' reliance on female jihadists — so-called "jihadist brides"—

to help populate the Caliphate and build the next generation. Unlike in al-Qaeda, IS' female jihadists are mainly seen as child-bearers. Soon after the militant to whom she is wed is martyred, the IS jihadist bride is transferred to the next jihadist to perform the same role.

In this sense, Wafa is an exception. She wants to be an al-Qaeda member who constructs a role for herself in the group's structure that is based on implementing its ideology. Wafa used her marriage to an al-Qaeda commander to join the group in Yemen, and al-Shihri facilitated her move there. There were muhajirat (those who have performed hijra) in Afghanistan as well who mainly went there with their husbands. After their husbands were martyred, they were sent to Syria to the areas under al-Qaeda control.

This raises questions about the destiny of Wafa, who reportedly remains in Yemen after the death of her husband in a drone attack in Yemen, and the death of her brother Yousef, who was killed by the Saudis in the southwestern coastal city of Jazan when he tried to sneak from Yemen to Saudi Arabia together with another militant who was wanted by Saudi authorities for terrorist activity. Her son Yousef, who received militant training in the group's camps in Yemen and now is working closely with al-Qaeda senior militants in training new recruits, has turned 18, and this makes it easier for Wafa to mobilize as she has her son as her mahram (chaperon) (akhbaar24, January 27, 2013). However, Wafa's mother has previously indicated that her daughter complained in a telephone call about the difficult life she leads in Yemen with her children and being confined to her house. This report raises doubts about rumors that Wafa moved to al-Qaeda-held areas in Syria (okaz, October 11, 2010).

### Conclusion

Wafa has adeptly manipulated the gender conventions of a Saudi woman, using her marital relationship and male alliances to rebel against the codes and establish her influence as a behind-the-scenes presence in al-Qaeda's female militancy. Wafa perfectly fits within the group's structural dynamic of female militancy, mobilizing under the cover of marriage to serve the jihadist cause through raising funds and raising the future generation of jihadists, rather than IS' jihadist bride model. Through her varied messaging, Wafa knows how to evoke fear and uncertainty about her destiny and win sympathy and support, providing her with a cover under which to mobilize and act on her extreme ideology. It is this unique oratory that makes her an important female militant in the al-Qaeda organizational structure.

Unlike other female militants, Wafa did not seem to go through a dramatic trajectory from a quiet, conventional Arab woman to a belligerent online recruiter for al-Qaeda. As things are difficult for women in Saudi Arabia, and their mobility is restricted by the need to have a male chaperone, Wafa found in marriage a path allowing her to act on her ideological beliefs and a break through from being an ideological spectator to an active member of al-Qaeda. Her association and alliance with male militants, whether as husbands or family, like brother or son, eased Wafa's path forward. This is a kind of modern re-creation of traditional roles played by Arab women and a new infusion of jihadist blood.

### Notes

[1] Hijra: The emigration from abode of Kufr (the land which is not ruled by Muslims) to the abode of Islam (land controlled by Muslims)

# Islamic State's White Widow: Sally Jones's Digital Jihad

*Halla Diyab*

**S**ally-Anne Frances Jones (a.k.a. Sakinah Hussein; Umm Hussain al-Britani; the White Widow) is a former punk rock guitarist turned one of the most dangerous female militants in the Islamic State (IS) group, serving as an online recruiter and propagandist. Jones is believed to be the first woman to be placed on a UN sanctions list that included a travel ban and freeze on assets (United Nations, September 25, 2015). A widow of Junaid Hussain (a.k.a. Abu Hussain al-Britani), the infamous IS hacker, Jones was reported to have been killed in June 2017 by an American drone, though this remains unconfirmed.

## Background

Jones, 45, a single mother of three, had no foundation in the Islamic faith when she traveled to Syria from her home in England during the Christmas holiday in 2013, after likely having been persuaded by Junaid Hussain, who was 19 years old at that time. Jones left Chatham, Kent with her son JoJo, 12, leaving her other two sons behind. She uses various online accounts under pseudonyms to promote the values of life under the Islamic Caliphate and lure other foreign women to join the group. It is believed that she converted to Islam after her marriage to Hussain in Idlib, after which she changed her name to Sakina Hussain and her son's name to Hamza. After reaching Raqqa, she was sent to a southwestern training camp, where she spent six weeks having her loyalty to the group tested, and learning tafsir (Islamic exegesis) and Sharia, while her husband was at a military training camp (shafaaq.com, September 17, 2016).

## The Allure of Jihad

Jones had a tough upbringing. Her parents divorced when she was a young child, and her father committed suicide when she was only ten. Over time, she seemingly developed a complicated and controversial relationship with authority. Possibly as a result of her upbringing, Jones has exhibited a consistent impulse to rebel against authority and mainstream norms, at times leading to destructive behavior. Her rebellion, seemingly driven by anger, has manifested in varying degrees of challenges to the establishment — as a punk rocker, attempts to practice witchcraft online and, ultimately, by becoming a notorious jihadist (nmsir, December 1, 2016). Jones, who felt unfulfilled in her quiet

family life in Chatham, Kent, was always eager for an adventure, and IS' jihad gave this to her (arabic.cnn.com, October 3, 2015). IS' notorious image and openness to new recruits, even those without a strong knowledge of ideology or Islam, was a subculture that fulfilled her in ways that her previous forays into rebellion had failed to do: Jones had long yearned for public recognition, but she was unable to achieve that through her music. She was willing to cast off her British national identity, go against the establishment and employ violence and brutality, which was enough to earn her entry into the group.

As a movement that focuses on visual performance — from visually documented beheadings to physical destruction and grand invasions — IS found in Jones a practiced performer who could help realize their sophisticatedly-programmed online propaganda machine, one of the most successful of our time. As a punk rock band guitarist who believes in rejecting the perceived excesses of the mainstream, and a fan of anti-establishment rhetoric, Jones found in IS a means to revive her rebellion against the establishment. IS gave Jones the exposure to maliciously translate her rebellious past into loud, violent and effective politicized lyric-like tweets. Under the pseudonym Umm Hussain al-Britani, she posted messages in support of IS, stating: “You Christians all need beheading with a nice blunt knife and stuck on the railings at Raqqa... Come here I'll do it for you.” (al-Anba, August 30, 2016). Often, her posts evoke violent images that are in line with IS' visualized terror.

Images of Jones' posing with weapons, together with her tweets, are a performance, staging the rhetoric of IS. Her image has helped IS spread waves of fear online, rippling out through Western society and establishing the group as masters of public fear-mongering. Conversely, Jones was offered a prized opportunity to have easy, borderless access to her global spectators and invade their daily life by producing volumes of fast-paced rhetoric that dwells mainly on violence. IS used Jones to infiltrate the lives of her global audience and conjure fear through the idea that even a white British woman would turn her back on democracy in favor of the Islamic Caliphate.

## Self-destructive or Independent?

Another twist in the tale of Jones is her destructive persona. Whether due to a deep-rooted resentment harbored from her childhood or to other life experiences, she has actively destroyed most of the traditionally core relationships in her life. This aspect of her character likely made her ready to offer her own child, JoJo, to the jihadist cause (Erem News, August 27, 2016). Unlike other female jihadist militants — with

the exception of the British jihadist bride, Grace “Khadija” Dare — Jones is a rare case of a mother who has offered her child to the cause. [2] After abandoning her partner and two children in the United Kingdom, she was willing to offer both her husband Hussain and her son JoJo to the jihadist cause. One interpretation is that she used the cause as another tool of abandoning those who she loves before they abandon her. Further, offering her husband Hussain in the name of jihad enabled her to abandon him while casting herself as a “winner,” rather than abandoned (independent.co.uk, October 12).

### Digital Jihadist Power Couple

The dynamic of Jones’ function within the group, as well as her relationship with Hussain, are uniquely suited to her. Hussain, just 23 when he died, had an adversarial relationship with the establishment, much like Jones. His young age allowed her to play a parental role in their relationship, giving her authority. IS’ marital structure — it is centered on the momentary marriage of jihadists, as the male jihadist should offer himself martyrdom — gave Jones a stronger identification with her role as a widow, rather than as a deserted wife. The temporary nature of her jihadist relationship with Hussain was the perfect fit for her, giving her a relationship that never forced her to lose her sense of independence.

Hussain’s reputation as a hacker, and his impulsive enmity and rejection of the establishment, was also a major factor in his appeal to Jones. She easily partnered with Hussain, forming a prominent IS cyber militant power couple. Further, operating primarily in the virtual world does not mandate the emotional attachment that a real life relationship requires. Jones’ past shows her as someone who prefers to be free of bonds, both social and emotional. Thus, the only space in which she could relate to men is online, and IS gave her the means to maintain that. Before joining ISIS, Jones developed an interest in witchcraft. She was eager to be a supernatural power herself, and she has, in some sense, achieved that, practicing “digital black magic.”

Driven by a thirst for influence, Jones operates according to a dynamic that is different from her female jihadist counterparts. Unlike most jihadist brides, for Jones, marriage in the land of “Jihad till martyrdom do us part” was not a sentimental romance. It was rather a vehicle to reinvent her image from an invisible mother in Chatham to a cyber presence who can spread fear and violence on a wide scale. Jones did not perform al-Nafir (“call to arms” or “call to mobilize”) or “Hijra” to Syria to offer her body to her jihadist husband, nor was she driven by ideological

or religious reasons. Instead, Jones sought to rebel against the establishment. [1] She was not “overtly concerned with sexuality” in her relationship with the jihadist husband, as she came to terms with Hussain marrying another woman while she was still married to him. It is reported that after a few weeks of the couple’s relocation to Raqqa, Hussain married a 23-year-old Syrian woman from Raqqa and lived with her and Jones in the same building (shafaaq.com, September 17, 2016). Jones was not driven by love in her relationship with Hussain. Their relation was more of a partnership in the insurgency of cyber terror.

Jones used love and marriage as a temporary state to further her independence. Unlike Hussain’s second Syrian wife, who married a jihadist after his death, Jones preferred to stay a widow, turning into IS’ “White Widow.” She then moved with her son JoJo to a family building in Raqqa (shafaaq.com, September 17, 2016). Her status as a widow facilitates her role in IS’ recruitment dynamic. Jones recruits other vulnerable jihadist brides to offer up their bodies to IS, but this time as vessels for explosives. Her destructive impulses were channeled in her operational authority over al-Anwar Alawlaki brigade, through which she recruits and trains female militants. [3] She cemented herself as a key cyber recruiter who entices women in the West to join IS.

### Conclusion

Sally Jones is the perfect example of a deconstructed image of a traditional female militant, manipulating IS’ outreach to manufacture her own global persona. Jones’ solitary and angry soul found a refuge in IS’ barbaric narrative and in her pragmatic relationship with Hussain. Jones symbolizes a unique, dangerous dimension of the Islamic State’s female militancy. It transcends the conventional Islamic female roles of jihadist brides as sexual objects into a new definition of female destructive power. The uniqueness of Jones lies in the seemingly limitless malice she is able to skillfully channel into visual performance to create mass impact of terror.

### Notes

[1] Al-Nafir to the land of Sham (the Levant) is the call to arms issued by IS to travel to IS self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq for the purpose of jihad and fighting in support of IS. In his first audio message, ISIS self-appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al- Baghdadi, sent a message to Muslims in July 1, 2014, titled “A Message to the Mujahideen and the Muslim Ummah In the Month of Ramadan,” in which he dwelled on inviting Muslims to perform al-naafir by emigrating to the Islamic State (news.siteintelgroup.com, July 1, 2014).

[2] Grace “Khadija” Dare is a British convert jihadist bride whose son soldier, Isa Dare, appeared in IS’ execution video (vetogate.com, January 5, 2016).

[3] The Anwar Alawlaki brigade is the Islamic State’s female special militant brigade, which was set up by Junaid Hussain in Raqqa (shafaaq.com, September 17, 2016)

## The Fall of Islamic State’s Female Militants: A Case Study

*Halla Diyab*

As an increasing number of Islamic State (IS) female militants have been captured and sentenced to death after the collapse of the so-called “caliphate,” gender roles within the group have been deconstructed once more. This process marks the fall of female militancy within the terrorist group. Meanwhile, as courts have delivered a series of judgments and death sentences against captive female militants, those female militants yet to be tried are attempting to become the architects of their own fate by reshaping their once violent rhetoric. With a total of 509 foreign women detained—including 400 Turkish female jihadists and 200 children who are being held in Iraq, with 16 of these women having been sentenced to death—captivity is a recurring theme in modern female militancy, whether at the hands of the terrorist group or their opponent (irakna.com, February 28).

For years, IS succeeded in manipulating gender norms within jihadist militancy by giving female insurgents visibility as jihadist brides and recruiters. Still, female jihadists experienced captivity a form of captivity. With the group’s considerable territorial losses and their last stronghold, Raqqa, having fallen, their dream of an everlasting Caliphate has been shattered. However, the defeat of the group has failed to change an important aspect of female militancy—captivity. Ironically, female militants have been met with captivity of a different sort—this time, at the hands of the group’s state adversaries, who seek to deliver a harsh justice.

Now captured female militants are attempting to abandon much of what IS female militancy stood for, shifting their rhetoric in an attempt to save themselves. Two prominent examples of how this shift is taking place are the cases of French jihadists Djamila Boutoutaou, 29, and Melina Boughedir, 27, who was the first female IS militant to be captured by the Iraqi forces (irakna.com , February 28).

### The Case of Melina Boughedir

Melina Boughedir, the wife of an Islamic State cook, is facing a death sentence for belonging to IS. Her case was heard by the Central Penal Court in Baghdad, which delivered the sentence despite claims that she did not engage in acts of terrorism (alroya.om, February 20). Boughedir entered Iraq illegally with her husband in October 2015 after they spent four days on the Syrian border. Her husband was reportedly

killed in the Battle of Mosul.

Boughedir, mother of four, was arrested in February 2017, during the Battle of Mosul. Three of her children were returned to France in December 2017 by the Iraqi government. On February 19, Boughedir, who entered the courtroom in a black gown, grey jacket and purple hijab (headscarf), was sentenced to seven months in prison for illegally entering Iraq, and she was to be deported to France. Though not sentenced for terrorism by the judge, later, on March 29, the Iraqi appeals court issued a sentence to re-try Boughedir's case. The ruling was issued on the grounds that Boughedir cannot only be sentenced for illegal entry into Iraq as she was aware that her husband was joining IS, and yet she still chose to join him ([arabic.euronews.com](http://arabic.euronews.com), April 10).

In May 2018, Boughedir denied all allegations that she is an IS supporter during her retrial court hearing. Boughedir stated that she is not an “ideologized” militant. When asked about her husband, Boughedir responded: “He went to fetch water and never came back, and I do not know anything about him” ([al-Arabiya](http://al-Arabiya), May 3).

During the court hearing, Boughedir was shown a series of photographs and asked to identify different jihadists who were featured in them. Boughedir was then presented with a photograph in which she appears, and the judge stated “you look so comfortable in this photograph in comparison to your claims that you were forced by your husband to join him in Iraq as he threatened you to take your children.” She responded: “I was at home, and my husband took the photo. I want to reunite with my children who have been repatriated to France” ([alhayat.com](http://alhayat.com), May 3). The court decided to hold a second hearing in June based on the request of her new lawyer appointed by her family.

### The Case of Djamila Boutoutaou

In a pink jacket and a brown hijab, Djamila Boutoutaou was in the public spotlight at her Baghdad court hearing. Surrounded by men while standing in her wooden cell, Boutoutaou failed to manipulate the judge with her rhetoric of victimization. “I want to raise my daughter,” she stated. Boutoutaou single-handedly embodies a new stage of female militancy, one which symbolizes the fall of IS’ female militancy as previously known. On the April 17, 2018, the Iraqi court gave Boutoutaou, who is a convert to Islam of Algerian descent, a life sentence for joining the terrorist group ([alaraby.co.uk](http://alaraby.co.uk), April 17).

Boutoutaou left France after she married a former rapper,

Mohammed Nassereddine. A mother to two—Khadija and Abdul Allah who are being held by the Iraqi forces in Tel Keppe (Tel Kaif)—Boutoutaou denied the court’s allegations that she joined the terrorist group. She claimed that she was tricked by her husband and left France for Turkey on a holiday with him. Boutoutaou, who says she wore a headscarf under the influence of her mother-in-law, claimed her husband received a call from someone named “al Qurtibi” while in Turkey. She said she overheard them talking about moving to Syria and Iraq. Boutoutaou alleges that they locked her up in a cave with her two children ([almarjie-paris.com](http://almarjie-paris.com), April 17).

Boutoutaou lost her son Abdullah in an Iraqi airstrike, and she claims to have since lost 70 kilograms out of grief. In response to the judge’s question about whether she joined IS with her husband, Boutoutaou claimed she was forced by her husband to join the group. She stated that “during the ten months we spent in Iraq, I did not see my husband as he used to spend most of his time not at home.” Boutoutaou was taken by her neighbor to Tal Afar where she handed herself over to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the north of Nineveh Governorate ([almarjie-paris.com](http://almarjie-paris.com), April 17).

### The Deconstructed Female Militancy

Separation from male jihadists forces the female militant to acquire a tone designed to win sympathy. It is this oratory that symbolizes the failure of female militants to survive when separated and alone. Boutoutaou and Boughedir both failed to utilize their gender role and maternal responsibilities to survive. Thus, they both can be seen to exemplify how the female militant identity collapses when taken out of the context of the group.

### New IS Propaganda

An IS propaganda video released in February, which shows women fighting on the front line, presents a revision of female militants’ identity within the group. The video redefines the role of female jihadists after the group’s territorial loss. It manipulates the previously defined gender roles to carve out a new role of female power within the ranks of male militants. This new image transcends the stereotypical image of the jihadist brides who live a love fantasy in the land of jihad and are viewed as a means of reproduction to guarantee the continuity and survival of the organization. Women are utilized in the video by the group to prove the survival of the jihadist cause. The five women armed with guns who are featured in the video present a distorted caricature of a militant. With the narrator hailing “the chaste

mujahid woman journeying to her lord with the garments of purity and faith,” the depiction presents an ironic contrasted to the image of captive Boutoutaou and Boughedir in the courtroom. This contrast proves the futility of the invisible, pure female jihadist militant covered in black to survive beyond the insurgency (palestinetoday.net, February 20).

### Conclusion

Captive female jihadists like Boutoutaou and Boughedir fit perfectly with the deconstructed image of a female militant after the collapse of IS’ “caliphate.” IS manipulates female gender roles as necessary to maintain its myth. The group is ready to present its female militants as solitary individuals who can fight on the front line. But the fate of captured militants like Boutoutaou and Boughedir proves the futility of IS’ attempt to be a female empowered group. Boutoutaou and Boughedir symbolize a new dimension of the Islamic State’s female militancy, one in which the “militant” readily compromises her extreme rhetoric for survival. The deviation of these two militants from the constructed image of IS female militancy not only highlights the futility of IS in creating long-serving female militants who maintain a worldview saturated by the beliefs of the groups, but also highlights how the role of female militancy is deteriorating and regressing within the terrorist group.

## Emilie König, Mayfa, Zahra Douman—The IS Women Leading The Next Frontier of Women in Jihad

*Halla Diyab*

With the dream of a Caliphate coming to an ignominious end, and Islamic State (IS) insurgents either being killed or fleeing from Syria and Iraq, female jihadists have been subjected to prosecution and captivity. As an increasing number of European women publicly plead for repatriation, a new form of female militancy is taking shape. With the loss of their male jihadist peers, the female militants are carving out a new role for women within the ranks of their group. These new roles will operate on jihadist sisterhood based on what these female jihadists have shared from the Caliphate’s fall—namely cruelty, imprisonment, separation, and the loss of male counterparts. These female jihadists feel betrayed by the failure of the Caliphate to sustain the jihadist ideology’s territory or protect its soldiers. They have developed a sense of separation from their male peers and are growing out of the conventional role for female jihadists, as they no longer need male peers to connect them to the jihadist cause. This does not mean they will think less of the jihadist ideology—rather, they will endeavor to restructure this ideology and feminize it. This process will pose a danger to the societies to which they are returning.

### Emilie König: The Threat of Wannabe-Returning Foreign Female Jihadists

The militants who hold extreme views and were radicalized before leaving to fight in Syria or Iraq pose a growing threat after returning to Europe. An example of this is Emilie König (a.k.a. Umm al-Tawab), the French nightclub bartender turned notorious IS recruiter (Alhurra, January 9). The 33-year-old jihadist and mother of three was arrested by Kurdish forces after she joined IS in 2012. König—who is considered one of the most dangerous French female jihadists on the UN blacklist and the U.S. list of foreign terrorists—was born to a Catholic former police officer who left her and her mother at the age of two. At 19, König left home only to return after converting to Islam under the influence of her first husband, “Ismail,” an Algerian drug trafficker who was serving his sentence in prison. He abused König until he was jailed again for domestic violence. König—who chose to be known as “Um al-Tawab,” which

means repentance in Arabic—apparently regretted her time working as a bartender in a Lorient nightclub during her teens. König fled from her first husband to Paris in 2011, and began wearing a niqab (or burka). She found in Islam a way to rebel against her society, in which she failed to fit. She was later stopped by local police in 2010 near a mosque in Lorraine for distributing flyers calling for jihad (Alqabas, May 12, 2016).

She became associated with the extremist group Forsane Alizza, whose leader was jailed in 2015 on terrorism charges. König was the first French woman to cross the Turkish borders and join IS in the summer of 2012, leaving her children behind (Albayan, January 3, 2016). She then married a French jihadist, Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Muhamed), who died shortly after their marriage, leaving her with three children. König played an active role as a prominent recruiter of wannabe-jihadists. She is believed to have assisted in recruiting more than 200 French women. König was not the conventional militant, but rather belonged to a wave of visible insurgents featured in a series of YouTube videos wearing niqabs and carrying their firearms, yelling “Allah Akbar” (Youtube, August 9, 2016). König is now held by Kurdish forces in al-Hawla, in eastern Syria, and is attempting to return to Paris. Although she stated in several interviews that she was tortured while under arrest, she later denied it in a video interview published by the Kurdish militant group, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) (Almasdar, January 10). In the interview, she appeared exhausted and did not wear a niqab or head scarf (Arabian Business, January 9).

A militant like König, who has been a follower of these extreme beliefs since her teens, will not be de-radicalized by the loss of the Caliphate’s territory. Her extremism began before she left for jihad in Syria and it found a place to grow by joining the group where her jihadism evolved from an ideology to active violence. König despised democracy and passionately enticed others to join the terrorist groups for years before she was captured. Showing regret for joining the group is insufficient evidence that she has renounced the extremist ideology. Rather, she is likely trying to gain sympathy so she can be released from captivity and return to France.

König’s active jihadism is further defined by appearing in her captivity videos without a headscarf. This was done to camouflage her rhetoric and give the false impression that she no longer holds extreme views. But this pattern can also be seen not just as belief in the terrorist cause, but using the extreme ideology to rebel against French society, which she deeply resents. König’s trajectory and past actions demonstrate her ability to operate on her own within the

jihadist movement. She operated without a male figure to connect her to the jihadist cause, and does not need a husband, a son, or even a leader to encourage her extremist activities, and herein lies the danger.

### **Mayfa: IS Matchmaker**

Another prominent case is that of the 21-year-old French woman known simply as “Mayfa” (a.k.a. Umm al-Zahraa). She was an IS matchmaker who persuaded young girls to travel to Syria in order to marry IS fighters (Alsumaria, September 29, 2015). She started a travel agency as a cover for her recruiting French girls. Before going to Syria in 2014, Mayfa reportedly advised two French girls to wage terrorist acts in France in case they fail to make it to Syria. Mayfa went to Syria in 2014, where she promoted life in IS-held parts of Syria via a series of online videos featuring her carrying Kalashnikovs. Through this video series, Mayfa enticed other women to travel to Syria to marry jihadists. She coordinated with men inside Turkey to facilitate the passage of the French girls to Syria. She was unaware that French intelligence knew of her activities. She was arrested when she landed in Paris, arriving from Turkey. Upon her arrest, Mayfa admitted to the police that she witnessed a beheading in Syria, but she used the same defense as König. She implied that she decided to repent, came back to France and gave up the name “Um al-Zahraa.” She was reportedly sentenced to eight years in prison in France (France24, April 7; al-Arabiya, September 29, 2015; Youm7, September 28, 2015).

Charged with violent rhetoric and lacking the environment to nourish it, European female jihadists on hijrah (immigration) to Syria utilize this rhetoric and make it into a way of life. Active female jihadism, however, was not attracting the attention of European intelligence agencies from 2013 to 2015, as the main focus had always been on male jihadists. This is mainly due to female jihadists being judged as sexual objects and potential brides who are complimentary to the jihadist movement but not a mandatory part of it. This lack of attention gave space for female jihadism to grow within the jihadist movement and become more visible.

### **Zahra Douman: From Melbourne Partier to IS Propagandist**

The danger of female jihadists lies in the connections and networks they establish between each other while fighting for their cause, especially among those from Europe. For some European female insurgents, the cause was a tool and pretext for empowerment. A prominent example is the case of a 21-year-old Australian student of Turkish descent, Zahra

Douman, who went to Syria to join IS in 2014. Douman was enticed to join the terrorist group by her friend, 23-year-old Mahmood Abdul Latif (a.k.a. “ISIS playboy” by the local Australian media), to whom she married for 40 days before he was killed fighting with IS. The ethnic-Lebanese Abdul Latif from Melbourne led a luxurious life going out to Australian night clubs before he joined the terrorist group (Janoubia, January 3, 2015).

Douman was reportedly his friend in Melbourne, and they would go out to nightclubs together. Douman is an example of a female jihadist who did not seem to believe in the ideology so much as she was attracted to the supposed extravagant lifestyle of jihadism. Abdul Latif used to exhibit images of children posing with Kalashnikovs on social media, advertising this life in Syria. Abdul Latif gave Douman the idea that life with IS is luxurious. Douman—who at one point tweeted that her dowry was a gun—stated that she burned her Australian passport and she has no intention of returning home. After his death, Douman described Abdul Latif as a “martyr.” On her Twitter account, she challenged whether anyone could capture her and posted Abdul Latif’s photo posing with a Kalashnikov. She added a caption in broken Arabic stating: “graves....be happy.....doors of Paradise, open.....the martyr Mahomood has arrived” (Watan, January 27, 2015).

Douman took on a propagandist role for the group by posting photos of a life of luxury online. Douman described it as “the five-star jihad in Syria.” Douman tweeted photos of five IS women fully covered in black, posing with guns and raising an IS flag near a luxury car (Sama News, March 21, 2015).

She challenged her home country and the United States, saying alongside the other female jihadists: “Australia and the United States, we are five women who were born on your soil and now we are thirsty to drink the blood of your people.” When Douman was criticized online for showing off a life of luxury while Syria is torn by war, she defended herself, stating that she was posing near the car in order to sell it. Douman was influential within the group, as she enticed many foreign fighters, especially Australian women, to join IS. The most well-known of her recruits is Yasmine Melanouf. Douman’s current condition and activities are difficult to track (Erem News, May 27, 2015).

### Conclusion

Female militants from the former Caliphate are renouncing their reliance on male-dominated extreme rhetoric and quickly shifting from being sexual objects to singular active units, establishing a new frontier of extreme jihadism.

These three militants endeavored to return to their home countries, survived captivity and imprisonment, and stayed willingly invisible. This common thread highlights a new identity of female militants born out of the falling Caliphate. It is solitary, independent, feminist, and will be a growing form of dangerous militancy for years to come.