

‘Many Sisters Wish They Were Men’: Gendered Discourse and Themes in pro-ISIS Online Communities

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Abstract

Though official Islamic State propaganda maintained narratives about women and the appropriate societal roles they were expected to fill, unofficial online content and behavioral patterns of online supporters both amplified and strayed from the official party line. Excellent scholarship has focused on gender dynamics and female membership in the Islamic State however, with the exception of Twitter studies, not as much research has been conducted in the online realm on other platforms. This paper hopes to contribute towards filling the gap by 1) examining 22 conversation exchanges in private pro-ISIS groups; some of which include interactions between male and female members and 2) analyzing prominent themes and narratives displayed in unofficial propaganda about women by addressing how these elements may or may not reflect the official narratives of the Islamic State. The findings are drawn from qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the online platforms of Hoop, Riot (Element), RocketChat, TamTam and Telegram which were selected for their wide popularity among ISIS supporters during a period ranging from 2018-2020.

Article History

Received Nov 15, 2020

Accepted Dec 12, 2020

Published Dec 25, 2020

Keywords: Islamic State, Terrorism, Telegram, Gender, Women, Online

Introduction

The Islamic State’s usage of social media and apps with encryption capabilities along with the ability to quickly adapt to counter-propaganda campaigns in the online sphere has served as a defining factor that has set it apart from its predecessors (Hoffman, 2016). Although not the only terrorist organization to solidify its online presence, it has employed creative strategies to ensure that its “full-spectrum” (Baele et al., 2019, p. 2) multi-lingual propaganda reach and

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unite a wide diverse global audience of supporters (Lokmanolgu, 2020, p.54). Additionally, the process of decentralization provided opportunities for supporters to become unofficial pro-Islamic State media content creators that, despite their unofficial status, nonetheless gained brand recognition and popularity among online ISIS communities. Part of this decentralization process included space for online female supporters and members *physically* located in the territorial so-called Caliphate to exercise their influence as prominent virtual propagandists and recruiters (Fraihi, 2018, p. 27). Though official Islamic State propaganda maintained narratives about women and the appropriate societal roles they were expected to fill, unofficial online content and behavioral patterns of online supporters both amplified and strayed from the official party line.

Excellent scholarship has focused on gender dynamics and female membership in the Islamic State (Davis, 2017 and 2020; Al-Dayel, 2018; Lahoud, 2018; Qazi, 2018 Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020; Daymon, 2020) however, with the exception of Twitter studies, not as much research has been conducted in the online realm on other platforms. This paper hopes to contribute towards filling the gap by 1) examining 22 conversation exchanges in private pro-ISIS groups; some of which include interactions between male and female members and 2) analyzing prominent themes and narratives displayed in unofficial propaganda about women by addressing how these elements may or may not reflect the official narratives of the Islamic State. The findings are drawn from qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the online platforms of Hoop, Riot (Element), RocketChat, TamTam and Telegram which were selected for their wide popularity among ISIS supporters during a period ranging from 2018-2020.

Aside from gaining a more in-depth understanding of unofficial propaganda content, ultimately, why does this matter? Content analysis of terrorist propaganda, in this case, of unofficial ISIS propaganda, offers a foundation from which to construct tailored counter-narratives but before this can be done, it is imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of themes and narratives (Braddock, 2020, p. 84). Content analysis may also help in identifying shifts in the sentiments of pro-ISIS online communities which can, in turn, be compared and contrasted with ISIS's policies regarding women or other topics for that matter.

In terms of future terrorism trends, it is necessary to ask if ISIS's policies could continue to undergo more radical policy shifts and if future Salafi-jihadi groups might incorporate women as active combatants in both offensive as well as defensive operations while citing ISIS as a precedent (Criezis, 2020, p. 72). In this study, the term Salafi-jihadi refers specifically to "violent rejectionists" within the "broader Salafi spectrum" (Maher, 2016, p. 12 and 12).

The paper contextualizes these data findings by first providing an overview of past research on female ISIS members and the diverse roles they held while in physical ISIS territory. It then shifts to the topic of virtual presence: first, a brief summary of Salafi-jihadism online followed by an examination of ISIS's digital footprint on Telegram. The next section focuses on the methodology for data collection followed by a presentation of the two data sets: the conversation exchanges and content theme categories. The analysis and discussion portion reviews the findings. In relation to the conversation exchanges, it situates female online propagandists within gender theory as it relates to concepts of female agency and provides a literature overview of scholars' various conclusions on what this agency entails for female ISIS supporters. For the second data set, it reviews wider trends tendencies discovered in the data and considers the implications of these findings. The conclusion focuses on how the results may provide insights for counter-narrative efforts and identifies areas for further research. In short, this research focuses on answering the questions: *How do women's online roles differ from roles they held in the territorial so-called Caliphate? How are women portrayed in unofficial propaganda in pro-ISIS online spaces and what prominent themes are found in the messaging?*

Female members of the Islamic State

Before expanding on unofficial propaganda narratives about women and other dynamics in the online space, it is important to contextualize the study within the wider framework of previous research that has been conducted on women's involvement in the Islamic State.

Headlines have approached the topic of female ISIS members with titles such as “The secret world of ISIS brides,” “ISIS lures women with kittens, nutella” and “Inside one man’s secret mission to rescue jihadi brides from ISIS” (Jaffer, 2018; CNN, 2015; Hamilton, 2020). Such one-dimensional portrayals present women as lacking agency in their decisions to join the terrorist group, may give the impression that their involvement was primarily passive, and imply that women solely joined for romantic relationship reasons. In addition, these narratives play off of simplistic reductionist tropes that sensationalize the concept of women’s involvement in terrorist organizations and recycle Orientalist stereotypes (Erin et al. 2015, p. 5; Davis, 2020, p. 6) – all of which further emphasize the necessity to think beyond frameworks that portray women as either “pawns or victims” and underline the need for “a more creative and nuanced understanding of women’s involvement in ISIS” (Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020, pp. 2, 11). Assigning female ISIS members with less accountability than their male counterparts for their roles in the terrorist organization distorts reality through a skewed gendered lens. As Gian Aldonani, a Yazidi activist, states, it fails to “recognize the crimes committed by ISIS female members” and the ‘ISIS bride’ narrative glosses over “their role as a fundamental part of the terrorist organization” (Wilgenburg, 2020).

Research reveals a complex reality beyond the jihadi bride trope and assumptions that women acted only as wives and reproducers for the next generation of fighters. However, this is not to underemphasize the importance that ISIS itself placed on being an obedient wife, homemaker, and/or mother. First-hand accounts verify that the organization maintained strict gender segregation and gendered expectations (Cook and Vale, 2016, p. 27). Nonetheless, women also fulfilled a wide array of roles as educators, medical staff, propagandists, recruiters, security personnel, facilitators of slavery through the enslavement of Yazidis (Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020, p. 27) and eventually, in rarer cases, fighters. As with other violent extremist groups (Asal and Jadoon, 2019, p. 20), women’s motivations for joining stemmed from a variety of personal reasons and ideological commitments – reasons that are, of course, not unique to gender. ISIS has also used women to “recruit, reward, [and] retain male fighters” (Bloom and Horgan, 2019, 51) but on the flip side, it has leveraged the

gendered masculine trope of “the symbol of the male warrior” (Pearson, 2018) in attempts to appeal to potential female recruits.

More broadly speaking, Jessica Davis identified three primary reasons as to why terrorist organizations may include women: increase media attention, easier access difficult targets because of women’s ability to slip under the radar and not be identified or suspected as combatants, and fill a void left by a lack of “manpower” (Davis, 2017, 2). Perhaps one of the most pertinent examples that demonstrates women filling a void left by a lack of manpower was al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s usage of female suicide bombers during the mid-2000s. Tellingly, AQI later appeared to have stopped deploying women that very well may have stemmed from pragmatism (Alexander et al. 2019, p. 44). Although AQI and the Islamic State should not be viewed as the same organization, AQI is ISIS’s predecessor and ISIS’s own ideological foundation is heavily rooted in what some analysts have termed “Zarqawism” (Al-Shishani, 2017; Fraihi, 2018, 44). For these reasons, it is important to note AQI’s usage of female suicide bombers (Alexander et al. 2019, p. 44).

When it comes to the permissibility of women’s *actual* participation on the battlefield, ISIS stands out as an anomaly among Salafi-jihadi organizations. Generally speaking, women’s participation in warfare has been viewed as optional (Cook, 2005, p. 376, 379) and initially, the Islamic State’s position on the permissibility of women’s engagement in combat remained in line with other Salafi-jihadi groups: women should not participate in battle unless under “defensive circumstances” (al-Tamimi, 2017, Winter, 2018, p. 5.). However, this began to evolve and *even* before this shift, women did express the desire to engage in combat according to interviews with female French returnees, “All of the sisters of *dawla* wanted to fight” (Thomson, 2016, p. 204).

In 2017, two case examples from official propaganda marked a major shift when a July article from Issue 11 of *Rumiyah* called on women to “rise with courage and sacrifice” (Rumiyah 2017, p. 15; Winter, 2018, p. 10) and an October *Al Naba* editorial explicitly stated that women’s obligations include engagement in *jihad* (Winter, 2018, p. 10). Four months later in February 2018, Al Hayat Media Center released a video showing women allegedly

fighting on the front lines (Inside the Khilafah 7, 2018). Then in January 2020, footage of a woman wearing a niqab fighting alongside her husband during the Battle of Baghouz emerged as ISIS members struggled to cling on to their last pocket of territory. The video circulated widely on Telegram and unofficial pro-Islamic State media sources reported that both she and her husband had been “martyred” (Criezis, 2020, 4.)

There remains much debate on the topic, but it is reasonable to consider that the decision to permit female fighters and eventually declare that these women’s duties included battlefield engagement as combatants reflected a certain degree of pragmatism due to ever-increasing pressure ISIS faced from the Coalition; as by mid-2017, ISIS had lost 60% of its territory (Khalil, 2019). On an additional note, it is important to highlight that an estimated 54% of Boko Haram attacks were carried out by female suicide bombers (Davis, 2017, p. 4). Although the group had pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015, hence becoming “Islamic State of West Africa,” their first attack of this category took place nearly a year earlier in June of 2014 (Campbell, 2020). In terms of motivations, “failed detonations revealed girls were often fighters’ daughters or traumatized, drugged, deceived, or abducted women unaware the vest under their garments would be detonated” (Zenn, 2020, p. 236).

Currently, thousands upon thousands of men, women, and minors are living in camps in North Eastern Syria – some of whom are Islamic State supporters. Women who remain ideologically dedicated to the Islamic State have continued the indoctrination of minors by refusing to send them to UNICEF schools and instead provide ‘home’ education (Vale, 2019, p. 6); a concerning factor that acts as a foundation for continued ideological commitment to the group. Through “organic activism,” these women have also policed other women’s behavior and dress; in effect acting as “female *hisbah* units” enforcing their policies through intimidation and violence (Vale, 2019, p. 7). In the online world, women have created funding campaigns and announced calls to action through channels and accounts dedicated to sharing testimonies and news from the camps. This will later be discussed in the study’s findings.

Online *Wilayat* and the ‘Media Caliphate’

Salafi-jihadi online Spaces

The Islamic State’s usage of the internet and various platforms is a defining factor that has distinguished it from its predecessors. Before exploring ISIS’s media presence and, more specifically, female supporters’ engagement in online activities, it is helpful to first provide a brief overview of Salafi-jihadis’ online presence.

During the First Chechen War, the mid 1990s saw the creation of a handful of websites and e-mail lists designed to disseminate media content framed from the perspective of jihadists (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016, p. 3) - this period constitutes what Aaron Zelin classifies as the second phase of jihadi media with the first phase consisting of physical propaganda such as pamphlets, newsletters, and magazines (Zelin, 2013, p. 4). He places interactive forums of the mid-2000s in third phase and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in the fourth phase (Zelin, 2013, p. 4). It is the transition from the third to fourth phases that marked significant shifts in media distribution and wider viewership.

Although Al Qa’ida Central preferred a centralized top-down approach, its affiliates in Yemen and Iraq notably gravitated towards more creative methods: Through the publication of its flashy online magazine, *Inspire*, AQAP promoted the concept of ‘Do it yourself jihad’ and AQI adapted to changes in the online environment by producing downloadable content as well as distributing graphic videos on YouTube (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016, p. 4). In contrast with these previous groups, ISIS’s focus on circulating propaganda via Twitter was instrumental for the group in obtaining a global reach far beyond what AQAP and Al Shabaab could accomplish (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016, p. 8).

From mid 2013 to mid 2015 (Krona, 2020, p.1), online ISIS supporters and ISIS members physically located in the territorial caliphate enjoyed success in distributing propaganda, personal accounts of life in ISIS territory, carefully tailored narratives, and other content on Twitter. However after encountering heavy waves of Twitter suspensions beginning in 2015, Telegram soon became their platform of choice (Bloom et al. 2017, p. 1)

where they demonstrated a certain technological “adaptability” (Alkhouri and Kassier, 2016, p. 1). In comparison with security on other apps, Telegram’s encryption features have proven to be particularly appealing and from early 2015 until the end of November 2019, ISIS flourished (Amarasingam, 2020).

November 2019 Telegram Ban and Further Decentralization²

In November 2019, Telegram and Europol launched a two-day coordinated campaign focused on removing Islamic State channels, groups, and pro-Islamic State accounts from the platform (Europol, 2019). Although Telegram had made previous efforts to take down ISIS content, the November campaign was far greater in scope (BBC Monitoring, 2019). A Europol report titled “Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2019 in Review,” (Europol, 2020) shared key findings about the Telegram campaign: 1) The takedown action coordinated by EU Member States and Europol on 21 -22 November resulted in an extensive eradication of pro-IS accounts, channels and groups from Telegram 2) Official as well as supportive IS media outlets and groups are still struggling to rebuild their networks online, with efforts continuing across several platforms.

Although ISIS supporters have struggled to remain on Telegram to a certain degree, they have, nonetheless, managed to maintain an active presence on the app where media dissemination of both official and unofficial propaganda continues at a steady pace. They have also attempted to discover ways to defeat the bans through trial-and-error methods and they continue to promote alternative platforms despite a still continued preference for Telegram. This gradual trajectory of decentralization has resulted in further fragmentation of online ISIS communities which allows for less stringent, as well as less uniformed, enforcement of gender norms that one might expect to encounter in these spaces. As will later be discussed, not all groups abided by the social norms of gender segregation and members even argued with one another regarding proper group regulation.

² The section “November 2019 Telegram Ban and Further Decentralization” was adapted from an earlier GNET article written by the author.

Methodology

Two types of data sets are examined in this paper: 1). 22 conversation exchanges in private pro-ISIS groups; some of which include interactions between alleged male and female members 2). Qualitative thematic analysis of 1,100 data points of unofficial pro-ISIS propaganda.

Throughout 2018 – 2019, the Telegram data was collected in the form of screenshots from but in 2020, I was able to archive entire channel and chat histories through Telegram’s “export data” function. Much of the Telegram information was gathered through public/private channels and private groups; “private” meaning that I had to enter the group through a unique url in order to access to the content. Quite often, private group links disappeared shortly after being posted. These groups were *initially* discovered through links posted in public pro-ISIS channels and after maintaining a continuous observation presence in various private groups, I noticed that admin accounts began automatically adding current chat members (including my own account) to new back-up groups that they had created in case the current group encountered a Telegram ban. Accounts would also occasionally send me links via private messages. Once my observation account was plugged into this network, I had solid access to new data.

Additionally, I must note that my observation account relied on deception through the selection of a male name as to avoid encountering limited access if I had chosen a female username. Anecdotal evidence indicates that female researchers are inclined to create male accounts in order to lower potential barriers to obtaining data (Conway, 2017, p. 91); it is in this manner where female researchers and female ISIS supporters alike rely on the same methods to accomplish their respective intended goals which center on accessibility. A separate female observation account was used to enter multiple female-only groups but it was not utilized for wider data collection aside from this objective. Both of these accounts partook in minimal engagement: in a couple of instances, pro-ISIS accounts randomly privately messaged me links to channels or groups and I replied with a Telegram sticker of

“جزاك الله خيرا” but aside from this, these accounts acted as silent observers. In terms of groups, a majority of group members did not engage in conversation in the various chats which made it easier to join as a passive member without arousing suspicions since it was not abnormal for members to remain quiet.

I entered closed channels obtained in the same manner by joining through urls posted in public pro-ISIS channels. Although I tried to consistently gather Telegram data during this time, there were several short periods of absence during data collection due to travel and in late November 2019, I temporarily encountered issues with avoiding bans during the Europol-Telegram campaign to remove ISIS content and accounts.

For Hoop, Riot, RocketChat and TamTam, I archived data in the form of screenshots. I entered groups and channels through links posted on Telegram and/or cross-posted on these various apps.

Public channels for all platforms previously mentioned were originally discovered through keyword searches focused on accessing specifically pro-ISIS content (as opposed to generic Salafi-jihadi channels). Keywords included: Khilafa(h), caliphate, dawlat, dawla(h), baqiya, baqqiya, Halumu, Amaq, اعماق , ناشر, باقية, دولة السلام(ية), خلافة, and the specific names of well-known unofficial propaganda outlets.

A majority of the content consists of English posts resulting in a data sample that skews heavily towards English-speaking ISIS supporters and although English is widely spoken, this is a limiting factor. Additionally, Telegram was the source for the majority of data which creates a Telegram bias. I collected all content mentioning women and discarded posts that focused on themes other than women, even if the content itself was disseminated from allegedly female-run channels or female accounts. This was done in order to keep the focus narrowed on narratives and themes concerning women as opposed to conducting a wider examination of the types of content female-run channels and female accounts posted in general (although this too would be an interesting angle to further explore).

Many archived channels and groups had months, and even years, of posting history but I identified content centered on women through key word searches. Examples of key

words were women, woman, sister(s), femme(s), Umm, and Oum. For channels and groups with shorter histories, I manually scrolled through their previous posts and individually extracted relevant content.

For the theme analysis section, the theme identification process followed these steps: Gain familiarity with themes and narratives by becoming immersed in [ISIS] terrorist content, read through collected content before generating a list of codes, consolidate similar codes into a single category, finish coding the data set into their distinct themes, and finally, quantify the results to identify percentage breakdowns of theme categories from highest to lowest (Braddock, 2020, pp. 85-86).

Data

Data Set 1: Conversations

The following data was gathered from Riot, RocketChat, TamTam and Telegram.

- Group 1: Supporters debate whether or not women should be allowed to fight on the front lines alongside men. One member argues that women are too weak, but another user insists that women and men can fight side by side in Islam. (Group 1 Telegram, 2018)
- Group 2: After a female account joins, supporters argue about whether or not women should be allowed into the group. One member advises others to avoid talking to her while another male account requests that she be allowed to stay provided that she changes her username and simply observes without participating in the chat. Tellingly, an admin comments "...many sisters help with media now *akhi*. We are short many brothers." (Group 2 Telegram, 2018)

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- Group 3: A male account posts a brief message asking fellow ‘brothers’ to avoid using profile photos of *mujahidat*. (Group 3 Telegram, 2019)
- Group 4: After a male account asserts his loyalty to the Islamic State, a female account reminds him to remain steadfast in his stance and he thanks her for her support. Members neither complain nor comment on the clear male-female account interaction or the presence of a female username. (Group 4 Telegram, 2019)
- Group 5: A male account notices the presence of a female account and shares his opinion that “sisters” should have a separate group. Another user suggests that “sisters” should conceal their gender to avoid creating *fitnah*. (Group 5 TamTam, 2019)
- Group 6: A female account requests links to new Telegram channels and other accounts respond to her inquiry. As with group 4, members neither complain nor comment on the male-female account exchanges. (Group 6 TamTam, 2019)
- Group 7: A female account shares generic propaganda content without any push back from male accounts. (Group 7 Riot, 2019)
- Group 8: A male account reminds others that women should not post selfies of any kind (even if they are wearing niqab) and advises men not to share pictures of their wives. (Group 8 RocketChat, 2020)
- Group 9: A male account directly asks a female account to change her profile picture to avoid creating *fitnah* and engaging in *haram* behavior. (Group 9 Telegram, 2020)

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- Group 10: A male account posts a lengthy rant about “how comfortable everyone is about the free mixing that is taking place.” He reminds fellow group members to fear Allah and cites an *ayat* and a hadith. He also requests that “sisters” hide that they are female and makes a sexually explicit comment about women trying to seduce men through provocative texts. (Group 10 Telegram, 2020)
- Group 11: A male account posts the link to a group on the Conversations app and states in rule 5 that women are not allowed. (Group 11 Telegram, 2020)
- Group 12: A male account voices annoyance at the presence of female members in the group and requests that they move to the group for “sisters.” He also suggests that women should hide their female identity and create names that do not reveal their gender. Another account complains that he has observed both men and women creating accounts of the opposite gender to access segregated spaces and asks Allah to guide them. (Group 12 Telegram, 2020)
- Group 13: A male account shares a message from a pro-ISIS unofficial media source asking brothers and sisters to join discussions groups; one link is for men and the other link is for women. There is an added warning that gender mixing is forbidden. (Group 13 Telegram, 2020)
- Group 14: A male admin account shares a link to a sisters-only group and asks women who would be willing to admin the group to contact him on a separate app. (Group 14 RocketChat, 2020)
- Group 15: A male account asks other group members for suggestions on how to share religious knowledge with a sister who is seeking guidance. Unlike with the previous interaction examples, he claims to know a friend in real life who in

turn, is in contact with the woman in question. Other group members share input such as sending religious materials through his friend or an imam and one person advises him to not pursue any interactions at all. Due to the ‘in real life’ dimension, the original poster discusses an additional concern about his own security since he is engaged in pro-ISIS activities online. (Group 15 Telegram, 2020)

Group 16: A male account asks brothers and sisters for group links; meaning that he is aware that women are also present and wishes for them to respond if they have the information that he is seeking. (Group 16 Telegram, 2020)

Group 17: A female account engages in casual chatting with male accounts and some offer to help her learn more about Islam after she reveals that she is a convert. (Group 17 Riot, 2020)

Group 18: Several male accounts accidentally join a sisters-only group and are asked to leave the chat. A male account posts “Sisters if you would like the benefit from groups you are advised not to mix...[or] change your name or @ to that which is not distinguished to be male or female...and if you cannot follow the rules you may be removed.” (Group 18 Telegram, 2020)

Group 19: A male account posts a screenshot of a conversation he previously had with a female account and asks why a woman would be in charge of running a channel. (Group 19 RocketChat, 2020)

Group 20: A male account goes out of his way to specifically acknowledge women, now under arrest, who were admins of a well-known English propaganda channel. (Group 20. Telegram, 2020)

Group 21: After a female account enters the group, male accounts debate whether or not she should be allowed to stay. One person suggests that she change her profile name and photo to avoid creating *fitna*. (Group 21 Telegram, 2020)

Group 22: A male admin provides his username for those who wish to contact him with the explicit message: “No women!” accompanied by stop sign and halting hand emojis. (Group 22 Telegram, 2020)

Data Set 2: Themes

The following themes are organized according to their frequency in the data set from the highest to lowest percentages and, depending on the content, a piece of data could also have multiple themes assigned to it. A total of 1,100 pieces of data were collected from Hoop, RocketChat and Telegram. The 12 themes that will be discussed are victimization, regulation of behavior, messages directed to brothers *and* sisters, female empowerment through Islamic values and pro-ISIS narratives, quotes from the Qur'an and *ahadith*, fundraising, companionship, female leaders, displays of women holding weapons, testimonies, juxtapositions between modesty and perceived immodesty, and calls to action.

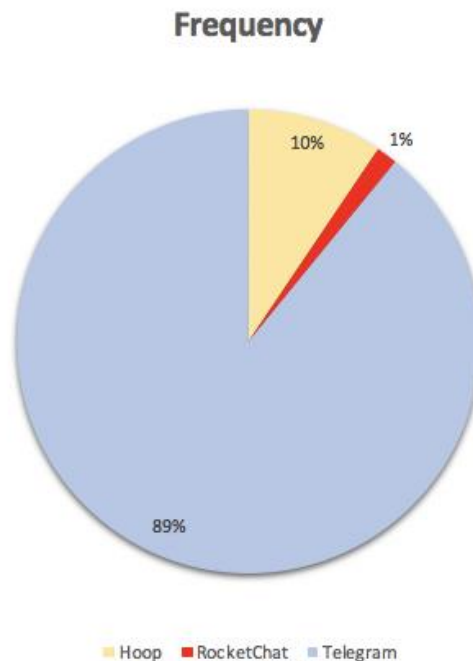


Figure 1: Percentage breakdown of content by platform

Victimization: 29.6%

Content incorporating the theme of victimization displayed a diverse array of narratives: women (and minors) endured incredible hardships during their exodus from Baghouz, women face discrimination in Western countries for wearing hijab or niqab, women are victims of sexual violence at the hands of the *kuffar*, and women feel forgotten in the camps in Eastern Syria as they languish in inhumane and dangerous conditions. The multitude of narratives that included an emphasis on women's victimization demonstrate the strength that posts designed to evoke emotions have from a propaganda aspect. More importantly, content coded under this theme was frequently cross-coded with other categories such as "female empowerment," "calls to action," and "fundraising" among others. Victimization and female empowerment may initially seem contradictory but the minority of posts occupying both categories intertwined these dual-themes to enhance their message: "These sisters who

made *hijrah* for the sake of Allah for their salvation and sacrificed their everything...[these sisters] are seen and touched by these atheists *kuffar*” (TA, 2016). Although this example post highlights victimization through implied sexual violence, it simultaneously celebrates women as heroic and empowered individuals who made sacrifices to travel to the Islamic State - the implication being that their suffering should be unacceptable to supporters. The fact that this category constitutes the largest theme percentage reflects its dynamic nature and importance in building varied narratives. It is also worth noting that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi addressed the camps in his September 16, 2019 speech entitled *And Say, Act*, “How can a Muslim accept to live while Muslim women are suffering in the displacement camps and the prisons of humiliation...” which indicates the higher priority leadership placed on this issue.

Regulation of behavior: 20.4%

In attempts to regulate women’s behavior, posts in this category focused on emphasizing modesty, informing women how they should treat their husbands, dictating behavior that should be avoided, outlining protocols for women’s online engagement, and strictly admonishing improper comportment. One channel, created by a female Australian national, had a particularly strong focus on regulating women’s behavior through a mix of advice and admonishment: “Fear Allah...delete your pictures from social media! Whether you are wearing Niqab or not. What is the point? What are you trying to do?” (TA, 2016). Notably, much of the content in this theme came from channels directed towards a female audience in order to foster a sense of woman-to-woman advice through the bond of virtual sisterhood; a promotion of belonging which has served as a recruitment narrative in drawing female travelers to ISIS territory (Saltman and Smith, 2015, p. 26). However some posts spoke directly to “brothers” and criticized their behavior: “I am kind of fed up with these Jihadi channels posting pictures of women in hijab with their clear tempting figures, what do people posting such content make a sensibly person think about them...these people possess diseased hearts” (TA, 2019).

Messages directed to brothers *and* sisters: 19.2%

Although men and women are expected to fulfill gender-based roles, these posts are particularly interesting because they highlight content directed towards a broader mixed audience. Sub-categories included warnings regarding online safety, requests for donations, announcements on where to follow specific channels once the originals were banned, and, in one case, a solicitation to contribute as a propaganda content creator for a pro-ISIS magazine focused on South Asia. Posts directed solely towards “brothers” were not in shortage which made this category all the more noticeable for its inclusion of a female audience that was frequently excluded in other messages.

Female Empowerment Through Islamic Values and Pro-ISIS Narratives: 16.6%

Fostering a sense of female empowerment through Islamic values centered on the narrative that women guard the honor of both themselves and that of the Ummah through modesty in dress and behavior. In turn, modesty and valuing *din* over worldly pleasures was cited as the source for true women’s strength who are described as being “the spine of this Ummah” (TA, 2020). In some cases, messages in this category included criticism meant to shame men for not fulfilling their obligations, “May Allah love you, oh my sisters. You have put many men of this Ummah to shame. May Allah keep you firm upon *haqq*” (TA, 2019). Other content emphasized women’s roles such as raising the next generation “upon the Jihad” and guarding “the man’s honour and wealth if he goes out for Jihad” with the reminder that “behind every great mujahid is a woman” (TA, 2019). More specifically, a minority of posts crafted pro-ISIS messages of female empowerment, “Lionesses of the Islamic State have roared and answered barking [at] you dogs” (TA, 2019). In summary, female empowerment came from three sources: general conservative Islamic concepts, a generic pro-Salafi-jihadi approach, and finally, explicitly pro-ISIS narratives. As demonstrated, potentially appealing narratives centered on concepts of empowerment go beyond tropes that frame women’s attraction to the Islamic State as stemming solely from romantic relationships and/or raising children (Al-Dayel, 2018, p.2). In their own right, the female empowerment messages in this

category act as a counter-narrative campaign that challenges conceptions of womanhood rooted in feminist thought and offer to female supporters an alternative path of female empowerment defined by a different set of values.

Quotes from the Qur'an and *Ahadith*: 14.8%

Posts with references from the Qur'an and *ahadith* is the fifth largest theme in the dataset. Most posts in this category used religious references to support a larger point being made. Including these references sought to strengthen the validity of the viewpoint or argument being made by the poster and, in many cases, influence behavior; the implication being that a refusal to take the advice is, at best, not advisable or, at worst, is even *haram*.

Fundraising: 11.7%

Following the fall of Baghouz, people, many of whom were women and children, streamed into camps in Eastern Syria. ISIS no longer holds physical territory but fundraising material focusing on accounts from “sisters” during the Battle of Baghouz and the hardships they describe facing in the camps have become a dominant theme. This category was frequently cross-coded with “testimonies.” Studies of female ISIS Twitter accounts analyzed the often-utopic language these women would use when broadcasting an idealized image of their lives in the Caliphate (Hoyle et. al, 2015, pp. 23-24) but now, women are sharing accounts from inside the camps that are meant to evoke sympathy and encourage emotional as well as financial support from like-minded supporters willing to donate. Every data piece in this category was directly related to funneling financial aid to “sisters” in need and numerous channels are dedicated to fundraising campaigns. Some brief posts asked potential donors to contact a specific username for more information on how to send money while others included lengthy accounts from women about living in abject conditions, suffering abuse at the hands of camp guards, lamenting about how they felt forgotten by the Ummah, and/or notes of thanks to donors. One campaign from al-Hol camp reportedly raised €3,000 indicating that these fundraising initiatives have the potential to be quite successful (Daymon,

2020). However, some campaigns have been scams and a number of posts addressed this issue by providing photos to prove that they were legitimate (Mironova, 2020).

Companionship: 10.9%

Companionship posts discussed how to positively foster a husband-wife relationship and sometimes included images of a husband-wife couple together in moments of intimacy where they were holding hands or sitting next to each other. Although this was not a dominant portrayal of companionship, some featured a militant theme such as a wife handing her husband his AK-47 or a man showing his wife how to use a weapon. Regardless of the images or specific texts, these posts highlighted the importance of supportive companionship, “This bond between husband and wife is from the most beloved affairs to Allah and His messenger...” (TA, 2019). The definitive gender roles of the man and woman attempt to showcase how each member in the relationship is meant to complement their partner. Other posts shed a negative light on women and warned men about issues they might face in a relationship, “...there is the real potential that even the most pious of Muslim women can be easily tempted into putting their husbands in a very difficult position with regard to their rights according to our shari’ah as husbands and fathers” (TA, 2019). Another forwarded message listed “7 types of women” to avoid marrying (TA, 2019). The positive and negative messages identified in this theme highlight supporters’ attempts to navigate the universal issue of relationships with significant others and highlight the components of ideal companionship.

Female Leaders: 7.9%

Posts celebrating female leaders included lengthy biographies about important historical figures, such as Aisha and Khadijah, while contemporary content celebrated women such as Aafia Siddiqui. Descriptions generally lauded them as exemplary female roles models for the Ummah for their leadership in battle, scholarly knowledge and/or displays of piety. Although not all posts were accompanied by images, the data that incorporated this

visual element frequently displayed women in niqab; some of whom held weapons. The effort to highlight women's historical and contemporary contributions are a part of an overarching narrative aimed at inspiring and influencing a pro-ISIS female audience: these women are heroes and those who follow in their footsteps will be just as noble. Aside from the celebration of female terrorists, the focus on historical figures is not inherently extremist but weaving their stories into the narrative is crucial to pro-ISIS propaganda channels because it allows them to root their ideology in sacred historical legitimacy from the days of the Prophet.

Displays of women holding weapons: 6.3%

Although this category did not compose a large percentage of the data, it featured women holding weapons which reflects a certain degree of admiration for their engagement in militancy and/or weapons training. A portion of content showcased images without accompanying text, but others included descriptions or pro-ISIS narratives. In an effort to highlight a continued dedication to defending the last remnants of the territorial so-called Caliphate, photos and videos of a woman in a burqa fighting alongside her husband on the frontline in Baghouz began circulating in various groups and channels. Reflecting a sense of urgency and desperation, one caption stated "...the last piece of land of the Caliphate defended by women, men, children, and wounded people...we are waiting for Allah's help" (TA, 2019). Another message, paired with an image of a woman holding an AK-47, called upon women to take matters into their own hands if they could not find a partner, "be your own knight in shiny armour if you don't find one" (TA, 2020). An example of a more graphic image featured a woman in niqab holding a severed head (TA, 2020). Other posts shamed men for not coming to jihad, "It is a matter of great shame that the men abstain from jihad while our sisters are on the frontlines..." (TA, 2020). Within a wider historical context, it is important to note that this content was posted in or after 2018 at a time when official ISIS propaganda had already erased any ambiguities surrounding the subject matter of female fighters in early 2018 by declaring that they should take up arms as combatants (Ingram et al. 2020, p. 213). Despite a consistent emphasis on domestic roles in both official and unofficial

propaganda, the presence of these posts in the data set speak to a certain appealing nature of women taking up arms.

Testimonies: 6.3%

A majority of posts coded as “testimonies” consisted of alleged first-hand accounts from women living in the camps and their experiences during the Battle of Baghouz. These testimonies included solicitations for donations and were frequently cross-coded with the “victimization” theme because of content lamenting limited financial access due to injustices, the dangers women faced in the camps, descriptions of abuse, and overall worsening conditions. Other themes are not new but “testimonies” double-coded with “victimization” are largely the result of the fall of Baghouz and the creation of the camps in Eastern Syria. Vera Mironova identified four primary groups of female ISIS supporters in one of the more well-known camps called al-Hol: hardcore ISIS supporters who constitute a minority, women who continue their support because their husbands are alive and still fighting with ISIS, those who fear deportations to their home countries where they could face dangers upon return, and the largest segment – women who are in need of financial aid due to the high cost of living in the camps (Mironova, 2020). Regardless of the motivation on the part of the poster, quoting or relaying alleged first-hand testimonies are designed to capture sympathy for suffering ‘sisters’ who face ‘persecution’ for a supposed continued loyalty to the Islamic State with the purpose of obtaining donations. The radical tone found in some testimonies may reflect “performing radicalism on social media” in attempts to appeal to a target audience of “ISIS’s leadership hiding in Idlib and its supporters abroad” (Mironova, 2020). In this sense, expressing pro-ISIS sentiments may, in certain cases, reflect a pragmatic strategic approach to surviving in the camps by finding donors for financial support and avoiding retribution from pro-ISIS women who often police others in the camp.

Juxtapositions between modesty and a perceived immodesty: 2.3%

Posts in this category focused on women's dress and emphasized modesty over a perceived immodesty that they frequently associated with Western countries and feminism. Content emphasized the pride and righteousness of Muslim women standing up to negative influences and external pressures: "I'd rather get insulted for being covered than whistled at for being half naked" (TA, 2020). As displayed in official ISIS propaganda, unofficial propaganda under this theme promoted the group's own conceptions of womanhood by establishing its own set of societal norms in opposition to that of its enemies (Al-Dayel, 2018, pp. 15 & 22).

Calls to action: 1.9%

The smallest percentage of posts made calls to action. They directed supporters to carry out attacks while citing the abuse of Muslim women by the *kuffar* as a justification, told "brothers" and "sisters" to maintain an online presence/be ready to make *hijrah*, and reminded "sisters" of when they must "wage jihad" (TA, 2020) under conditions that would make it *fard al ayn*.

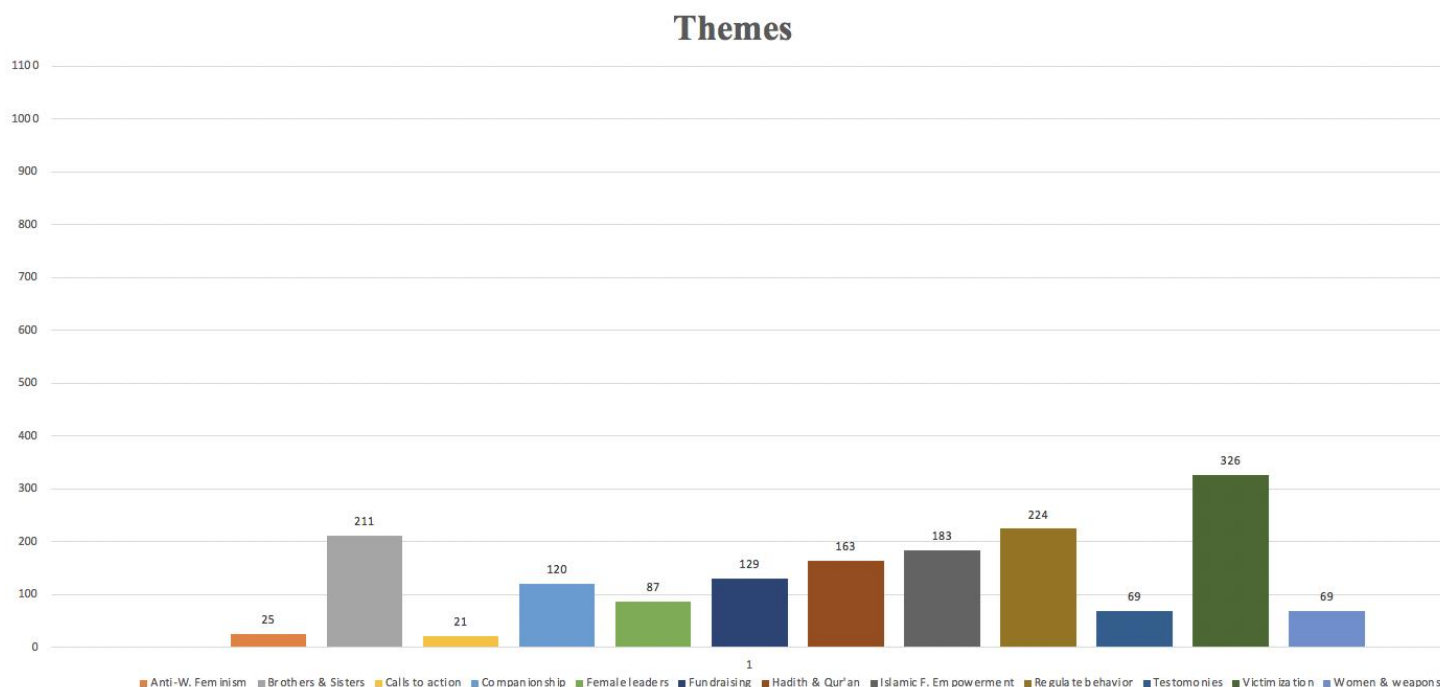


Figure 2: Bar graph breakdown of data pieces per theme

Analysis and Discussion

Conversation Data

Despite ardent off-line gender restrictions, gender-based societal roles/expectations, and the micromanagement of behavior extending even into private spaces, imposing these same rules and restrictions online is difficult in comparison. Perhaps one of the more interesting observations to note is the lack of consensus surrounding female accounts' engagement. Although some male accounts expressed their desire to adhere to expected strict gender segregation regulations, others directly confronted this approach and instead favored two options: allow women in the groups provided that they change their usernames to male/gender-neutral or allow women to have limited engagement and/or act as observers as long as they avoid entering into conversation exchanges with men. In some of the cases,

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women's participation in the group chat was permitted without comment or objection and, as evident in Groups 4 (2019) and 6 (2019), female and male accounts participated in brief casual chatting. The instances where male accounts advocated for outright deception i.e. changing usernames to something male or gender-neutral serve as concrete examples where ISIS supporters searched for ways to bend segregation policies through dishonesty.

The debates regarding group policy reveal an organic re-negotiation of gender boundaries where users attempted to strike a balance between adhering to ISIS off-line social norms and taking more pragmatic approaches that allow for varying degrees of flexibility within the context of a virtual reality (Criezis, 2020, p. 71). The user's comment from Group 2 (2018), "...many sisters help with media now *akhi*. We are short many brothers," reflects observations that terrorist groups may be willing to accept women if they face a "literal lack of manpower" (Davis, 2017, p. 2). The 'lack of manpower' analysis applies to groups in the physical sphere; however, it could remain true for online spaces as well. Due to arrests and consistent Telegram bans, IS supporters have encountered obstacles that have disrupted their communications and citing a manpower shortage for propagandists as a reason to permit women in these spaces speaks to a preference for pragmatism over adherence to strict gender social norms.

Groups 1 (2018) and 15 (2020) are examples of online conversations focused on real-world interactions. In Group 1, a user comments "They [women] aren't that strong. They must stay at home," and another male account in favor of women fighters replies, "don't need to be that strong to carry an AK." This exchange took place at the beginning of January 2018 when official IS propaganda had already indicated a favorable position towards women's engagement in battle; a month later, Al Hayat released "Inside the Khilafah 7" video allegedly showing female fighters on the frontlines. The individual who supported allowing women to fight did not reference official IS propaganda, but it would be fair to conclude that it likely informed his stance to a certain degree.

The previous conversations discussed women participating and joining pro-IS groups online, however, do viewpoints change when women become engaged in terrorism off-line?

Reactions following the arrest of two well-known English language female propagandists offer some insight but, of course, are not representative of typical reactions given that this is simply one case study.

In October 2019, two admins operating a channel called “GreenB1rds” were arrested in the Netherlands and in the UK. Reports revealed that they were both women and Michelle Ramsden, the admin based in the UK, “had at points posed as a man to gain access to key ISIS-related channels and be taken seriously by fellow fanatics” (Dearden, 2020). The GreenB1rds channel frequently published threats, attack instructions, generic ISIS propaganda, and lengthy online rants. Ramsden was arrested after providing bags filled with what she thought were filled with explosives to undercover police officers as part of a plan to attack St Paul’s Cathedral in London (Dearden, 2020; Basra, 2020).

When the GreenB1rds news reached ISIS Telegram, supporters responded in multiple ways: they warned others to be more cautious online, made *dua* for the female admins, and another user commented on the fact that admins were female (Criezis, 2020, p. 70). Echoing the comments about women’s supposed weakness made in Group 1 (2018), the individual responded, “Please *ikhwan* in the future can u not allow our precious pearls to run such delicate groups/channels” (Criezis, 2020, p. 70). A channel also shared a message stating that “many sisters wish they were men” and criticized men for not taking action while there were many women who yearned for such opportunities if only they were not restricted by their gender (Criezis, 2020, p. 70).

These gender-based reactions reveal a couple of interesting aspects: regardless of the female admins’ significant propaganda contributions along with the intention to conduct a terrorist attack, they nonetheless received criticism that identified them as “delicate” because of their gender and, per the comment stating that women should not be allowed to admin channels or groups, there is the inherent assumption on the part of the commenter that users can implement gender regulation/segregation online as it would be done in the real world (Criezis, 2020, p. 70). The secretive nature of pro-ISIS online spaces has benefits in terms of providing anonymity for those engaging in illegal activities but when it comes to enforcing

certain social norms such as gender segregation, it serves as a barrier that forces self-identified supporters to navigate more ambiguous territories that would be frowned upon in a real-world context.

Michael Krona posits that there is value in examining the “today’s virtual caliphate” as a “separate entity” characterized by five features: platform fragmentation, an emphasis on religion as opposed to ISIS ideological doctrines, outsourced propaganda production, platform migration from open to closed encrypted platforms, and the creation of identity through participatory media (Krona, 2020). This trajectory of an increasingly decentralized virtual caliphate has created fertile conditions that, coupled with the nature of online anonymity, have allowed for an increasing flexibility pertaining to gender norms. Per these categories, GreenB1rds fits under “outsourced propaganda production” where it arguably developed into a recognizable brand name that sought to engage English-speaking communities as opposed to “achieving maximum exposure” (Krona, 2020). During its active posting period, supporters did not know that some of the prominent admins of GreenB1rds were women and the *general* lack of negative responses upon the announcement of these admins’ true identities may indicate a certain indifference towards gender. That is not to say that women’s engagement as propagandists or group member participants in online discussions is encouraged (as demonstrated by the conversation exchange data) or that these admins had agency, but the virtual environment does provide more opportunities for female supporters to participate.

Studies about and interviews with female members reflect the realities of limitations they encountered in the physical space. When it comes to online engagement and propaganda content, scholars have arrived at varied conclusions concerning agency. Nelly Lahoud demonstrated that narratives and portrayals of women depended on the target audience: The English magazines, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, and their French counterparts, *Dar al-Islam* and *Rumiyah* (FR), highlighted carefully crafted “façades of female agency” while the weekly Arabic newspaper, *al-Naba*, utilized outright insulting and demeaning descriptions of women (Lahoud, 2018, pp. 6-8). In their study on ISIS recruitment material, Bidisha Biswas and Shirin Deylami concluded that there exists “blurred boundaries of empowerment, agency and

subjugation” (Biswas and Deylami, 2019, 197). Gina Vale cited online campaigns attempting to raise awareness and funds for women in the camps and asserted that “women demonstrate agency in the creation and dissemination of the campaign” but still depend on men by “defaulting to male leadership” (Vale, 2019). It appears that agency, defined here as “the ability to make choices” (Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020, 5), may shift – increasing or decreasing depending on various contexts and wider circumstances.

The conversation exchanges and GreenBlrds example demonstrate that agency varies depending on the space and context. At a structural level on these various platforms, women mostly do not have full agency – they are not permitted to admin non-female-only groups if it is known that they are female and in the conversation exchanges, negotiations concerning the permissibility of allowing or not allowing women into the groups noticeably did not include any input from the female accounts themselves. Men acted as the ultimate arbiters on female group membership policy. Women who choose to hide their identities under neutral or male sounding usernames rely on deception by portraying themselves as either not female (neutral) or as explicitly male. The agency they gain through this form of passing hinges on an erasure of their gender meaning that even though they overcome barriers that they would encounter under a female username, they still must find a way to work around the system if they want complete access to groups and a full ability to engage. *If* women are permitted to remain in the mixed group, they have limited agency where they are presented a narrow set of choices for what they can post and how they can engage. That being said, the fact that gaining access and engaging in these online spaces via “gender-switching” to avoid limitations of gendered barriers could indicate that representation of female accounts and their influence is underrepresented overall given that it is often impossible to determine the true identity of the person behind a username (Conway, 2017, p. 81).

For members of women-only groups, it could be argued that female agency is greatly expanded within this context where men are not present and cannot police female accounts; however private female-only groups are not as common as male groups. Through an account with a female username, I observed activities in three separate women-only chats. In an

unrestricted environment, women were free to share a range of content: news from the camps, generic religious advice, violent ISIS propaganda, emojis and Telegram stickers of Muslim women, current events about coronavirus, and casual chatting. All three groups had under 20 members and when male accounts joined, they were quickly reprimanded for entering with messages such as “SISTERS GROUP ONLY” (TA, 2020). Although still limited in an overall sense, women determined who could join these specific group spaces and enforced a no-male account policy.

Theme Data

40.8% of the data received multiple theme codes and while this composes a minority of the total content, it nonetheless reflects how posts incorporated intertwining narrative overlaps to create multi-dimensional propaganda. The two most common themes – victimization and regulation of behavior - reveal a *general* pattern of preference for re-enforcing narratives that portray women as victims and in need of advice focused on regulating their behavior by both men and fellow women. Echoing official ISIS propaganda, this regulation of behavior demonstrates a compulsion to discipline and require conformity to strict gendered regulations in women’s personal as well as public life (al-Dayel, 2018, p. 15). With the exception of posts that positively portrayed women’s involvement in militaristic activities, there is a clear emphasis on the necessity of supportive roles which were deemed as being equally important to militant jihad but in a different way. The minority of content demeaning both men and women speaks to certain degrees of tensions and frustrations towards individuals who may be viewed as not effectively fulfilling their duty; for men, this would include a reluctance to answer the call of jihad or hesitancy in actively stand up for persecuted “sisters” and for women, this speaks to what are perceived as undesirable character traits that could be seen as problematic in a marriage or straying away from Islamic values.

The two categories, “displays of women holding weapons” and “calls to action”, contained a concentrated amount of content featuring violence which demonstrates the continued resonance of violent messages and images in propaganda created for and about pro-

ISIS women; a population that generally has not and is not expected to engage in combat. In comparison, a study conducted on official Islamic State video outputs from 2015-2018 found that 57% of the content focused on violence and though it is not surprising that official media had a higher percentage of violence than this sample of unofficial content, it demonstrates the integral nature that violent themes and narratives have to the group and its supporters (Nanninga, 2019, p. 13). Alternatively, 43% of the official ISIS videos featured non-violent themes such as state building (Nanninga, 2019, p. 13). This dataset also contained themes focused on other subjects unrelated to violent activities. The breakdown of violent vs nonviolent messages is a crucial factor in understanding how ISIS official and unofficial content incorporates various themes and narratives designed to have multiple levels of appeal.

The data, when examined in conjunction with the conversation exchanges, collectively reveals the dynamic multi-faceted nature of unofficial propaganda and conversations in the online space concerning women. The dual presence of coherent messages and dissenting content demonstrates a lack of narrative uniformity that can be found in decentralized virtual echo-chambers. In contrast, ISIS propaganda disseminated from *official* media outlets carries more coherent messages despite gradual shifts in views towards subject matters such as women's engagement in battle (Winter, 2018).

Conclusion

This paper presented two data sets focused on women - 22 separate conversation case examples and 1,100 archived screenshots of unofficial propaganda - and contextualized these findings within wider discussions on pro-ISIS spaces online, official ISIS propaganda narratives about women, and female fighters. It also aims to compliment previous studies that have been conducted on official content such as analyses of Dabiq, Rumiya, Al Naba, Al Hayat Media Center releases, and speeches from leaders of the Islamic State. When constructing counter-narratives, all aspects of a propaganda's content must be taken into

account. The study hopes to contribute towards deepening the understanding of unofficial pro-ISIS content as well as the complex nature of its narratives about women.

Insights obtained through content analysis of propaganda about women could be helpful when considering ways to challenge ISIS's messaging and social media "soft power" (Bloom and Daymon, 2018, p. 377) approach. Whether it originates from official media outlets, real-life connections or decentralized online echo-chambers (Winter, 2016, p. 80), sympathizers and supporters encounter these themes and narratives from a variety of sources. Therefore, a comprehensive counter-narrative strategy must look further than official propaganda in order to detect consistency and divergence from core ISIS messaging. In turn, a strategy could focus on highlighting discrepancies between ISIS supporters' narratives and actions vs those promoted by the official Islamic State (Braddock, 2020, p. 92). More importantly, identified themes could help counter-propaganda efforts avoid the pitfalls of unintentionally reinforcing violent extremist narratives (Braddock, 2020, p. 92) and prevent gender-based assumptions from informing policy (Davis, 2020, 9). It must also remain flexible and adapt to changes in ISIS's messaging strategy as well as avoid a one-size-fits all approach that fails to factor in not only online propaganda, but also the individualized contexts of lived experiences from the individuals themselves (Winter, 2015, p. 43, Moaveni, 2019, p. 715).

Currently, the issue of women and minors in the camps continues to be a topic of debate and countries have implemented varied inconsistent repatriation policies for these individuals. Female ISIS supporters and members are too often sensationalized through gendered lenses that risk resulting in potentially faulty policy approaches and counter-narrative measures. In a study conducted on American ISIS supporters, the authors concluded that women within their sample "were involved in every major category of ISIS-related activity in the US...most did so entirely on their own volition, and despite sensationalized and simplified accounts of their cases, often radicalized without the influence of a male co-conspirator" (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al, 2020, pp. 21-22). Additionally, this begs the question if online decentralization and geographic distance allow for female ISIS supporters to "have

more agency to interpret their roles” (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al, 2020, p. 22) and what this might entail for security and policy; especially as the issue of repatriation constantly looms in the background. Online engagement does not automatically translate to offline action, however, remaining aware of prominent themes and narratives recycled in virtual echo-chambers provides insights into content that appeals to supporters regardless of whether they restrict their engagement to the virtual world or become involved in offline terrorist activities.

Further research could focus on specific linguistic online communities of ISIS supporters and conduct a comparative study between language X vs Y. Other research examining themes related to a variety of alternatively chosen topics and datasets spanning a longer period of time could compare and contrast findings with this study or reveal significant shifts in unofficial ISIS propaganda content depending on time period. Studies on women’s engagement in online spaces vs. the real world for other extremist groups that maintain a heavy virtual presence, such as white supremacists, could also reveal interesting findings.

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler