

Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh

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Abstract

Women participate extensively in armed, Islamist struggle. In recent years, foreign women have travelled from the West to join Daesh. Their participation perplexes policymakers, government officials, and researchers who call attention to the group's gendered regulation, violence, and widespread use of rape. Consequently, observers often argue that women are deceived by the organisation or seduced by the promise of romance. This suggests that women would not, under rational circumstances, choose to join the group. In this article, we address two resultant questions: why do Western women join Daesh? Are their motivations distinct from other Islamist recruits? Using an original dataset of social media activity from 17 Western female recruits between 2011–15, we conclude that women are primarily driven by religious ideology that adopts an expressly gendered frame. We find that feelings of isolation and disaffection also drive migration. We suggest that female foreign recruits are not unique in their motivations and share many similarities with male fighters and women in other Islamist organisations. This research has valuable implications for security studies and counterterrorism, which tend to treat extremist women as unique. Female recruits should be taken seriously as insurgents intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate.

Keywords

Daesh; Terrorism; Gender; Political Violence; Social Media

Introduction

Women are active participants in Islamist insurgencies.¹ They are soldiers, bombers, logistical coordinators, spies, and sympathisers. Women participated as frontline fighters for al-Qaeda, and one female Ansar al-Sunnah member in Iraq reportedly recruited eighty female suicide bombers in two years.² Iraqi bombers accounted for 24.7 per cent of all female suicide bombings between 1968–2012.³ The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines operates women's auxiliaries responsible

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¹ We use the term 'Islamist' to describe groups that follow extremist strands of Islamic fundamentalism and seek to change the political status quo through use of violence.

² Katherine Zoepf and Riyadh Mohammed, 'Amnesty plan in Iraq draws 18 insurgents', *New York Times* (27 November 2008), available at: {<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/28/world/middleeast/28amnesty.html>}; 'Iraq's "female bomber recruiter"', *The BBC* (4 February 2009), available at: {<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7869570.stm>}.

³ Jessica Davis, 'Evolution of the global jihad: Female suicide bombers in Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36:4 (2013), pp. 279–91. Note: Not all bombers were part of explicitly 'Islamist' movements.

for medical services, education, and fundraising.⁴ Since the 1980s, all-female Islamist groups Dukhtaran-Millat (DeM) and the Muslim Khawateen Markaz (MKM) have been enforcing the burqa in public spaces and encouraging female participation in the resistance against Indian authorities in Kashmir.⁵ When the insurgency in Kashmir began, DeM called on women to remain in their homes to support their rebel husbands, framing this support role as a central part of their personal *jihad*, or struggle. DeM claims it successfully prevented women from attending militant training camps in Pakistan in favour of this private war.⁶ In Afghanistan, female spies worked for the Taliban from the beginning.⁷ Women are also joining the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (hereafter Daesh). Some of these women are domestically recruited, but in recent years foreign women have actively travelled to join the insurgency in Iraq and Syria.

In December 2015, the Soufan Group reported that up to 31,000 people from over 86 countries had travelled to join Daesh.⁸ Over 5,000 of these recruits are from Western states, and more than 600 of them are women.⁹ Per French intelligence services, by 2014 only 10 per cent of all French recruits were female. In 2016 women composed an estimated 40 per cent of all French migrants in Daesh-controlled territory.¹⁰ The United States government estimates that one in six Americans who attempted to join Daesh in Syria are women.¹¹ Despite the empirical record of female participation in armed, Islamist struggle, Daesh's female membership perplexes policymakers, government officials, and casual observers. They express difficulty reconciling the organisation's successful foreign recruitment with its harsh treatment and conservative expectations of women and girls. Daesh's dogmatic enforcement of its interpretation of 'Islamic' law has led to 'increasingly harsh restrictions on movement and dress' with brutal police forces maintaining these standards.¹² Women in Daesh-controlled areas rarely venture outside the home for fear of the police.¹³ The Institute for Strategic Dialogue concludes that Daesh has declared a 'war on women and girls' while international human rights monitors document and condemn an extensive 'sex slave' industry carried out by male fighters buying and selling Yazidi women.¹⁴ As one

⁴ Rosalie Arcala Hall and Joanna Pares Hoare, 'Philippines', in Jenny Hedstrom and Thiyumi Senarathna, 'Women in Conflict and Peace', International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2015).

⁵ Swati Parashar, 'Gender, jihad, and jingoism: Women as perpetrators, planners, and patrons of militancy in Kashmir', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34:4 (2011), pp. 295–317.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Seran de Leede, 'Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment', The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) (2014).

⁸ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (December 2015).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alyssa J. Rubin and Aurelein Breeden, 'Women's emergence as terrorists in France points to shift in ISIS gender roles', *The New York Times* (1 October 2016), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/womens-emergence-as-terrorists-in-france-points-to-shift-in-isis-gender-roles.html?_r=0}.

¹¹ Danielle Paquette, 'Why young American women are joining ISIS', *The Washington Post* (17 November 2015), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/17/why-young-american-women-are-joining-isis/?utm_term=.2babf8c8ce96}.

¹² Mona Mahmood, 'Double-layered veils and despair ... women describe life under ISIS', *The Guardian* (17 February 2015), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves>}.

¹³ Fazel Hawramy, Shalaw Mohammed, and Kareem Shaheen, 'Life under ISIS in Raqqa: "We're living in a giant prison"', *The Guardian* (9 December 2015), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/09/life-under-isis-raqqa-mosul-giant-prison-syria-iraq>}.

¹⁴ Sasha Havlicek, 'The Islamic State's War on Women and Girls', statement given before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing (28 July 2015); Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape* (14 April 2015).

Syrian activist notes, under Daesh, ‘The life of a girl [is] itself a violation.’¹⁵ Consequently, much of the research on Daesh’s foreign recruitment argues that women are deceived by the organisation, brainwashed by malevolent radicals online, or seduced by the promise of romance.¹⁶ These explanations suggest that women would not, under rational circumstances, choose to join the group. In this article, we address two resultant questions: why do Western women join Daesh? Are their motivations distinct from other Islamist recruits?

We advance two arguments about women’s participation in Daesh. First, we theorise that the political hyper-focus on women in the group stems from the fact that Daesh is recruiting foreign, Western women. While most Islamist insurgencies primarily train local female recruits, Daesh draws many foreign women from comparatively gender-equitable societies. This disrupts Western states’ narratives of intervention and international security. Consequently, women’s participation appears anomalous. Ultimately, Western women’s voluntary involvement in Daesh complicates the institutional depiction of Middle Eastern women as perpetually in need of emancipation.¹⁷ Second, we contend that the *muhajirat* (pl. female migrants, sing. *muhajira/muhajirah*)¹⁸ move to Syria and Iraq for largely the same reasons as male foreign fighters and women in other Islamist groups. We argue that these women are primarily pulled by a religious commitment and a sense of community. They are often pushed by perceived isolation in the West. However, we conclude that while feelings of alienation in their home societies mobilise many foreign recruits, these women perceive a uniquely gendered form of anti-Muslim violence in the West that may help to explain their move towards extremism. This key difference is often overlooked and is important in explaining the behaviour of *muhajirat* joining Daesh.

We explore these ideas by drawing on an original dataset of social media activity from 17 Western *muhajirat* accounts operating between 2011–15. This data is a novel contribution to research on Daesh recruitment and on female militancy. Existing studies of women’s participation in Daesh offer rich recruitment histories and detail women’s roles within the organisation.¹⁹ Still, most research relies on secondary sources and external explanations for female recruitment.²⁰ Women’s voices are often erased in studies of gender and conflict. It is important that female participants’ opinions, defences, and rationales be validated as evidence. Our data suggests that the *muhajirat* are primarily responding to a religious and political call to righteousness and view themselves as political agents for a group they believe represents their interests as Muslims and as women. Subsequently, we urge scholars to take female Daesh recruits seriously as insurgents intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate.

¹⁵ Hawramy, Mohammed, and Shaheen, ‘Life under ISIS in Raqqa’.

¹⁶ See, for example, Ashley Binetti, ‘A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS’ Recruitment of Women from the West’, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (2015); Ed Royce, ‘Women Under ISIS Rule: From Brutality to Recruitment’, statement given before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing (29 July 2015).

¹⁷ See Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) for a discussion of Western foreign interventions in the Middle East justified by the emancipation of Muslim women.

¹⁸ Female migrants refer to themselves using this term frequently in their social media activity and interviews.

¹⁹ Jennifer Philippa Eggert, ‘Women fighters in the “Islamic State” and al-Qaida in Iraq: a comparative analysis’, *Journal of International Peace and Organization*, 90:3–4 (2015), pp. 363–80; Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, ‘The Western muhajirat of ISIS’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38 (2015), pp. 495–509; Amanda N. Spencer, ‘The hidden face of terrorism: an analysis of the women in Islamic State’, *Journal of Strategic Security*, 9:3 (2016), pp. 74–98.

²⁰ A notable exception is Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, ‘Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS’, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015).

This article proceeds as follows. First, we explore the gendered security framework that suggests the *muhajirat* are unique in their motivations for joining Daesh. Following this, we offer four possible explanations for why Western women join the organisation. These hypotheses assess female recruits' uniqueness relative to male foreign fighters and women in other Islamist organisations. We introduce our data and research methodology, and use our original data to evaluate theories of women's participation. Our approach does not identify definitive causal pathways of radicalisation: we cannot answer the question of why Daesh successfully recruited these women but not others.²¹ In this project, we illustrate how radicalised women justify themselves and explain the momentous decision to leave their home countries and travel to an insurgent-held conflict zone. We demonstrate the importance of religious ideology, community, and perceived anti-Muslim discrimination as key explanations for women's *hijra* (migration, also *hijrah*) to Syria and Iraq. We emphasise that expectations drawn from a Western security narrative are only weakly reflected in our data. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings, offer thoughts on the role of agency as an analytic category in this case, and provide recommendations for scholarly and policy work on the Daesh *muhajirat*.

Gender and securitisation: Theorising the dominant framework

Literature on women in violent political organisations often focuses on why women join domestic groups. Extant explanations emphasise fear, need for protection, political ideology, the feminist or emancipatory platforms of leftist groups, family ties, poverty, a lack of political and economic opportunity, and the opportunity to escape the private sphere.²² These studies suggest that women's motivations are largely similar to men's – they participate to protect themselves, to fight for their communities, to defend an ideological cause, and to support organisations they believe will improve their lives. Western *muhajirat* seemingly complicate this framework. Many recruits are middle class, pursuing higher education, engaged in civil society, and voluntarily leaving behind comparatively comfortable lives in liberal states. Their pre-existing ties to Daesh members appear tenuous at best, and most are radicalised individually and online. Most do not come from Islamist families or communities. Moreover, women in Daesh actively seek out restrictive gender roles that most observers view as inimical to their interests.²³ The international community's intense focus on the *muhajirat* – which is particularly fervent around white women and recent Muslim converts – illustrates the collective Western disbelief that women would willingly forgo social and political equity. Because these recruits seem to fall beyond the scope of existing theory, policymakers and government officials tend to portray them as irrational, deluded, and naïve.

²¹ See Anabel Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) for a discussion of British women who convert to Salafism but remain in Britain and do not engage in extremist violence.

²² Miranda Alison, 'Cogs in the wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam', *Civil Wars*, 6:4 (2003), 37–54; Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Natalia Herrera and Douglas Porch, "'Like going to a fiesta' – the role of female fighters in Colombia's FARC-EP', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 19:4 (2008), pp. 609–34; Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (London: Routledge, 2008); Parashar, 'Gender, jihad, and jingoism'; Sarah Parkinson, 'Organizing rebellion: Rethinking high-risk mobilization and social networks in war', *American Political Science Review*, 107:3 (2013), pp. 418–34; Jocelyn Viterna, 'Pulled, pushed and persuaded: Explaining women's mobilization into the Salvadorian Guerrilla Army', *American Journal of Sociology*, 112:1 (2006), pp. 1–45; Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³ See Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

We theorise that this disbelief stems primarily from the irreconcilability of the West's security narrative with female recruits. Narrative is generally understood as 'the stories people tell ... how people make sense of their lives ... [and] how they construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality.'²⁴ Scholars note that some Western security narratives emphasise saviourship as justification for why Western forces must act abroad. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously contends, 'white men are saving brown women from brown men'.²⁵ She offers this as part of the 'imperialist subject-production' process wherein Western states and their agents legitimise their interventions by emphasising the oppression of brown women (the subjects). Lila Abu-Lughod argues that part of the US's justification for 'War on Terror' interventions in Afghanistan was the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban. She concludes that 'it is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving' because 'projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged'.²⁶ Marnia Lazreg similarly calls attention to forced Christianisation and unveiling practices during French colonialism in Algeria, noting that the French 'obsession with women' was 'the one constant feature of the Algerian occupation by France'.²⁷

Western engagement with Daesh focuses heavily on the group's treatment of women and girls, in particular sexual violence perpetrated against Yazidis. Kerry F. Crawford and colleagues contend, 'These stories are horrifying, but they also serve a political narrative: Forces of evil in the Middle East are using rape as a weapon in terror campaigns against natural allies of "the West"'.²⁸ The authors argue that this narrative obscures complex processes, draws attention away from Daesh's other abuses, and is selectively invoked to justify intervention based on 'the impulse to "save" Syrian and Iraqi women'.²⁹ Foreign female recruits destabilise this story. It is difficult to reconcile the West's role in Syria and Iraq as one of emancipation when Western women willingly join the organisations that their home countries deem oppressive.³⁰ For this reason, policymakers, government officials, media commentators, and some researchers paint Western *muhajirat* as coerced, tricked, and driven to irrationality by sexual and romantic desire. In one extreme illustration, a recent Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security report argues that many female Daesh recruits are legally human trafficking victims because of the insurgency's deceptive recruiting.³¹

The policies that many Western governments and judicial institutions pursue impress upon the public that migration is not a choice Western women would voluntarily make. Disparate legal treatment of

²⁴ Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, 'Narrative in political science', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1 (1998), p. 315.

²⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 93.

²⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (2002), pp. 788–9.

²⁷ Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 135.

²⁸ Kerry F. Crawford, Amelia Hoover Green, and Sarah Parkinson, 'Wartime sexual violence is not just a "weapon of war"', *The Washington Post* (24 September 2014), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/24/wartime-sexual-violence-is-not-just-a-weapon-of-war/?utm_term=.10d543ec5ed6}.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ We do not weigh in on whether Daesh is objectively oppressive. Important to our argument is that the *perception* of Daesh – and other Islamist organisations – as violently oppressive underlies much of the justification for Western militarisation in the Middle East.

³¹ Binetti, 'A New Frontier'.

female recruits and sympathisers illustrates the strength of this narrative.³² Judges and legislators in the United States and United Kingdom often take an overtly sympathetic approach when dealing with Western female recruits. When Shannon Conley, a white 19-year-old from Colorado, was convicted for conspiracy to support Daesh, her attorneys stressed that she was misled by falsities about the organisation. During trial, the prosecutor labelled her ‘pathologically naïve’. The judge called her a ‘bit of a mess’, and a ‘look-at-me girl’ who just ‘doesn’t get it’.³³ In a recent parliament meeting, the Anti-Terror Chief of London’s Metropolitan Police offered immunity to three middle-class women who left for Syria in February 2015. He noted that the police have no evidence that these women are responsible for terrorist offences despite joining the organisation. This marks the first time the police offered immunity from prosecution to a Daesh returnee and is a stark divergence from harsh punishments levelled at male recruits from Western countries. An immunity deal suggests that *muhajirat* are not real extremists. This framework advocates treating female recruits as peripheral actors, as wives-of-terrorists who uniquely warrant saviourship. It helps explain the West’s perplexed reaction to the *muhajirat* despite the empirical history of women’s participation in Islamist insurgencies.

Why do Western women join Daesh?

We assess four explanations for why Western women join Daesh in Syria and Iraq. We draw our first set of explanations from the gendered security narrative that assumes the *muhajirat* are acting irrationally or have little decision-making autonomy: (1) women are motivated by romance or sex; (2) women are tricked by recruiters who present an unrealistic portrayal of life in Daesh-controlled territory. These explanations consider the Daesh *muhajirat* a unique phenomenon, different from foreign male recruits or women who join Islamist groups in their own countries. Our second set of explanations draws from the literature on foreign fighters and domestic recruits in other Islamist organisations: (3) women are pushed into Daesh by feelings of isolation and alienation in their home societies; (4) religious and ideological commitment draws women to the so-called Islamic caliphate. These theories suggest that women’s motivations are akin to those driving male recruits and fighters in other insurgencies.

First, romantic and sexual explanations assume that women join violent groups because either they are seeking romantic relationships or are simply looking for sex. For example, Robin Morgan concludes that women are coerced into terror through ‘recruitment by romance’.³⁴ She warns, ‘[terrorists use] sex and “love” to enmesh women – and, in turn, to use women’s sexuality to further the cause’. Women literally reproduce violent groups, and in many cases avenge the deaths of their husbands through violence. A clear example of this is the intense academic and media focus on Chechen ‘Black Widows’. This name, applied externally to female suicide attackers, implies that women’s violence is motivated by their romantic relationships with men. Similarly, in 2015 New Zealand’s prime minister concluded that women leaving the country to join Daesh were ‘presumably’ ‘jihadi brides’.³⁵ The media, frequently painting the *muhajirat* as ‘jihadi brides’, encourages this narrative. One Quilliam

³² Ester E. J. Strømme, ‘Jihadi Brides or Female Foreign Fighters? Women in Da’esh – from Recruitment to Sentencing’, GPS Policy Brief, PRIO Centre on Gender, Peace and Security (2017).

³³ Michael Martinez, Ana Cabrera, and Sara Weisfeldt, ‘Colorado woman gets 4 Years for wanting to join ISIS’, CNN (24 January 2015), available at: {<http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/23/us/colorado-woman-isis-sentencing/index.html>}.

³⁴ Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1989), p. 201.

³⁵ Audrey Young, ‘Rise in Kiwi women heading to Iraq and Syria’, *New Zealand Herald* (8 December 2015), available at: {http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=11557876}.

Foundation researcher notes that some women may view joining Daesh as a ‘romantic adventure’ where they have more options in choosing a like-minded partner than if they remained at home.³⁶

Sexual explanations for women’s participation de-emphasise romance and focus instead on sexual desire or defect. Lindsey O’Rourke, for example, notes that high values placed on women’s fidelity and chastity in many societies may encourage women to perpetrate violence – especially suicide attacks – to compensate for a loss of family honour caused by ‘defects’ like extra-marital sexual activity or rape.³⁷ Other explanations centre sexual desire or compulsion. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry suggest that female Islamist terrorists are viewed as acutely sexually desperate. Popular representations depict them as ‘particularly weak and dependent on men’s praise and acceptance’.³⁸ Western governments paint female terrorists as obsessed with men: intelligence officials in Australia, Britain, Malaysia, and Tunisia accuse women of performing a ‘sexual jihad’, migrating to perform sexual favours for Daesh fighters.³⁹ In New York, the FBI foiled two female terrorists’ plot to detonate explosives. Shane Harris describes them sexually as ‘jihadist groupies’ who ‘worshiped domestic terrorists’.⁴⁰ A recent *New York Times* article describes a soon-to-be *muhajira* ‘gyrating’ to music in her childhood bedroom before turning to a discussion of how Muslim girls find observant Muslim men sexually attractive as a form of girlhood rebellion. The author writes that for these girls, ‘beards are sexy’.⁴¹

Coupled with romantic and sexual arguments is the claim that Daesh deceives women as a recruitment strategy. One report concludes that social media propaganda targeting English and French-speaking women differs from that targeting Arab women, and that recruiters present a rosier image to Westerners.⁴² In a US House Oversight Committee on Daesh recruitment, Congressman Ed Royce argued that female members are ‘brainwashed’, and that with each new female recruit, ‘ISIS has a new poster child for its jihadi girl-power propaganda’.⁴³ Georgetown University legal fellow Ashley Binetti contends that when women join Daesh, ‘they might be forced into a marriage and/or find themselves in situations where an originally agreed-to marriage takes on a nature of domestic servitude or sexual slavery ... [Daesh] also does not mention its systematic campaign of sexual slavery and mass rape of enemy women, which it frequently employs as a tool of torture.’⁴⁴

³⁶ Lizzie Dearden, ‘ISIS “jihadi brides” trying to radicalise girls and encourage UK terror attacks online as they remain trapped in Syria’, *The Independent* (13 August 2016), available at: {<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-jihadi-brides-women-british-syria-kadiza-sultana-radicalise-terror-trapped-abuse-married-air-a7187946.html>}.

³⁷ Lindsey A. O’Rourke, ‘What’s special about female suicide terrorism?’, *Security Studies*, 18:4 (2009), pp. 681–718.

³⁸ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, ‘Reduced to bad sex: Narratives of violent women from the Bible to the War on Terror’, *International Relations*, 22:5 (2008), p. 16.

³⁹ Vasudevan Sridharan, ‘“Sexual jihad”: British, Australian, and Malaysian women going to Iraq as “comfort women” for ISIS’, *International Business Times* (27 August 2014), available at: {<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/british-australian-malaysian-women-iraq-offering-sex-jihad-isis-islamists-1462770>}.

⁴⁰ Shane Harris, ‘NYC terror groupies wanted to be bad bitches with bombs’, *The Daily Beast* (2 April 2015), available at: {<http://www.thedailybeast.com/nyc-terror-groupies-wanted-to-be-bad-bitches-with-bombs>}.

⁴¹ Katrin Bennhold, ‘Jihad and girl power: How ISIS lured 3 London schoolgirls’, *The New York Times* (17 August 2015), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/world/europe/jihad-and-girl-power-how-isis-lured-3-london-teenagers.html>}.

⁴² Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter, ‘The women of ISIL’, *Politico* (7 December 2015), available at: {<http://www.politico.eu/article/the-women-of-isil-female-suicide-bomber-terrorism/>}.

⁴³ Ed Royce, ‘Women Under ISIS Rule: From Brutality to Recruitment’, statement given before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing (29 July 2015).

⁴⁴ Binetti, ‘A New Frontier’.

The expectation is that the *muhajirat* are not fully aware of what life is like under Daesh and that once they arrive, women disappear into a void of danger, discomfort, and regret.

Together, these theories illustrate Western audiences' need to explain the *muhajirat* in ways that absolve them from their participation. We assess the empirical validity of these hypotheses using our original data. Sexual and romantic arguments yield four observable implications. First, women should be focused on romance and pursuit of love. Next, we expect marriage to be a central concern. Third, women should be preoccupied with sex, lust, and men in Daesh. Finally, women should have an underdeveloped knowledge of Islamic teachings and little ideological commitment to the caliphate's religious agenda. From the deception argument, we expect that social media posts may articulate over-luxurified versions of life for women in Daesh territory. Contrarily, we may also see complaints of unexpected hardships, references to or shock regarding danger/violence, or expressions of regret. The former expectation assumes that *muhajirat* social media accounts are, at least in part, recruitment tools. The latter expectations assume the *muhajirat* have some autonomy in posting. These expectations are not mutually exclusive. We discuss these limitations of social media data and our approach to them in the following section.

An alternative framework suggests that women make largely autonomous decisions to join Daesh. These explanations assume that *muhajirat* motivations are like those of other foreign recruits and domestic female insurgents. Research on male foreign fighters emphasises the role of perceived isolation and exclusion in driving their participation in violent groups.⁴⁵ Daesh and other organisations that mobilise foreign support do so by targeting those who are loosely tied to their communities or who cannot identify extremism beliefs among their peers. David Malet notes that foreign fighters 'are often persuadable because of their weak affiliations with their own country and national identity'.⁴⁶ These feelings of 'otherness', coupled with technological advances, allow isolated individuals to virtually connect with radical, Islamist communities abroad. In Jerrold M. Post's exploration of al-Qaeda, he notes that the group was successful in attracting 'alienated Muslim youth', particularly because these individuals felt they had nowhere to turn. He notes that young Muslim men 'felt welcomed as [members] of the *umma* [Muslim community]' in Islamist groups after facing hostility towards their religion. Olivier Roy suggests that recent Daesh terrorist attacks in Europe are frequently perpetrated by second-generation immigrants who have 'lost their connection with their country of origin and have failed to integrate into Western societies'.⁴⁷ Importantly, Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard note that one need not have personally hostile experiences to be affected by these narratives.⁴⁸ Still, research suggests that many Western Muslims do feel oppressed and marginalised in their daily lives.⁴⁹

Many radicalisation scholars also specifically cite the role of the Internet in this mobilisation process, with Post concluding that 'isolated individuals consumed by hatred can find common cause in these [Islamist] websites, feel they are not alone, and be moved along the pathway from thought to

⁴⁵ Militant Islamist organisations in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere have successfully recruited Muslims from around the world, though no group has recruited foreigners as efficaciously as Daesh.

⁴⁶ David Malet, 'Foreign fighters playbook', *Foreign Affairs* (8 April 2014).

⁴⁷ Quoted in Davide Lerner, 'It's not Islam that drives young Europeans to jihad, France's top terrorism expert explains', *Haaretz* (4 June 2017), available at: {<http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/1.791954>}.

⁴⁸ Angel Rabasa and Cheryl Benard, *Eurojihad: Patterns of Islamist Radicalisation and Terrorism in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴⁹ David Voas and Fenella Fleischmann, 'Islam moves West: Religious change in the first and second generations', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38 (2012), pp. 525–45.

action'.⁵⁰ They observe that individuals may develop or deepen anti-Western grievances because of the narratives of Muslim oppression that Daesh circulates online. Indeed, recent studies of Daesh recruitment emphasise the group's interest in bringing individuals who feel religiously and socially isolated together on social media. Samantha Mahmood and Halim Rane conclude that feelings of disaffection in Western countries can make individuals more susceptible to extremist ideas.⁵¹ While we cannot determine whether such feelings radicalise the *muhajirat*, we can evaluate the role they play in women's rationalisations for travelling to join Daesh.

A final explanation is that the group's religious ideology motivates women to participate. Women recruited domestically into Islamist groups report ideological salience as a primary motivator.⁵² Scholars have laid rich theoretical ground for understanding women in these movements. For example, Ben Shitrit concludes that women are important to conservative religious movements 'not only as targets of restrictive politics, but as participating activists'.⁵³ Writing on conservative Islamic movements in Egypt, Mahmood concludes that women devotedly 'pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that has historically accorded women a subordinate status, and seek to cultivate virtues that are associated with feminine passivity and submissiveness'.⁵⁴ In these groups, this particular kind of pious, moral woman is the backbone of the community.⁵⁵ Consequently, women may enthusiastically adopt restrictive roles because they view their participation as appropriate for their gender and foundational to the movement's survival.

Muhajirat may also be drawn by Daesh's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam which, when deeply espoused, calls for believers to make *hijra* to an Islamic caliphate. Daesh's ideological underpinnings are rooted in the mid-twentieth-century development of political Islamic fundamentalism. This ideology leads many to believe that they are 'in a state of war against the apostates' and that this necessitates separation and struggle from the non-Muslim world.⁵⁶ This ideology requires believers to make *hijra* to Islamic societies. Daesh, an organisation uniquely in control of physical territory, has declared a caliphate. *Hijra* to Daesh-controlled territory is not simply migration, it is a religious obligation. In recent research, Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam interviewed twenty male foreign fighters in Daesh and assessed several motivations for *hijra*, including isolation and lack of opportunity. Recruits reported religion, morality, and 'the personal nature of the journey' as the primary rationale for participation. As the authors write, 'the stress falls on engaging in actions mandated by God, and ones that could easily demand [recruits] make the ultimate sacrifice'.⁵⁷

An important debate in the literature is whether it is the nature of Islamic fundamentalism or an individual's psychology that motivates extremist behaviours. For example, Gilles Kepel characterises

⁵⁰ Jerrold M. Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to al-Qaeda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 251.

⁵¹ Samantha Mahmood and Halim Rane, 'Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda', *The Journal of International Communication*, 1:23 (2017), pp. 1–15.

⁵² Parashar, 'Gender, jihad, and jingoism'.

⁵³ Lihi Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions: Women's Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival', *Cultural Anthropology*, 12:2 (2001), p. 203.

⁵⁵ Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 85.

⁵⁷ Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, 'Talking to foreign fighters: Insights into the motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 40:3 (2016), p. 202.

the rise in Islamist terrorist groups as the radicalisation of Islam. In this view, fundamentalist strains of the religion are at odds with Western values and can be a truly underlying catalyst for extremism.⁵⁸ Alternatively, Roy suggests that this phenomenon is instead an Islamification of radicalism.⁵⁹ He concludes that extremism is not built on factors inherent in fundamentalism, but that individual disaffection with the West – spurred by colonialism and exclusion – finds comfort in extremism.⁶⁰ While our project does not explore the roots of extremism, our evaluation of both isolation and ideological explanations highlight how current discourses of radicalisation are and are not reflected in the words of actual Daesh participants.

Theories of isolation and ideology contend that the *muhajirat* are not so different from their male counterparts. They also suggest that these women's participation is, in many ways, akin to that of women in other Islamist organisations. Together, these explanations conclude that the *muhajirat* are not exceptional, despite the fevered attention they receive from Western observers. From the isolation explanation, we expect to see anti-Western hostility and rejection of Western lifestyles reflected in recruits' social media activity. We also expect to see references to discrimination faced by these women or other Muslims in the West. Furthermore, we expect desire for family and community to motivate migration. From the religious/ideological explanations we expect women to cite *hijra* as a religious duty. We also expect to see other key fundamentalist ideas, such as *jihād*, *da'wa* (the call to spread Islam), rule by God's law, and other religious invocations reflected in their posts. Because Daesh uniquely calls for the construction of an immediate religious caliphate, we expect that female Daesh recruits will explicitly reference this objective. Finally, we expect female recruits to be well-versed in Islamic theology and religious text – citing the Qur'an or religious authorities.

Data and research design

We evaluate these four explanations for Western women's recruitment using a wealth of primary material. Most significantly, we introduce a new dataset of female Daesh recruits' social media activity. We supplement this data with official Daesh publications, unofficial propaganda, and extant research from counterterrorism organisations tracking foreign recruits. We employ an original dataset of Western female migrants' social media activity that includes 571 posts from 17 accounts where the author or authors self-identify as migrants in Daesh-controlled territory. Posts were made on Twitter, Tumblr, and Kik between 2011–15 and were collected between June and November of 2015. We identified the *muhajirat* in our data through a snowball technique, exploring their online relationships with known Daesh members, other female recruits, and other Western sympathisers.⁶¹ This is an established method used regularly by terrorism researchers for identifying and assessing Daesh fighters.⁶²

Women in our data identify their origin countries as Scotland, France, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Sweden, Canada, and the United States (Table 1). Also included in our data are cases where the specific country of origin cannot be verified but evidence suggests that it is in Europe (excluding

⁵⁸ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2000).

⁵⁹ Olivier Roy, 'France's Oedipal Islamist complex', *Foreign Policy* (2016).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Though our snowball sampling technique certainly demonstrates that these women are 'networked', we discounted so many accounts throughout this procedure that we unfortunately do not have detailed data on the exact nature of these connections.

⁶² See Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett, 'Becoming Mulan'; Jytte Klausen, 'Tweeting the jihad: Social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:1 (2015), pp. 1–22.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: *muhajirat* characteristics.

Author(s)	Origin	Location	Platform	Posts	Dates (M/Y)
Umm Layth	Scotland	Syria	Tumblr	17	4/14–9/15
Umm Bilal	France	Aleppo, Syria	Twitter	2	3/15–5/15
Sakina Muhajira	France	Syria	Twitter	46	8/15–9/15
Oum Fudayl Muhajirah	Netherlands	Shaam (Syria)	Twitter	7	11/14–2/15
Umm Adam Britāniyah	Great Britain	Caliphate	Twitter	3	2/15–4/15
Umm Abbas	Great Britain	Raqqa, Syria	Twitter	69	9/15–9/15
Umm Umar	Great Britain	Syria	Twitter	11	unknown
Ummu'AbbāsAl-Britāni	Great Britain	Syria	Twitter	112	7/11–6/15
Umm Towbah	Sweden	Sham	Twitter	14	5/15–9/15
Bint Mujahid	Canada	Caliphate	Twitter	23	1/15–9/15
Hoda Muthana	United States of America	Syria	Twitter, Kik	10	unknown
Umm Aminah	United States of America	Syria	Twitter	3	4/15–7/15
Lioness	West	Islamic State	Twitter	151	4/13–2/14
Umm Nosaybah Kalashn	West	Raqqa, Syria	Twitter	20	5/14–6/15
Umm Usamah	West	Mosul, Iraq	Twitter	12	10/14–1/15
GreenBirdofDabiq	West	Raqqa, Syria	Twitter	15	4/15–11/15
Al Muhajirat	West	Caliphate	Tumblr	56	4/15–9/15

Russia and Turkey), the United States of America, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. Posts are written in English, French, Dutch, Swedish, and Arabic. With one exception, each account included in our dataset is identified as single-authored. There is variation in the data provided by each account. Some accounts were active for years, while others went silent or were shut down after a month.⁶³ The regularity of posts varies across accounts with some providing far more regular updates than others. Finally, because this data is collected across platforms, there is a difference in the length of each post, with Twitter posts being limited to 140 characters and Tumblr posts sometimes consisting of many paragraphs.

There are limitations in collecting social media data on women in Daesh, some of which are reflected in the variation across our sources. Main issues confronting researchers include inaccurate self-identification, the production and destruction of data in real time, the inability to access the entire universe of possible accounts, the suspension or deletion of accounts by their platforms, and the overlap between personal data and propaganda. To ensure the integrity of our sample, we rely on a strict selection/confirmation rubric that differentiates female recruits who have physically joined the group from female sympathisers.⁶⁴ We further imposed reliability checks to evaluate each account included in the dataset. Both researchers independently evaluated all relevant information, and we include in our data only those accounts believed by each author separately to be a Western woman in Daesh-controlled territory.⁶⁵

⁶³ To the best of our knowledge all the accounts in our data have now been suspended by the social media platform or deleted by the author.

⁶⁴ Our selection/confirmation rubric and further explanation of our selection process is available in the supplemental Appendix.

⁶⁵ Through this reliability mechanism we excluded 14 accounts from our final data where though the authors are likely Western migrants, the accounts failed to meet our coding standards. We further discounted hundreds of other pro-Daesh accounts.

Table 2. Deductive coding rubric.

Code	Source hypothesis	Notes
lust/sex	sexual	Post references sexual desires, lustful urges, etc.
romance	romance	Post references romance, fairytale ideas of love, etc.
marriage	romance	Post references marriage, desire to get married, etc.
no_religion	sexual/romance	Post shows a lack of religious understanding and motivations are presented as important <i>in spite of</i> Daesh's religious ideals
luxury	deception	Post references joyful, easy, or rich life under Daesh
hardship	deception	Post references unexpected challenges, roles, or difficulties
danger	deception	Post references fear of bombings, violence, or rape
regret	deception	Post references regrets about moving to Daesh from the West
discrimination	isolation	Post references discrimination in West based on religious beliefs
hostility	isolation	Post is hostile towards Western lifestyles, actors, ideals
community	isolation	Post cites lack of community in West or presence of newfound community under Daesh
family	isolation	Post cites lack of family support in West, or presence of family under Daesh
caliphate	ideology	Post extols the uniqueness of the Caliphate project under Daesh
hijrah_duty	ideology	Post references the religious requirement of believers to move
religion	ideology	Post invokes religious language or Fundamentalist beliefs
verse	ideology	Post cites religious scholars or passages from the Qur'an

Our intensive analysis leads us to believe there is significant autonomy in the publication of this social media activity. Still, we concede that this activity is both personal and recruitment propaganda. This is not an impediment. It demonstrates the narratives women use about their *hijra* to recruit other women into Daesh. This data offers insights both into why women join and how they convince others to follow. Furthermore, while we treat each account as an individual case, we do not claim that this sample is representative of all Western women in Daesh. We use this data to gain a deeper understanding of recruits' decision-making processes rather than to definitively profile what a typical recruit 'looks like'. While this methodology may not conclusively identify a single causal driver of migration, it is useful for identifying themes and assessing extant theories.

Because many of these accounts include a high volume of posts, we allow our research question to provide focus for our data collection. We limit our dataset to every post concerning gender, Daesh, migration, and life in Daesh-controlled territory from each of the 17 cases. We also include samples of other posts, ranging from religious commentary to comments on popular culture and photos of animals and viral Internet memes. To analyse this data, we performed a combination of deductive and inductive coding using the assistance of Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.⁶⁶ Our deductive codes are pre-determined themes based on the hypotheses we lay out in the previous section (Table 2).

To help avoid projecting biases onto the study, we also allowed themes to 'emerge' from the data.⁶⁷ Because of the concern that certain narratives are being imposed onto these women and their choices, giving the data some room to 'speak for itself' is imperative. This combination of

⁶⁶ We offer detailed descriptions of our data, including code frequencies and dominance, in the supplemental Appendix.

⁶⁷ See Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 11 for a discussion of the risks of only using 'a priori theoretical categories' when exploring qualitative data.

predetermined and emergent coding allows us to explore the theories laid out above, as well as assess themes that have been neglected by current scholarship.

Participants in ongoing conflicts are difficult to study. This sample offers a novel look at actors in a violent group that is nearly impossible to access and provides data suited for our unique research question. For these reasons, we neither look at Western male recruits nor compare women who join Daesh to those who do not. As Mario Luis Small concludes, selecting respondents at random or aiming to identify ‘representative’ cases for the sake of generalisability may be counterproductive and compromise the integrity of small-n, contextual research.⁶⁸ If, for example, we selected cases at random from a sample of all known Daesh-sympathetic accounts, our data would greatly oversample men and those who have not physically joined the organisation. Neither of these populations provide data as useful as that from Western female migrants and would leave us no space to examine our question. We are confident that our data offer insight into Western women’s motivations for migrating to Iraq and Syria, are appropriate given the limitations of our data collection, and help us understand the processes we study.

To supplement our original data, we utilise other key primary and secondary sources. We draw on Daesh’s official propaganda magazine *Dabiq* (now *Rumiyah*), most issues of which include an article purportedly written by a female recruit, and we also use an unofficial manifesto written by the group’s female police force, the Al-Khansaa Brigade. We further rely on existing reports concerning women in Daesh, female migrants, and foreign fighters, as well as published interviews conducted by Western journalists with *muhajirat* over Twitter and the social messaging application Kik. In the sections that follow, we evaluate the evidence explaining Western women’s participation in Daesh, relying primarily on the rationales and opinions that the *muhajirat* advance in their own words.

Analysis

Our data suggests that hypotheses concluding women are lured by sex or tricked into joining Daesh hold little weight in explaining Western female recruitment. While women, like all recruits, may feel that they have made a mistake in joining the organisation, we find little evidence that Daesh hides or downplays its violence, expectations, and living conditions online. Instead, we see evidence that these *muhajirat*, like male foreign fighters, were primarily pulled into Daesh by religious commitment and pushed by alienation and violence in their home societies. However, the *muhajirat* do articulate a uniquely gendered form of discrimination levelled against them and draw on it as an explanation for their migration. They similarly perceive state and social hostility against Muslim women more generally and use this as evidence that Western states oppress Islam.

First, we find little evidence that sex motivates the *muhajirat*. When lust is mentioned, women explicitly chastise those who submit to such urges.⁶⁹ Female recruits acknowledge and reject Western governments’ and the media’s sexualisation of them. They firmly deny a ‘sexual jihad’ and chide Western commentators for accusing them of extramarital sex. Umm Adam Britāniyah, from Great Britain, argues, ‘#jihadibrides is the age-old attack against Islam being “misogynistic” ... Foolish are

⁶⁸ Mario Luis Small, “How many cases do I need?” On science and the logic of case selection in field based research’, *Ethnography*, 10:1 (2009), pp. 5–38.

⁶⁹ Al Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 August 2015). This account offers the month of each post but not the date. Therefore, we default all posts to the first of the month for *Al Muhajirat*.

those that accuse our sisters in IS [of] *Zina* [extramarital sex].⁷⁰ Umm Layth agrees, suggesting that people make sexual accusations because they do not understand why Western women would join Daesh. She concludes,

Many people in present day do not understand and cannot comprehend at all why a female would choose to make this decision. They will point fingers and say behind your back and to your family's faces that you are taking part in '*Jihadul nikaah*' or 'sexual jihad' and many many more vile terms. It hurts because these words will come from perhaps some of your closest relatives.⁷¹

As another *muhajira* explains, 'I genuinely thought [that term] was for jokes ... [T]here is no such rubbish in islam nor the Islamic State such as Sexual Jihad [*sic*].'⁷²

Importantly, the data does indicate a preoccupation with husbands and married life. However, this motivation does not conform to romantic explanations as expected. We see no evidence of romantic adventure-seeking or a desire for a wider array of potential partners. Instead, this devotion appears ultimately rooted in a gendered religious and political ideology – not the want for romantic affection. These women are embracing what they view as central roles of women's *jihad*: marrying and supporting fighters, mourning and celebrating martyrs, and bearing the future children of the caliphate. As one *muhajira* notes, 'Your first priority shouldn't be how to find a husband once in the *khilafah* [caliphate] but actually getting to the *khilafah*. Continue to renew your intentions and make your *hijrah* for the sake of Allah.'⁷³ Women's participation in Daesh as wives and mothers is complex and cannot be captured by the reductive 'jihadi bride' narrative. Nor can it be simplified into a story about women seeking romantic partners.

The connection between marriage and religious duty is demonstrated across data sources. The Al-Khansaa manifesto cautions that women in the modern, non-Islamic world are being prevented from realising their natural roles by their over-extension and subsequent emasculation of men. GreenBirdofDabiq, a *muhajira* living in Raqqa, Syria, concludes, 'A muslim wife should Know her place at home aswell the man. Today a lot muslim marriage is almost like kuffar [non-Muslims, also *kufr*, *kuffr*, *Kuffar*, *Kuffaar* *Kufr*] [*sic*].'⁷⁴ Female recruits perceive marriage in Daesh as more religiously fulfilling than marriage elsewhere. Hoda Muthana notes, 'Nothing is forced here. I felt the most content, I wanted to marry under an Islamic state rather than the West and since it means obeying Allah.'⁷⁵ A religious, rather than sexual or romantic, understanding of marriage is also seen in the women's discussions of polygamy. They lament polygamy's unpopularity in the West, believe Islam mandates it, and actively express desire for co-wives.⁷⁶ Still, *muhajirat* emphasise that while marriage is important, it is secondary to their relationship with God and their desire to live in the caliphate.

While marriage may be required in Daesh, *muhajirat* enthusiastically approach unions because it is part of their larger contribution to this *jihad*.⁷⁷ A central focus on bearing witness to fighters'

⁷⁰ Umm Adam Britāniyah, Twitter (9 April 2015, 23 March 2015).

⁷¹ Umm Layth, Tumblr (3 June 2014).

⁷² Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (18 September 2015).

⁷³ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 May 2015).

⁷⁴ GreenBirdofDabiq, Twitter (28 August 2015).

⁷⁵ Hoda Muthana, personal interview conducted by Ellie Hall over Kik.

⁷⁶ Lioness, Twitter (6 June 2013, 12 August 2013); Sakina, Twitter (3 September 2015, 21 September 2015); Ummu'AbbāsAl-Britāni, Twitter (24 November 2013).

⁷⁷ Though marriage appears mandated, Umm Nosaybah Kalashn reports being in Daesh-controlled territory for over a year and claims that women are not forced to marry the fighters they are recommended. However, her

deaths highlights the political underpinnings of marriage acts for these women. *Muhajirat* consider jihadi fighters the most respectable men and are eager to support them.⁷⁸ As Lioness muses, ‘Being in a place where you [are] guaranteed to marry a soldier of Allah is a blessing [w]hat more could you want.’⁷⁹ Besides supporting fighters, it is also the wife’s duty to bear witness if her husband is martyred. Martyrs’ widows are revered in Daesh and are typically required to undergo a mourning period of four months and ten days before remarrying. The *muhajirat* recall Daesh supplying food and financial support to martyrs’ wives, and women expressly cite their desires to marry a *shaheed* (martyr, also *shahid*).⁸⁰ Lioness advises, ‘Become the daughter of a *shaheed*, Become the sisters of a *shaheed*, Become the wives of a *shaheed*, Become the mothers of a *shaheed*, And watch how Allah fulfils your desire to be amongst the *shuhadaa* [martyrs] [*sic*].’⁸¹ It is ideological devotion to the creation of an Islamic state, not sexual or romantic desire, which seemingly drives these relationships.

Second, we find little evidence to suggest that recruiters deceive female participants with an unrealistic portrayal of life in Daesh-controlled territory. While some researchers contend that social media activity targeted towards Western women presents a more luxurious and exciting image of Daesh, our data depicts a life of discomfort, violence, and separation from family and friends. *Muhajirat* directly reference giving up modern luxuries as part of *hijra*. They admit missing Western comforts, but believe that they are making a worthy sacrifice. Even if foreign recruits may not contemplate the finality of their decision to leave home, women are straightforward about some of the realities of life in Daesh-controlled territory.⁸² Some *muhajirat* do note that new recruits expect the caliphate to be economically and politically functioning more completely than it is. They write, ‘Coming from the land of *kuffr*, the land of injustice, to the land of Islam is indeed an upscale no matter how big the sacrifices, but at the same time we must come to understand that this is a new born state with problems here and there but that doesn’t mean we should sacrifice any less for it.’⁸³

Umm A similarly notes, ‘Making *Hijrah* isn’t a ticket to a comfortable life.’⁸⁴ When asked about how her life has changed since moving to Syria, Umm M writes,

I’ve learned to cope with certain life style changes that I would have never imagined myself been able to withstand – such as living in +45 degree weather without air conditioning, sometimes having to take cold showers in the winter and not having the luxury of excessive food variety etc. *Alhamdulillah* [Thanks be to Allah] all this has humbled me [*sic*].⁸⁵

In a post advising would-be migrants on what to bring with them, *muhajirat* suggest bringing thick winter clothes to wear indoors because of the lack of heating and toiletries and personal items scarce in Syria and Iraq. Some women also complain about in-fighting between Western recruits and Arab women.⁸⁶

experience appears unique. Umm Nosaybah Kalashn, Twitter (18 September 2014, 17 March 2015, 2 June 2015).

⁷⁸ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 May 2015).

⁷⁹ Lioness, Twitter (27 February 2014).

⁸⁰ Umm Umar, personal interview conducted by Nabeelah Jaffer over Twitter.

⁸¹ Lioness, Twitter (6 October 2013).

⁸² We did find evidence that one woman did not fully understand the role she was to play in Daesh. Umm Nosaybah Kalashn notes her disappointment in not being allowed to fight and mentions that she had been in her national army at home. See Umm Nosaybah Kalashn, Twitter (22 May 2014).

⁸³ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 April 2015).

⁸⁴ Umm A, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 September 2015).

⁸⁵ Umm M, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 September 2015).

⁸⁶ GreenBirdofDabiq, Twitter (18 October 2015).

They make clear that life under Daesh is less comfortable than at home, but believe, ‘You are leaving the land of *kufir* for the land of Islam so much sacrifice is to be made.’⁸⁷ Umm Layth insists that most Western recruits understand what they are giving up when they leave home. She notes that staying in the West means a comfortable life, but that the reward for making *hijra* to Daesh will be much greater in the afterlife.⁸⁸

Beyond the lack of material comforts, women are also upfront about the violence they experience. Several *muhajirat* recall airstrikes, and they often post graphic images of these attacks. Umm Usamah, a *muhajira* in Mosul, Iraq, writes, ‘Witnessed my first airstrike last night as the disbelievers attacked Raqqa. *Alhamdulillah*, zero casualties & more money wasted by the *Kuffar*.’⁸⁹ Umm Aminah, from Tennessee, posted of a photo one Syrian morning captioned ‘Bed, breakfast, and bombs ... my lovely view in al Bab.’⁹⁰ The *muhajirat* run from aerial attacks and witness children killed by the bombs.⁹¹ In September 2015, Umm Abbas claimed to have experienced nine airstrikes in Raqqa.⁹² Bint Mujahid, a Canadian, remembers seeing people burned alive and crushed by bombs. She notes that this seems inevitable given the necessity of war.⁹³ One recruit noted that she was moving to Iraq because Raqqa had become too dangerous.⁹⁴

In addition to clear warnings of discomfort, resource scarcity, and coalition attacks, the *muhajirat* discuss Daesh’s widespread use of violence against women. A 2015 *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion or ruling) issued by Daesh’s Committee of Research and Fatwas sanctions the taking, buying, selling, and rape of non-Muslim female slaves.⁹⁵ The *fatwa* dictates the circumstances in which men can rape women held as slaves and includes provisions concerning menstruation, pregnancy, lineage, and release. We find no evidence that Daesh women keep this secret in their social media activity or recruitment propaganda. Instead, we find that not only are female recruits aware of this violence when joining the organisation, but the *muhajirat* openly admit and accept Daesh’s rape of women and girls held as slaves. They explicitly note that rape is a punishable offence when the victim is a Muslim, but encourage the enslavement and rape of Yazidis.

Daesh is a *Salafi*-jihadist organisation. In *Salafi* tradition, non-Muslim religious groups whose theology is rooted in the Bible or the Torah are known as *ahl al-kitab*, or people of The Book. The Prophet Muhammed dictated that these groups be specially protected from conversion and allowed to practice their religions with little interference. Yazidis, a religious community spreading across Iraq and Syria, are not *ahl al-kitab*, and subsequently Daesh views them as heathens with no religious protection. Women in our data trust that this combination of *Salafi* theology and national hierarchy protects them from sexual violence, and they also feel that Yazidi women deserve mistreatment. In the ninth issue of *Dabiq*, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah argues that slavery and rape are punishment for abandoning God’s favour. She affirms, ‘We have indeed raided and captured the [non-Muslim] women, and drove them like sheep by the edge of the sword ...

⁸⁷ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 September 2015).

⁸⁸ Umm Layth, Tumblr (11 September 2014).

⁸⁹ Umm Usamah, Twitter (12 October 2014).

⁹⁰ Umm Aminah, Twitter (30 April 2015).

⁹¹ Umm Abbas, Twitter (18 September 2015); Ummu’AbbāsAl-Britāni, Twitter (29 October 2014).

⁹² Umm Abbas, Twitter (21 September 2015).

⁹³ Bint Mujahid, Twitter (3 February 2015).

⁹⁴ Umm Nosaybah, Twitter (18 September 2014).

⁹⁵ ISIL Committee on Research and Fatwas, ‘Fatwa Number 64’ (29 January 2015).

I and those with me at home prostrated to Allah in gratitude on the day the first slave-girl entered our home.⁹⁶

Umm Abbas even jokes about this practice: ‘The Jazrawis [fighters from the Gulf region] here are the ones who have the most *sabiyas* [female slaves]. They love their women ... He purchased one for 1000\$ lool [laughing out loud] ... Then another for 10000\$ [sic].’⁹⁷ In one post, a *muhajira* responds to an anonymous commenter asking her to clarify ‘misconceptions’ about Daesh’s use of rape. The commenter notes that rumors of this practice turn women away from making *hijra*. The *muhajira* replies,

... we as muslims should be happy that the *khilafah* is back with all its glories including the *sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh)* [verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, permissions and disapprovals of the Islamic prophet Mohammad, (peace be unto him)] of taking the *kuffar* women as *sabayyah* [slaves] to humiliate *kuffr* and what it stands for ... i must say what you may have heard about brothers taking the yazidi women as *sabayyah* is in fact true *wa Alhamdu lillah* [and praise belongs to Allah].⁹⁸

While keenly aware of Daesh’s violence, the *muhajirat* feel that the group protects them from rape. For example, Bint Muhajid recalls feeling unsafe walking home in Canada, but says, ‘Now I walk home ... Surrounded by *Mujahideen* [fighters], knowing no-one can harm me. What a difference.’⁹⁹ Umm Abbas similarly notes, ‘*Dawla* [the State, Daesh] has the best types of men, and the *shariah* [Islamic] court protects you from all types of violence.’¹⁰⁰

The ‘deception’ explanation is uniquely difficult to evaluate through social media. It may be unreasonable to expect female recruits to complain about deception or their regrets on a public forum like Twitter. Doing so may risk their personal safety in an already violent and highly regulated environment. Furthermore, because the conditions of life under Daesh are not completely transparent, it is hard to evaluate how realistically these accounts portray daily life. However, while women may not directly reference social media deception or divulge the extent of the difficulties they face, the existing literature suggests that social media activity targeted at Westerners will present a rosy image of Daesh. This assertion is not reflected in our data; nor is the claim that women will not complain publicly.

Third, our data suggests that like other foreign fighters, Western women in Daesh do feel isolated and threatened in their home states and this mobilises them towards extremism. This isolation is both religious and political. Although many claims about Muslim radicalisation highlight the ease of finding likeminded communities,¹⁰¹ we find that women have difficulty identifying sympathisers in Western states. Hoda Muthana remembers, ‘I literally isolated myself from all my friends and community members the last year I was in America ... I grew closer to my *deen* [religion], I lost all my friends, I found none in my community that desired to tread the path I was striving for.’¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, ‘Slave-girls or prostitutes?’, *Dabiq*, 11 (2015), pp. 46–8; the author’s name suggests that she is also a migrant.

⁹⁷ Umm Abbas, Twitter (23 September 2015).

⁹⁸ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 June 2015).

⁹⁹ Bint Muhajid, Twitter (17 July 2015).

¹⁰⁰ Umm Abbas, personal interview conducted by Nabeelah Jaffer over Twitter. It is important to clarify that we have no way of measuring the *actual* incidence of rape and violence that these women face and this distinction should be kept in mind.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, ‘Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat’, New York City Police Department, Intelligence Division Report (2007).

¹⁰² Hoda Muthana, personal interview conducted by Ellie Hall over Kik.

Sakina, a French *muhajira*, notes that when she converted to Islam her mother told her that she wished she were a lesbian instead.¹⁰³ The *muhajirat* believe Western Muslims are not properly pious and there is a lack of opportunity to follow a deeply fundamentalist strain of Islam in these spaces.¹⁰⁴

The women in our dataset believe Muslims in the West are oppressed in particularly gendered ways. They frequently discuss the discrimination experienced by those who wear *hijab* and *niqab* [female head and face coverings]. Existing scholarship and hate crime statistics support the belief that Muslim women are frequent targets. Barbara Perry suggests that Muslim women are targeted in part because they are perceived as ‘exotic Others who do not fit the Western ideal of womanhood’.¹⁰⁵ In Australia, 50 per cent of post-9/11 attacks on Muslims are perpetrated against women. Comparatively, 44 per cent of victims are male and 6 per cent are buildings or property.¹⁰⁶ Regardless of a veiled woman’s religiosity, onlookers often perceive the veil as an indicator of the Islamic faith. Because veiling is an inherently visible practice, veiled girls and women are common targets of anti-Muslim attacks.¹⁰⁷ In the United States, numerous recent reports detail veiled Muslim women being physically assaulted. In response, some activist groups have begun teaching Muslim women self-defence and how to escape an attacker who grabs their head scarves. MuslimGirl.net, a popular website catered to English-speaking Muslim women, posted an article on 5 December 2015, titled ‘Crisis Safety Manual for Muslim Women’. The site listed ways to disguise the veil, such as ‘try the hood or beanie-on-top option to attract less attention’. Quraishi-Landes – an Islamic law specialist – writes that if women wearing the veil felt their ‘life or safety is threatened in any way ... [they] have an Islamic allowance (*durura*) to adjust [their] clothing accordingly’.¹⁰⁸

The *muhajirat* in our data report feeling isolated and discriminated against in their home countries because of their public displays of Islamic piety. Safety and belonging in Daesh-controlled territory are particularly manifested through veiling and dress because these women believe living in non-Muslim society is dangerous. On *Al-Muhajirat*, women write, ‘In *Dar Al-Kufr* [the non-Muslim world], a *Muslimah* [female Muslim] is subjugated to the many oppressive laws which control her, she may not be given a job due to the way she dresses, she is ridiculed on the bus/train by the *Kuffaar*, and no one can protect her as Islam wishes for her to be protected.’¹⁰⁹ One *muhajira* recalls, ‘... I was smiling at [non-Muslims] as they walked by me knowing very well they hated the true essence of my religion and everything it stood for.’¹¹⁰ Another notes that when she arrived in Syria from the West, she finally felt safe.¹¹¹ Women in the Al-Khanssaa police force contend that veiling is a recovery of rights for women who were forcibly revealed by Western colonisers and modern leaders.

¹⁰³ Sakina, Twitter (26 September 2015).

¹⁰⁴ Ummu’AbbāsAl-Britāni, Twitter (24 September 2014).

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Perry, ‘Gendered Islamophobia: Hate crime against Muslim women’, *Social Identities*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 74–89.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Many women in the West – devout and not devout – choose to wear the veil. For many others, veiling is not part of their religious or cultural practice. For discussion of the diverse, complex relationships between Muslim women and veiling, see Asifa Siraj, ‘Meanings of modesty and the hijab amongst Muslim women in Glasgow, Scotland’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 18:6 (2011), pp. 716–31 and Smeeta Mishra and Faegheh Shirazi, ‘Hybrid identities: American Muslim women speak’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17:2 (2010), pp. 191–209.

¹⁰⁸ Rachel Zoll, ‘US Muslim Women Debate Safety of Hijab Amid Backlash’, Associated Press (10 December 2015), available: {<http://www.nwherald.com/2015/12/10/u-s-muslim-women-debate-safety-of-hijab-amid-backlash/amx9vry/>}.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 July 2015).

¹¹⁰ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 July 2015).

¹¹¹ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 August 2015).

They insist, ‘After the establishment of the caliphate, coverings and hijab ... returned to the country and decency swept the country.’¹¹²

Reclamation of modesty is a key concern for the *muhajirat*, and they believe that it is not possible to fully do this outside of an Islamic caliphate. Female recruits recall family in their home states asking them to stop wearing *niqabs* (covering that shows only the eyes) and non-Muslim women condescendingly addressing them in public. Lioness consistently stresses the importance of modesty and adores ‘[b]eing in a place not seeing no naked women, seeing every woman n child from the age of seven cover up fully in niqab with no eyes on show [*sic*].’¹¹³ Many *muhajirat* believe that non-Muslim society ‘contaminates’ women with sexualised expectations and public feminism.¹¹⁴ Others emphasise the uneven enforcement of veiling laws in the West. Bint Mujahid notes that Catholic nuns are not required to move their head coverings and laments that veiling laws are directed exclusively at Muslims.¹¹⁵ Experiences of isolation and, sometimes, violence separate the *muhajirat* from most women who join domestic Islamist organisations. While female fighters in domestic groups are often recruited from local communities with corresponding values, foreign women are seeking a society unlike their liberal homes.

Of course, most Muslims who feel isolated or disconnected from their communities do not seek out and are not enticed by extremist violence. As Post, Mahmood and Rane, and others conclude, it is when isolation leads individuals to become embedded in online extremist networks that this factor increases the likelihood of radicalisation. Our data demonstrates that, beginning online and continuing after *hijra*, women are building close community ties that further mobilise them into political violence. *Muhajirat* treasure the support structures available for them within Daesh and on the Internet, and they constantly refer to one another as *ukhti* (my sister) and *akhwati* (my sisters). Quotidian relationships are key mobilising factors – while the *muhajirat* are failing to find these relationships locally, they are identifying each other online and creating close communities held together by shared experience, piety, ideology, and the desire to live under an Islamic caliphate. This mobilisation process is not unique to the *muhajirat*. For example, Jocelyn Viterna and Sarah Parkinson find that quotidian networks are key to insurgent women’s recruitment in El Salvador and Lebanon, respectively.¹¹⁶ Where traditional domestic insurgencies build these relationships within their contiguous communities, Daesh women are building them on the Internet. Isolation caused by anti-Muslim discrimination may push women into these online communities and may motivate their radicalisation and journeys abroad.

Finally, our data strongly suggests that, like male foreign fighters, *muhajirat* are motivated by an ideological commitment to Daesh that necessitates physical migration. *Hijra* enables women to participate in the creation and maintenance of the caliphate. Subsequently, the *muhajirat* view *hijra* as both central to Islamic practice and required by Islamic teachings. Some women explicitly emphasise *hijra*’s requisite nature. One *muhajira* contends, ‘The Muslims could never have abandoned their homes and families, exposing themselves to the pain of separation and the hardship

¹¹² Al-Khansaa Brigade, *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women*. trans. Charlie Winter (Quilliam Foundation, 2015), p. 28.

¹¹³ Lioness, Twitter (27 February 2013).

¹¹⁴ Umm U, Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 September 2015).

¹¹⁵ Bint Mujahid, Twitter (27 February 2015).

¹¹⁶ Viterna, ‘Pulled, pushed and persuaded’, pp. 1–45; Viterna, *Women in War*; Parkinson, ‘Organizing rebellion’.

of migration if it had not been indispensable to the practice of their religion and the assertion of Islam in the land.¹¹⁷ Sakina believes that *jihad* is compulsory and deems those unwilling to take part ‘hypocrites’ and ‘dogs’.¹¹⁸ Another *muhajira* tells prospective recruits that if they are making *hijra* for glory or land that they will not last in Daesh. She notes that only belief in God should motivate this migration.¹¹⁹

The *muhajirat* show little patience for Muslims who do not migrate. Before they leave home, many of the women in our data profess the desire to make *hijra* despite legal obstacles or family disapproval. Umm Layth contends that some women are not courageous enough to make *hijra*, and that they hide behind the guilt that migrating would bring grief to their families.¹²⁰ Ummu’AbbāsAl-Britāni, a British *muhajira*, chides women who do not make *hijra* by referencing the excuses they make, such as ‘I can’t shop online.’¹²¹ Some, like Umm Abbas, offer a more direct approach:

If you neglect *Hijrah* & would rather be oppressed in *Darul KUFRA* [the non-Muslim world] due to land preferences, then you are held for whatever the *Kuffar* do to you// IF THEY PRISON YOU, TORTURE YOU, RAPE YOU, SLAUGHTER YOU, TAKE YOUR KIDS, ... WHATEVER THEY DO ... It’s on you. You chose to neglect *Hijrah* [sic].¹²²

Other women shame Western Muslims who have not made *hijra* by telling stories about those who have joined them in Syria and Iraq.¹²³ Umm Nosaybah Kalashn notes that her fifty-year-old father has joined her and asks would-be recruits what they are waiting for.¹²⁴ Another *muhajira* recalls a woman who made *hijra* on foot, with her family, and without a passport. She writes that it took the woman four months to arrive and chides, ‘so if they can make *Hijrah* so can you’.¹²⁵ These women view their physical obligation to Daesh as both mandatory for all Muslims and uniquely gendered. The *muhajirat* emphasise the important space women occupy and focus on marriage, martyrdom, modesty, and maintaining the caliphate’s moral compass.

The significance of their commitment is further captured in the capitalisation of ‘*Hijra*’ on social media. The capitalisation of *Hijra* in much of our data suggests that while *hijra* literally means migration, the *muhajirat* are directly likening their journeys to Mohammed’s *hijra*, which is known as ‘The Hijra’. This linguistic choice indicates that the *muhajirat* see themselves as emulating Mohammad – literally fleeing persecution and waging a violent *jihad* against non-believers. They believe that Daesh offers them an authentic space for pure religious practice, and that they are courageously answering its call for true believers. As Umm Layth writes of herself, ‘[W]allahi [I swear] my mother you have raised a Lioness among a land of cowards.’¹²⁶

Finally, *muhajirat* connect *hijra* and violent *jihad*. Their social media activity dually emphasises the need to remove one’s self from the society of non-believers and their desire to violently attack this

¹¹⁷ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 August 2015).

¹¹⁸ Sakina, Twitter (9 August 2015).

¹¹⁹ Al-Muhajirat, Tumblr (1 July 2015).

¹²⁰ Umm Layth, Tumblr (3 June 2014).

¹²¹ Ummu’AbbāsAl-Britāni, Twitter (30 April 2015).

¹²² Umm Abbas, Twitter (23 September 2015).

¹²³ Umm Abbas (Twitter, 12 September 2015) writes, ‘Don’t you feel ashamed? To see a child [fighting with a weapon] whilst you neglect *Hijrah*, Ba’yah [allegiance] and *Jihad* #WilayatAlBarakah #IS.’

¹²⁴ Umm Nosaybah Kalashn, Twitter (17 March 2015).

¹²⁵ Ummu’AbbāsAl-Britāni, Twitter (29 October 2014).

¹²⁶ Umm Layth, Tumblr (9 April 2014).

world. Women often post graphic videos and imagery of Daesh beheadings and public violence, as well as calls to a brutal war between the caliphate and the non-Muslim world. Umm Layth speaks to President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron directly, promising, ‘you and your countries will be beneath our feet and your Kufr will be destroyed’.¹²⁷ Bint Mujahid also threatens domestic terrorism, saying, ‘Live in Fear. Sleeper cells & lone wolves are undetectable. They will strike against when you least suspect’.¹²⁸ Hoda Muthana demands someone, ‘Go on drive-bys and spill [American] blood, or rent a big truck and drive all over them ... Kill them’.¹²⁹

Conclusions and recommendations

As government officials, policymakers, and researchers struggle to explain Daesh’s recruitment of Western women, they often focus on factors unrelated to religion or ideology. This is likely because narratives of tricked, brainwashed, and sexually lured women fit saliently into existing security narratives of women in the Middle East requiring liberation. The imagery of Western recruits as victims against a backdrop of (mostly) brown men for whom governments and policymakers make no comparable excuses is a powerful tool in shaping narratives about the liberal, emancipatory political project. In this view, Western *muhajirat* are considered exceptional. They differ from their domestic female counterparts, drawn from predominately Muslim and ‘non-liberal’ communities into Islamist groups. They differ too from male foreign fighters. Indeed, Western male recruits are rarely imagined as victims of deception, perceived to be motivated by sexual interest in other recruits, offered immunity deals, or treated as confused victims in need of rescue.¹³⁰ We suggest that this approach is theoretically flawed and contributes to the long empirical history of erasing women’s engagement in political violence. Further, this framework is ill suited to explain Western *muhajirat*. Our data suggests that while Daesh recruits participate for complex reasons, Western women seem to be primarily drawn by a religious commitment and pushed by perceived isolation and alienation in their home societies.

In sum, our analysis suggests that women join Daesh for largely the same reasons as male recruits. Richard Barrett, co-founder of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, contends that male fighters are motivated by ‘relatively straightforward’ factors including disillusionment, persecution, religious ideology, and a desire for brotherhood and belonging. He argues, ‘They’re going off there to do something which they believe is good’.¹³¹ Our data suggests that these factors similarly motivate women. By their own accounts, the Western *muhajirat* are not so different from other Islamist women or their foreign male counterparts. They are not ‘jihadi-brides’, running after men for excitement or reward. They are committed actors making decisions they view as fundamental to their faith. Female recruits believe that *hijra* is mandatory, and that their sacrifice is required for religious fulfillment.

However, the *muhajirat* do uniquely reference gendered violence in their home countries that may push them towards extremist communities. Muslim women in many Western countries are targeted

¹²⁷ Umm Layth, Tumblr (11 September 2014).

¹²⁸ Bint Muhajid, Twitter (10 February 2015).

¹²⁹ Hoda Muthana, Twitter (19 March 2015).

¹³⁰ Some scholars suggest that sex or romanticism may motivate male recruits though this argument appears infrequently. See Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³¹ Richard Barrett, ‘Foreign Fighters in Syria’, presented to the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs (2015).

by hate crimes, and the *muhajirat* directly reference fear of violence as a factor in their disaffection. Western *muhajirat* further feel violated by laws, political rhetoric, and social opposition to their outward practices of faith. They reject sexualised expectations and enthusiastically accept more conservative roles that they believe are unattainable in the West. This disillusionment is evident in these online accounts, where women carve out gendered space that is explicitly female, religious, and communal. Through social media, women speak to a community of ‘sisters’ that exalt Islamism and encourage others to pledge fully to the caliphate. James P. Farwell contends, on social media ‘the group’s narrative portrays [Daesh] as an agent of change, the true apostle of sovereign faith, a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice, and a collection of avengers bent on settling accounts for the perceived sufferings of others.’¹³² Subsequently, Daesh may be attractive to those isolated in Western society who struggle to find community or face religious persecution. Women, like men, are subject to this narrative.

This article encourages radicalisation scholars to take seriously the intersection between individual psychology and the specifics of Islamist ideology. Much of the current literature is divided between viewing extremists as ‘troubled individuals’ or seeing them ‘cogs in a system’.¹³³ Roy and Kepel’s debate about the role of religion in radicalisation exemplifies this contention. Kepel directly links Islamist violence to the ‘intellectual resources of *Salafism*’, emphasising developments in religious thought as an explanation.¹³⁴ In contrast, Roy focuses on the application of religion to radical behaviour.¹³⁵ Others, like Anabel Inge, question the causal link between *Salafism* and violent extremism by exploring the lives of Western women who become *Salafi* but are not terrorists.¹³⁶ Our research offers valuable insights into this debate. The *muhajirat* emphasise both individual factors (isolation and discrimination that cause them to seek out extremist communities) and specifically Islamist ideas (religious mandate for making *hijra*) in their justifications for joining Daesh.¹³⁷ The combination of these factors in their testimony suggests that drawing a hard line between religion as a cause or cover for extremism may be unwise. The relationship between religion and the radicalisation process is outside of the scope of this article, but acknowledging the complex role Islamic fundamentalism plays in catalysing violence helps explain why these women chose to uproot their lives and travel to Syria or Iraq. Community-seeking among disenfranchised individuals and mandates of a particular brand of Islamism likely work cyclically to enhance one another.

The theoretical implications of this project indicate that framework for understanding women’s participation in conservative movements does exist, but researchers have been hesitant to employ it to explain the *muhajirat*. We suggest that this irreconcilability results from Daesh’s high-profile recruitment of Western women. This tension raises theoretical questions about agency and its

¹³² James P. Farwell, ‘The media strategy of ISIS’, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56:6 (2014), pp. 49–55.

¹³³ Adam Nossiter, ‘“That ignoramus”: 2 French scholars of radical Islam turn bitter rivals’, *New York Times* (12 July 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/europe/france-radical-islam.html>}.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹³⁶ Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman*.

¹³⁷ Roy suggested in a recent conversation about European terror that Islamic ideology had little to do with the attackers’ motivations: ‘had [the attacker] been imbued with Islamic culture and bent toward the ambition of establishing an Islamic state in the Middle East, he would have probably not have known about pop singer Ariana Grande ... he would have traveled to Syria or Libya instead.’ Women in our data did travel to Daesh-controlled territory, but similarly reflect a working knowledge of Western popular culture and teenage phenomena. This highlights the contradictions between explanations for extremism touting religion and those emphasising other factors.

deployment in narratives of Islamist women. Mahmood tackles the question of agency and Islam directly, arguing that liberal conceptions of agency as resistance to domination or social norms ‘sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions’.¹³⁸ She contends that women in these movements are agentic actors, but that we should understand agency under these conditions ‘not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’.¹³⁹ Others, like Jessica Aughter, question the need to inscribe agency into women’s actions as a prerequisite for legitimate participation in politics.¹⁴⁰

Our data makes clear that Daesh women, like most participants in political violence, perform both agently and otherwise. These recruits are pushed and pulled by external forces of violence, religion, and community. Restricting our analysis of these activities by marking them as either completely voluntary or fully coerced offers an inaccurate assessment of the *muhajirat* and their political practices. Instead, we conclude that articulating the ‘clear, bounded agent’ that scholarly discourses often demand is an impossible – and inadvisable – project.¹⁴¹ No one makes decisions in a vacuum. Daesh women are reacting to their social, political, and religious worlds and responding in ways that they feel benefit their interests as women and as Muslims. In this article, we contest the dominant narrative of the *muhajirat* as under-informed, deceived, and forcibly recruited actors. We contend that the *muhajirat* are extremists actively engaged in political action.

The political implications of our findings are clear. Disparate treatment of male and female foreign recruits is misguided. This approach carries dangerous implications for the future of counter-extremism and the valuation of female terrorists as threats domestically and abroad. As Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone conclude, ‘women returning from conflict areas or those, even more numerous, anxious to join but unable to travel, could engage in violent acts’.¹⁴² While women take on primarily administrative roles in Daesh-controlled territory, female attackers acting in the group’s name are not unprecedented. Women are also critical to spreading extremist ideology, fundraising, and recruiting new members. Hyper-focus on the *muhajirat* as exceptional and uniquely vulnerable underestimates them as violent political actors.

Further, while this study does not answer the question of whether hostility towards Muslims directly encourages extremism, our data does highlight the strong perception among these recruits that their home countries are oppressive. Whether drawing from personal experiences of hostility or narratives of Western oppression circulating online, the *muhajirat* view Western society as hateful and dangerous. They perceive anti-Muslim expectations enforced by law, advertising, and social relations. They denounce anti-veiling policies and antagonistic social interactions. Regardless of whether this reflects broader Muslim experiences or the empirical realities of anti-Muslim discrimination, Western governments should take these concerns seriously. Daesh portrays itself as a community that values Muslims’ social and religious contributions. This imagery may resonate with women, and men, who feel targeted by state politics or oppressed by dominant cultures.

¹³⁸ Mahmood, ‘Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent’, p. 202.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁴⁰ Jessica Aughter, ‘Gendering terror’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 14:1 (2012), pp. 121–39.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴² Peresin and Cervone, ‘The Western muhajirat of ISIS’, p. 495.

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Supplementary material

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