

THE CARTER CENTER

The Women in Daesh:

Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda

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Executive Summary

Since its inception, Daesh has been successfully recruiting women across national and ideological lines to assume key positions in advancing the organization's objectives. According to recent estimates, out of 31,000 fighters within Daesh territories, almost one-fifth, roughly 6,200, are women.¹ Yet, to date, research and policy focus on women's involvement in Daesh has been scant. Several media accounts that have covered female participation tend to be alarmingly reductionist in their description of the roles women play in Daesh.² These reports primarily categorize women as either passive victims, "Jihadi brides," or subsidiary supporters of male guardians with negligible influence.³ This approach not only ignores the multiplicity of roles played by women to expand Daesh's ideological and operational agenda, but also oversimplifies the motivations behind their decisions to join Daesh. Just like their male counterparts, women are complex human beings with conflicting aspirations, ideological leanings, and life struggles that inform the choices they make. Viewing female recruits simply as a monolithic entity, defined solely by their association

¹ Sofia Patel, *The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017. <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/the-sultanate-of-women-exploring-female-roles-in-perpetrating-and-preventing-violent-extremism>

² See for example: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/10/london-girls-lost-isis-what-became-jihadi-brides> ; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-british-brides->

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with male relatives, offers little to understand how they are indoctrinated and recruited, the extent to which they are involved in the organization, and what can be done to prevent their radicalization.

This report presents an

lead to disproportionate effects of poverty and injustice on women and is proactively engaged in instituting relevant programs that defend them from potential harm and loss of dignity.

The Carter Center's field interviews further reveal how Daesh attempts to establish itself as the legitimate champion and protector of women.

An example is the story of a mother in Ceuta, Spain (on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar), whose son and daughter were recruited and migrated to Daesh territory in 2014-15⁹. The son was recruited first by a group of boys he met in a vocational program. He contacted his family only when he arrived in Turkey on his way to Syria.¹⁰ As he was effectively disowned by his family, Aisha, his sister, was not allowed to talk about him. But she refused to give up on her brother and would spend late nights in her room, on her phone, plying social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram for news of him. Aisha made contact with a boy who knew her brother and was also planning to go to Syria. They struck up a friendship, a love affair, and then a marriage—all online over social media. One interviewee reported that the young man sent Aisha a suicide belt as a wedding gift. They only met when Aisha arrived in Syria. She got pregnant and had a son, the first Spanish national to be born in Daesh territory. After her young husband died, she remained in contact with her mother, sending her pictures of her baby. The mother pleaded with Aisha to return to Spain, but she refused, replying instead, "You should make hijra here!" Aisha told her mother that she had independence and purpose in her life—Daesh provided her with a house, a stipend, and a way to be involved with the building of something of world-historical importance. Aisha felt empowered by her involvement in Daesh's so-called caliphate and had taken to advising other female migrants in Syria. Aisha's mother was heartbroken by the loss and was hounded by the Spanish police for information on her daughter and grandson.

This tragic story provides insight into how Daesh's multilayered recruitment propaganda harms the everyday lives of communities.

While security and prosperity are crucial factors in inspiring some women to migrate to Daesh, the opportunity to contribute in a struggle for a higher cause can be appealing to others. Many female recruits, from both Western and Muslim-majority countries, sympathize with and respond to the emotional appeals central to Daesh's narrative of the

and descriptions of atrocities that evoke feelings of anger, disgust, and vengeance, and further perpetuate the longstanding belief that Western “*kuffar*” (infidels) are at war against Islam. As one Daesh *mujahidah* (female fighter) reportedly posted on Twitter: “Two camps in the world, either with the camp of *iman* (belief) or camp of *kufir* (disbelief) no in between.”¹¹ Encountering such imagery invigorates an activist zeal within many women who feel that it is their moral duty to leave for the “*khilafah*” (caliphate) and participate, through any available avenues, in the global

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Media reports of women migrating to Daesh territory, combined with aggressive security approaches, have led to increased scrutiny of young women. For young women and girls detained on terrorism charges, the consequences are severe and extend well beyond legal repercussions. The media was granted access and shared images of minors arrested on charges related to terrorism before trial. Their identities were not protected. In cultures where female modesty is prized, such public exposure, even if the charges are dropped, can severely limit marriage prospects and educational opportunities. Countries in North Africa that have seen a high flow of foreign fighters to Syria have also seen police raids on all-female Daesh cells. Many interviewees expressed concerns over these raids and reported concern for the girls' physical safety

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