

# European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic

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**ICCT Background Note**

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The number of Western young women joining IS has increased in the last months. Most recently, three teenage girls from east London successfully travelled to Syria. They are now believed to reside in Raqqa. Who are these women, the so-called Jihadi brides, who want to join IS? And what drives them? What do we know of their role within IS? These are questions that need answering if we successfully want to tackle this new phenomenon. There is still much we do not know. In this Background Note, ICCT Research Fellows Prof. Dr. Edwin Bakker and Ms. Seran de Leede provide preliminary answers to these vital questions and explain what we know so far of these, often very young women.

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## Introduction

Since late 2012, Western countries have been confronted with the issue of a growing number of their citizens of Muslim origin, or converts to Islam, travelling to Syria to join the fight against the regime of Bashar al Assad. Most of them have joined jihadist groups such as Jabhat al Nusra, the al Qaeda affiliate, or Islamic State (IS).<sup>1</sup> According to various sources, including the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), the number of European foreign fighters<sup>2</sup> is estimated to have reached around 4,000 persons.<sup>3</sup> The majority of those are men, but since the declaration of the Caliphate by leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 29 June 2014, the number of women who have responded to the call of jihad has risen. The exact numbers of European women in Syria are difficult to determine. A recent article in *Dissent* magazine claims women from European countries, as well as from those in the United States, Canada, and Australia, amount to around ten percent of the total number of foreign fighters. The article claims that 70 women are believed to come from France and 60 from the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> The New York Times claims British women make up some twenty percent of the 550 Western women in IS-controlled territory.<sup>5</sup> According to The Soufan Group, the estimated number of women from EU member states joining the jihad is 18 percent of the total number of European foreign fighters.<sup>6</sup> The November 2014 report of the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) on the threat level in the Netherlands claims there are 30 known cases of women from the Netherlands in Syria.<sup>7</sup> Unofficial estimates, however, are closer to 40 women. The increasing number of women migrating to Syria, among them very young girls, adds to the concern of European Muslim communities and the authorities – concerns related to both their return and the possibility of them not returning. Women travelling in such numbers to a foreign conflict is a relatively new dimension to the phenomenon of foreign fighters. It raises a number of fundamental questions: Who are these women? Why do they go to Syria, and what is their particular role when in Syria?

In this background note, we will first provide a short historical background of the phenomenon of Western female foreign fighters. We will then move to the case of Syria and focus on what we know so far about women travelling there; who they are, what drives them, and what role they play once there. Based on previous research,<sup>8</sup> government reports, newspaper articles, and interviews with relatives of girls in Syria, this background note aims to distinguish key motivations and the specific roles for these women who have joined jihadist groups. The final part consists of concluding remarks and reflections for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Jihadist groups are defined as groups that engage in the violent jihad, the so-called “lesser jihad” or physical struggle against the alleged enemies of Islam.

<sup>2</sup> Foreign fighters are defined here as non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflicts. This definition is put forward by David Malet in his book *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.9.

<sup>3</sup> P.R. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s”, *ICSR, Department of War Studies*, King’s College London, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s>.

<sup>4</sup> R. Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy”, *Dissent*, 62, No. 1 (Winter 2015), 118-125, 118, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-women-choose-isis-islamic-militancy>.

<sup>5</sup> M.A. Weaver, “Her Majesty’s Jihadists”, *The New York Times*, 14 April 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/her-majestys-jihadists.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/her-majestys-jihadists.html?_r=2).

<sup>6</sup> R. Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *The Soufan Group*, New York (2014), 16, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland (DTN 37), 12 November 2014, <https://www.nctv.nl/onderwerpen/tb/dtn/actueeldreigingsniveau>.

<sup>8</sup> For instance C. Hoyle, A. Bradford, and R. Frenett, “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS”, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, findings of Dr. Katharine Brown from King’s College who contributed to the BBC documentary “Britain’s Jihadi Brides”, 8 April 2015, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05qq4c0>) and findings of Prof. Dr. Susanne Schröter from the Frankfurt Research Center on Global Islam (FFGI).

## Female Foreign Fighters in the Past

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is predominantly a male phenomenon. If we look at foreign fighters from Western countries, there have been only a few examples of women joining a fight in another country, at least until recently. Perhaps the only time when a substantial number of Western women moved in somewhat larger numbers to a foreign battlefield was during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Female communists and women from other left-wing groups joined the side of the Republicans in their struggle against the fascist nationalists under General Francisco Franco. They served mainly as nurses but were also valuable for the propaganda of the Republicans aimed to obtain more foreign support. A few of these women also actively participated in the fighting.<sup>9</sup>

On a much smaller scale, a number of Western women were involved in foreign conflicts during the 1960s and 1970s. The Dutch citizen Lidwina Janssen, for instance, travelled to Yemen in 1976 to be trained in a military camp of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), together with other young Western men and women.<sup>10</sup> In 2002, the Dutch Tanja Nijmeijer joined the ranks of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). She is now part of the FARC delegation involved in peace talks with the Colombian government.<sup>11</sup> Examples of women from Western countries who actively joined jihadist groups in the past include the Belgian convert Muriel Degauque, the American “Jihad Jane” and the British Samantha Louise Lewthwaite. Muriel Degauque carried out a suicide car bomb attack in Iraq in 2005. Jihad Jane, or Colleen Renee LaRose, converted to Islam in her late thirties, radicalised and became involved in recruiting others to wage violent jihad. She also plotted to murder Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist who had drawn a cartoon of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.<sup>12</sup> In 2014, she was convicted and sentenced to ten years for terrorism-related crimes.<sup>13</sup> Samantha Louise Lewthwaite, also known as Sherafiyah Lewthwaite or the “White Widow”, is the widow of one of the 7/7 London bombers. She is an alleged member of Al-Shabaab and accused of having been involved in a number of their attacks in Kenya.<sup>14</sup> She is also believed to have played a role in the Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi in 2013 and is currently wanted by the authorities in Kenya.<sup>15</sup>

There are also examples of jihadist groups that use female suicide bombers. Their numbers have increased considerably in the last decade.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the Chechen suicide squads, referred to as the Black Widows, have been held responsible for almost half of the suicide attacks in Russia between 2000 and 2005. Palestinian women carrying out suicide attacks are another example.<sup>17</sup> In 2005, the late leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi, introduced the use of female suicide bombers in Iraq as an al Qaeda strategy.<sup>18</sup>

Several publications have focused on women and terrorism in general and increasingly on women in jihadist movements specifically.<sup>19</sup> However, since the involvement of female *foreign* fighters on *this scale* is a new

<sup>9</sup> See for instance the case of Fanny Schoonheydt: Y. Scholten, *Fanny Schoonheydt. Een Nederlands meisje strijdt in de Spaanse Burgeroorlog* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> B.A. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen, tien militante vrouwen in het vizier* (Uitgeverij Boom: Amsterdam, 2012), p. 93-104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> J. Adams, “Jihad Jane and 7 others held in plot to kill Swedish cartoonist”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 March 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0310/Jihad-Jane-and-7-others-held-in-plot-to-kill-Swedish-cartoonist>.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 4 March 2010, <http://media.nbcphiladelphia.com/documents/JihadJane.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> BBC News, *Profile: Samantha Lewthwaite*, 24 September 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-24204517>.

<sup>15</sup> Interpol, *Wanted List*, 2013, <http://www.interpol.int/notice/search/wanted/2013-52018>.

<sup>16</sup> M. Bloom, *Bombshell, Women and Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> M. Bloom, *Bombshell*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>18</sup> L. Sjoberg, C.E. Gentry eds., *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, Athens Georgia, 2011, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> L. Vogel, L. Porter and M. Keibell, “The roles of women in contemporary political and revolutionary conflict: a thematic model”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37:1, pp. 91-114; L. Sjoberg, C.E. Gentry (Eds.), *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, Athens Georgia, 2011; M. Loadenthal, “Reproducing a culture of martyrdom, the role of Palestinian women in discourse constructions, transmission and legitimization”. In D. Cooper, C. Phelan eds. *Motherhood and War, International Perspectives*, pp. 181-206, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

phenomenon, the body of literature on this topic is very small. As a result, we still know little about these women, why they (want to) go to Syria, and what role they fulfil once there. Only recently, research has started to focus on this particular phenomenon that seems to be growing quite rapidly and begs for answers to these and other questions, with the view of preventing or managing this phenomenon.

## Foreign Women and the Fight in Syria

In 2013 and 2014 there was an increase in the number of women from European countries who went to Syria to become, in one way or another, involved in the insurgency against the Assad regime. Many of them are (very) young women who travelled either with their husbands (often as newlyweds), with other young girls, or even alone. Several counter-terrorism agencies have expressed concern over the role of women in relation to the foreign jihadist fighter phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> As stated earlier, it is difficult to estimate the number of European women currently in Syria. A recent study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) estimates there are now around 550 Western women in IS territory.<sup>21</sup> In addition to those women who joined jihadist groups, there is an unknown number of Western women who made their way to Syria to join Kurdish groups.<sup>22</sup> In the following, our focus is on those women who have joined jihadist groups. Who are these women? Why do they go to Syria, and what is their particular role?

### Box 1: Western women in IS-controlled areas

The following numbers are estimates based on different reports of different dates. The numbers refer to Western women residing in IS-controlled areas. Based on these reports we estimate that the number of Western women in IS-controlled areas is at least a few hundred.

Total number of Western women	550 <sup>23</sup>
German women	70 <sup>24</sup>
of which are German women under 25	28 <sup>25</sup>
of which are German schoolgirls	9 <sup>26</sup>
French women	63 <sup>27</sup> – 70 <sup>28</sup>
British women	60 <sup>29</sup>
of which are British schoolgirls	20 <sup>30</sup>
Dutch women	30 <sup>31</sup>
Austrian women	14 <sup>32</sup>

<sup>20</sup> NCTV Action programme 36, June 2014, <https://www.nctv.nl/onderwerpen-a-z/dtn.aspx>; Verfassungsschutzbericht 2013, Bundesministerium des Innern, 199, <http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/embed/vsbericht-2013.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford, R. Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western migrants to ISIS", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> A famous case is that of a young German woman fighting alongside Kurdish forces in Syria who was killed in March 2015 in clashes with Islamic State fighters. The German woman, Ivana Hoffmann, had joined female Kurdish fighting units, known as the YPJ. Reuters, German woman killed fighting Islamic State in Syria, 9 March 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/09/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-germany-idUSKBN0M516T20150309>.

<sup>23</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford, R. Frenett, 'Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS', *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015

<sup>24</sup> C. Hartmann, "70 women, including 9 schoolgirls, left Germany to join ISIS – report", *Reuters*, 29 March 2015. [70 women including 9 schoolgirls left Germany](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/29/70-women-including-9-schoolgirls-left-germany).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> H. Sherwood, S. Laville, K. Willsher, "Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join ISIS fighters", *The Guardian*, 29 September 2014. [Schoolgirl jihadis](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/schoolgirl-jihadis).

<sup>28</sup> R. Zakaria, 'Women and Islamic Militancy', *Dissent* 62, no. 1, (winter) 2015, pp. 118-125. [Dissent Magazine](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online-editions/women-and-islamic-militancy)

<sup>29</sup> S. Swinford, "20 British teenage girls have gone to Syria to join Isis", *The Telegraph*, 1 March 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland (DTN 37), 12 November 2014, [DTN 37](http://www.dtn.nl/37).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## Who are the women traveling to Syria?

Several factors complicate the collection of data on women who have travel(led) to Syria. On-going police investigations, privacy regulations, and hesitation of relatives to cooperate with researchers (out of fear of incriminating a loved one or themselves) influence the ability to gather data. In addition, many girls who are believed to be in Syria have reservations when it comes to talking to researchers or the media. Some of the women who are believed to reside in Syria are, however, highly active online. Their online posts on social media accounts such as Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr provide valuable insights into their world. Recent studies have taken these accounts as a starting point.<sup>33</sup> Additional insights on these women can be gained from interviews with people who were close to the women who travelled to Syria.<sup>34</sup> Media reports and research by think tanks, government agencies, scholars and police help to fill in the picture further. When data from these different sources are combined, the impressions that emerge of these girls' situations proves to be very mixed.

The predominant stereotype of a woman travelling to Syria is often that of either a naïve and docile victim, or a fanatic and dominant agitator. Research so far suggests, however, that there is not one particular profile of women who travel to Syria. While most of the girls are young, some as young as fifteen,<sup>35</sup> there are also mothers with young children who make the trip.<sup>36</sup> Some of the girls have difficulties in school and are said to have an IQ below average,<sup>37</sup> but there are also women who are highly educated.<sup>38</sup> It also appears that even though a relatively large portion of the girls had (or still have) a troubled childhood,<sup>39</sup> there are some who come from families with no known problems with the authorities.<sup>40</sup> Most of the girls come from religiously moderate Muslim families,<sup>41</sup> yet some converted to Islam at a later age.<sup>42</sup> While some of the young girls seem vulnerable and impressionable, others appear to be strong and hold deep convictions.

<sup>33</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford and R. Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015; Melanie Smith, Research Fellow at ICSR, tracks 30 women who travelled to Syria on social media. To the author's knowledge, Smith has not yet published her findings on her own research but she is often quoted, for instance in the NBC News article "Jihadi brides swap lives in the West for front line with Syria militants" by Cassandra Vinograd, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/jihadi-brides-swap-lives-west-front-line-syria-militants-n150491>.

<sup>34</sup> Including parents, friends, police officers and social workers.

<sup>35</sup> For instance the Dutch Moezdalifa el A. (15), the Austrian Sabina Selimovic (15) and Samra Kesinovic (16) and Salma and Zahra Halane, (twins) (16) from the United Kingdom.

<sup>36</sup> Two Dutch families from Utrecht travelled to Syria, according to a Dutch newspaper. J. Groen, "Twee moslimgezinnen naar Syrië vertrokken voor jihad", *De Volkskrant*, 5 September 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Interview carried out by the author with an anonymous source.

<sup>38</sup> The British twins Salma and Zahra Halane are claimed to be very smart in many reports. See for instance: "Twin Manchester schoolgirls who ran away to Syria 'have married ISIS fighters and mainly stay indoors and read the Qur'an unless their jihadi husbands take them out'", <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2703792/Twin-Manchester-schoolgirls-ran-away-Syria-married-ISIS-fighters-mainly-stay-indoors-read-Quran-unless-jihadi-husbands-out.html>.

<sup>39</sup> One under-aged girl currently under protection comes from a large family, has problems at school, has difficulty fitting in and finding her place in society. She has family members who have already successfully travelled to Syria and since she feels nothing keeps her here, she considers joining them; Another Dutch-Moroccan girl, aged sixteen, was stopped in Hungary before she reached Syria. According to her parents, she was out of control. They contacted youth protection who referred the parents to the Dutch Council of Child Protection, <http://www.bndestem.nl/regio/brabant/tilburgs-meisje-16-wilde-in-syri%C3%AB-trouwen-met-is-strijder-1.4622640>.

<sup>40</sup> "Aqsa Mahmood: how did Scot become jihadi bride in Syria?", *The Week*, 4 September 2014, <http://www.theweek.co.uk/people/islamic-state/60274/aqsa-mahmood-how-did-scot-become-jihadi-bride-in-syria#ixzz3Qb9Ooyrv>; A. Shubert, B. Naik, "From Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical' and ISIS bride", *CNN*, 5 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/>.

<sup>41</sup> A. Shubert and B. Naik, "From Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical' and ISIS bride", *CNN*, 5 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/>.

<sup>42</sup> A Dutch-Portuguese girl (19) who is allegedly in Syria also had problems at home. Neighbours say this typical, girl next door changed rapidly, from a girl wearing short skirts to one wearing the all-covering niqaab. See, for instance: B. Olmer and C. Ververs, "Syriëganger Angela B. uit Soesterberg zegt zielsgelukkig te zijn 'Hier word ik niet vreemd aangekeken'", *Telegraaf*. 12 September 2014, <http://m.telegraaf.nl/article/23071654/hier-word-ik-niet-vreemd-aangekeken>.

More generally, based on what the girls themselves reveal online, the majority of them are, or have become, followers of a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam. Most dress conservatively in black, wearing a full *nikaab* (face veil). They consider themselves devout and seem convinced they are on the right path. They only answer to Allah. It

**Box 2: Shukri F.**

In November 2014, the Somali-Dutch woman Shukri F., aged twenty, was charged with recruiting for violent jihad and sedition. This was not her first arrest, as she had been arrested in July 2013 for the same charges. In 2013, however, there was not enough evidence to make a case against her. Last November, the public prosecutor argued Shukri was responsible for persuading both her first and her second husband to travel to Syria to join the jihad. She was also charged with encouraging a young girl, a close friend of hers who was arrested at the Belgian airport Zaventem, to travel to Syria. Shukri denied all charges and claimed her online posts and her conversations with friends had been taken out of context. She claimed it was coincidental that both her husbands shared her belief in the importance of travelling to Syria. The District Court in The Hague sentenced her second husband to three years in prison.<sup>43</sup> She herself was acquitted on all counts.<sup>44</sup>

should be noted that not all girls residing in Syria are active online. Therefore, findings from internet surveys alone possibly do not represent the views of all girls. Based on the statements of the girls who are active online, however, it seems for many of these young women, the decision to travel to Syria and to join a jihadist group, was their own decision made after much consideration.<sup>45</sup> Such surveys, however, do not provide insight into how they came to this decision.

### Why do they go?

As is the case with men, the motivations of women to contribute to the struggle in Syria can vary from one person to another. Research so far suggests that the motivations of the young women do not necessarily differ from the motivations of the young men. In a study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), the researchers reviewed the social media accounts of twelve women who claim to reside in IS-controlled territory. The study shows these women cite the oppression of Muslims worldwide as one of the main motivations to join the jihad in Syria. In addition, the study shows that women, like men, see it as their ideological and religious duty to support the jihad.<sup>46</sup> From the online posts reviewed, it is clear the women strongly adhere to the idea of the afterlife. By supporting the jihad, their aim is to secure their place in *Jannah* (Paradise). Experts in the field further suggest that the appealing idea of a fresh start, sparked by feelings of not belonging or having failed, can influence both women's and men's decisions to join the jihad in Syria. In addition, the attraction of adventure and travelling to a foreign land can play a role for both genders.<sup>47</sup>

This is not to say, however, that there are no differences between the motivations of men and of women. Prof. Dr. Susanne Schröter, head of the Frankfurt Research Center on Global Islam (FFGI), points out that many researchers believe it is the hope of finding love or romance that brings many young women to Syria. Their online postings underscore this romanticised image of jihad. Men are ideologically represented as tough, courageous

<sup>43</sup> The Hague Court, *Uitspraak*, 2 December 2014,

<http://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2014:14652&keyword=syri%C3%AB>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> B. Stoter, "European women find appeal in Syrian jihad", *Al Monitor*, 6 June 2014; J. Groen, "Meer meisjes van plan op jihadreis te gaan naar Syrië", *De Volkskrant*, 3 July 2014; B. Olmer and C. Ververs, "Syriëganger Angela B. uit Soesterberg zegt zielsgelukkig te zijn 'Hier word ik niet vreemd aangekeken'", *Telegraaf*, 12 September 2014; Also, a survey on social media gives the impression that at least the majority of the women are not, or at least do not feel, coerced. See for instance: H. Khaleeli, "The British women married to jihad", *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/06/british-women-married-to-jihad-isis-syria>.

<sup>46</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford and R. Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, 10-14; this image is confirmed in an interview conducted by the author with an anonymous source.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

fighters and women as strong, modest, and honourable wives and mothers. Numerous online accounts show pictures of men riding horses while carrying the IS flag, good-looking men adoring their completely veiled women, pictures of beautiful sunsets, and of lions and lionesses.

Box 3: Moezdalifa el A.

Moezdalifa el A., a fifteen year old girl from Hilversum in the Netherlands, was stopped at Düsseldorf airport while on her way to Syria. Moezdalifa went to the *Gooise Praktijkschool*, a school emphasising practical education for children who have difficulty learning in conventional schools. There is a high level of personal counseling in schools like these. Despite this, the school authorities did not recognise signals that Moezdalifa was making plans to travel to Syria. They claimed the radicalisation process, as well as her preparations for travelling, took place outside the school. They did notice, however, Moezdalifa's change in clothing when she came to school with a *ghimaar* (Islamic garment that hides all body shapes but leaves the face uncovered).<sup>48</sup> According to an article in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, one of her friends said that Moezdalifa had contact with two Muslim women from Belgium who assured her that "in Syria, she could have a perfect life and get married".<sup>49</sup> The principal of her school said that Moezdalifa wanted to travel to Syria, marry there, and be a good Muslim.<sup>50</sup> The same report said that a friend claimed Moezdalifa was on the radar of several institutions. Her mother was apparently also worried, because she was hiding her daughter's passport. Nonetheless, Moezadlifa managed to get to Düsseldorf in Germany before being intercepted.<sup>51</sup>

Online messages such as, "In the Holy Land I found you my dearest mujahedeen" further. A social media survey carried out by Melanie Smith from King's College International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation confirms that for at least some women, the idea of being married to a heroic fighter who is willing to sacrifice himself for a greater cause, is an appealing one.<sup>52</sup> Being married to a fighter can also have another advantage, since as his wife, some of the perceived glory is expected to also reflect on her. Furthermore, if her partner dies a martyr's death, her status in the community is also thought to increase considerably, as are her

chances of entering *Jannah*.<sup>53</sup>

Women travelling to Syria, however, should not be dismissed simply as hopeless romantics. Schröter believes that "the women of IS may have partly been attracted by romantic ideas of finding a soul mate, but like the male jihadists, they also see themselves as part of a grand movement that will completely change the world".<sup>54</sup> The online postings reviewed in the ISD study support the idea that many of the young women want to contribute to building the new state. According to this report, the women claim they want to live by the laws of Allah, in a pure and Islamic state.<sup>55</sup> The women claim they will be treated with honour in the new, holy land they helped build.

<sup>48</sup> "Andere school voor 15-jarige Hilversumse", *RTVNH*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.rtvnh.nl/nieuws/146409/Andere+school+voor+15-jarige+Hilversumse>.

<sup>49</sup> M. Oostveen, "Moezdalifa (15) leek op weg naar Syrië", *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2014/juni/23/moezdalifa-15-leek-op-weg-naar-syrie-1391552>.

<sup>50</sup> H. Runhaar, "Hilversum's meisje geronseld voor Syrië", *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 28 June 2014, <http://www.gooieneemlander.nl/regionaal/gooivechtstreek/article27108468.ece/Hilversums-meisje-geronseld-voor-Syrie?lref=vptop>.

<sup>51</sup> M. Oostveen, "Moezdalifa (15) leek op weg naar Syrië", *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 June 2014, <http://www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/van/2014/juni/23/moezdalifa-15-leek-op-weg-naar-syrie-1391552>.

<sup>52</sup> Based on a social media survey carried out by Melanie Smith. See: H. Khaleeli, "The British women married to jihad", *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Malika el Aroud for instance, widow of martyr Abdessatar who helped carry out the attack on the leader of the Northern Alliance Massoud in Afghanistan two days before 9/11 commands great respect in her Islamist community. See: B.A. de Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen*, p. 19. It should also be remembered that as one of the supposed rewards for a martyr not only can he go straight to paradise but he can also on the day of judgment, intercede for up to 70 loved ones to ensure them a place in paradise as well.

<sup>54</sup> S. Schröter, "Between romance and Kalashnikovs - the women of 'Islamic State'", 11 February 2015, *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.de/between-romance-and-kalashnikovs-the-women-of-islamic-state/a-18250589>.

<sup>55</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford and R. Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, p. 12. This image is also confirmed in interviews by the author with an anonymous source.



The strong bond with the other “sisters” can be regarded as another motivation as to why some women are interested in travelling to Syria. Women post that giving up their family and friends is hard, but that the friendship they get in return makes every other friendship fade. Research points to the idea that for women seeking some form of sanctity or acceptance, this notion of sisterhood is another pull factor.<sup>56</sup>

The motivation of some of the girls to go to Syria at times reflects acts of rebellion, revolts against their immediate environment, their family and especially their parents. For some young women, turning to religion seems to be a way of stating their freedom of expression. They have the freedom and the right to adopt the hijab.<sup>57</sup> The idea of going to Syria not only fits the rhetoric of being a devout Muslim, but also – through marriage with a jihadist – can seemingly provide an opportunity to escape parental control and offer a (new) life of their own.<sup>58</sup>

#### Box 4: Aqsa Mahmood

Aqsa Mahmood is the daughter of Muzaffar Mahmood who moved from Pakistan to Glasgow in the 1970s. He and his wife bought a home in an affluent neighbourhood and had four children, who went to the prestigious private school Craigholme down the road. In a CNN interview Muzaffar said, “She was the best daughter you could have. We just don't know what happened to her. She loved school. She was very friendly. I have never shouted at her all my life, all my life”.<sup>59</sup> She enrolled at Glasgow Caledonian University to study diagnostic radiology. According to The Daily Mail, her friends from school said she was not very different and got on with everybody. She was a really confident, clever person.<sup>60</sup>

It was a great shock to the school and the family when in November 2013, Aqsa secretly travelled to IS territory. In correspondence with her family, Aqsa, now married to a jihadist fighter, stresses she wants to be in Syria and she wants to die a martyr's death.<sup>61</sup> Aqsa is very active on social media and seems to play an important role in convincing other women to support or join the fight in Syria. On Twitter she wrote: “Follow the examples of your brothers from Woolwich, Texas and Boston” and “If you cannot make it to the battlefield, then bring the battlefield to yourself”. On her Tumblr page she offers advice to women thinking of making the journey; what they need to pack and how to prepare.<sup>62</sup> Also on her blog (Umm Layth), she wrote “the family you get in exchange for leaving the ones behind are like the pearl in comparison to the shell you threw away into the foam of the sea, which is the *Ummah*. The reason for this is because your love for one another is purely for the sake of Allah”. (...) “Rejecting your family is a religious duty if they makes allies with the kuffar and reject jihad. (...) Blood ties are nothing compared to living a truly Islamic life”.<sup>63</sup> At least one of the trio of young British girls who left their London homes in February 2015 and are now thought to be with Islamic State in Syria appears to have been in touch with Mahmood on social media.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 13; this image is confirmed in an interview conducted by the author with an anonymous source.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance: N. Ezzerouli, “Zwijmelen over het kalifaat”, *De Volkskrant*, 5 October 2014.

<sup>58</sup> M. Ranstorp, “The Foreign Policy Essay: Scandinavian Foreign Fighters – Trends and Lessons”, *Lawfare*, *Hard National Security Choices*, 7 December 2014.

<sup>59</sup> A. Shubert and B Naik, “CNN exclusive: From Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical' and ISIS bride”, *CNN*, 5 September 2014, [http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/index.html?hpt=hp\\_c1](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/05/world/europe/isis-bride-glasgow-scotland/index.html?hpt=hp_c1).

<sup>60</sup> E. Glanfield, “You've betrayed us”, *The Daily Mail*, 3 September 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2742112/You-ve-betrayed-Parents-private-school-jihadist-emotional-appeal-stop-inciting-massacre-return-home-Syria.html>.

<sup>61</sup> A. Shubert, B Naik, “CNN exclusive: From Glasgow girl to 'bedroom radical' and ISIS bride”, *CNN*, 5 September 2014.

<sup>62</sup> H. Khaleeli, “The British women married to jihad”, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014.

<sup>63</sup> M. Petrou, “What's driving teen girls to jihad?”, *Macleans*, 7 March 2015, <http://www.macleans.ca/society/teen-girl-jihadists/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

## What is their role?

Contrary to what many photos of young women posing with or using firearms suggest, European Muslim girls going to Syria to assist the jihadist side do not actively take part in the fighting. While they often undergo some form of military training, they claim most of that serves the purpose of self-defence. One online article, posted by a “sister” entitled “Women’s role in jihad”, explains that the role of women is not one of actively fighting, unless absolutely necessary.<sup>65</sup> When women are called by the jihad leader to pick up arms, however, they should not hesitate to do so and should be prepared to answer the call.<sup>66</sup> The online article stresses that at the moment, the situation of the *Ummah* (community of Islamic people) is not considered desperate enough that women too have to be called to enter the fight. Women who want to join the jihad should express their support in other ways.<sup>67</sup>

This is not to say that women refrain from producing or disseminating violent images. On social media accounts from women who are believed to be in Syria, images of severed heads are re-tweeted, some with encouraging comments from the women themselves. One woman even posted saying she wanted to be the first woman to behead an infidel.<sup>68</sup> A former British medical student who now goes by the name of Mujahidah Bint Usama went particularly far. She posted a photo of herself in a nurse’s uniform holding up a severed head in her left hand.

Online footage of the *Zora Foundation* (IS media group) illustrates what is currently the expected role of women in the jihad in Syria.<sup>69</sup> Women should focus mainly on supporting the *mujahedeen* fighters.<sup>70</sup> They should have basic medical training so they can take care of wounded fighters. They should cook food that provides the fighters with enough energy to be persistent in battle, and they should learn how to sew and repair damaged clothes.<sup>71</sup> The online publication of the “sister” on the role of women in the jihad adds two more duties for female jihadists. First, raising children (both boys and girls) to be brave and courageous, fearing none other than Allah and hating none other than *kufars* (the non-believers). Their second obligation is encouraging others to join the jihad.<sup>72</sup> Especially the latter is becoming increasingly visible. The Scottish Aqsa Mahmood for instance (see box 3) appears to play an important role in providing online tips for other (young) women planning to travel to Syria.<sup>73</sup> Various sources (news articles, social media surveys, reports) suggest women can play a further role in mediating in marriages, in collecting money for the fighters and the fight, in spreading the ideology of militant Islam, in supporting the struggle online and in supporting the families of *mujahedeen*.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Women’s role in jihad, <https://archive.org/details/SistersRoleInJihad>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> L. Dearden, “James Foley beheading: ‘I want to be the first UK woman to kill a Westerner’, says British jihadist in Syria”, *The Independent*, 22 August 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/james-foley-beheading-i-want-to-be-the-first-uk-woman-to-kill-a-westerner-says-british-jihadist-in-syria-9684908.html>.

<sup>69</sup> The footage has been taken offline, but there are photos of the video on several news reports, for instance: H. Saul, “Isis now targeting women with guides on how to be the ‘ultimate wives of jihad’”, *The Independent*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-now-targeting-women-with-guides-on-how-to-be-the-ultimate-wives-of-jihad-9830562.html>.

<sup>70</sup> *Mujahedeen* fighters are defined as those engaged in the violent jihad.

<sup>71</sup> The footage has been taken offline, but there are photos of the video on several news reports for instance: H. Saul, “Isis now targeting women with guides on how to be the ‘ultimate wives of jihad’”, *The Independent*, 31 October 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Women’s role in jihad, <https://archive.org/details/SistersRoleInJihad>.

<sup>73</sup> SITE Staff, “Girl Talk, calling Western women to Syria”, *SITE*, 30 July 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/218-girl-talk-lives-of-western-women-who-have-migrated-to-syria>.

<sup>74</sup> C. Hoyle, A. Bradford and R. Frenett, “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS”, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015; R. Zakaria, “Women and Islamic militancy”, *Dissent*, vol. 62, number 1, winter 2015, 118-125, 119; K. Gibbons and J. Simpson, “Women shame British men into joining the jihad”, *The Times*, 4 November 2014, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4256910.ece>; H. Khaleeli, “The British women married to Jihad”, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/06/british-women-married-to-jihad-isis-syria>; interviews with anonymous sources by the authors; social media surveys see for instance: J. Elgot, “The Lives Of The British Jihadi Women Who Have Left To Fight With Islamic State”, *Huffington Post*, 2 September 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/09/02/the-british-jihadi-janes-who-have-left-to-fight-with-islamic-state\\_n\\_5752804.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/09/02/the-british-jihadi-janes-who-have-left-to-fight-with-islamic-state_n_5752804.html?utm_hp_ref=tw).

**Box 5: Nora el-Bathy**

Nora el-Bathy was an ordinary, fifteen year old schoolgirl who wanted to be a doctor. She was a practicing Muslim who had started to wear a hijab and had done so for a few months. In January 2014, she left her home in Avignon, southern France with her schoolbag. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But instead of going to school, she took the train to Paris, changed her mobile phone and boarded a flight to Istanbul. Back home, her parents, practicing but not conservative Muslims, reported her missing. Her brother Fouad searched her room for clues. He found that she had opened a second Facebook account on which she had said to make *hijra*. She also had a second phone which she had used to talk to “sisters”, according to Fouad. While Nora had been talking about wearing the full veil and of helping the wounded in Syria, particularly children, nobody in the family had imagined she was planning to run away. After her disappearance, Nora told her family she was happy and did not want to return to France. Fouad, however, claims he has seen her in Syria with al Nusra, watching the children of fighters. According to Fouad, Nora had told him she made the biggest mistake of her life. The el-Bathy family is currently taking legal action for what they consider their daughter’s kidnapping, believing Nora went to Syria of her own free will, but that she had been brainwashed by extremists.<sup>75</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Although the phenomenon of women joining the violent jihad in Syria is relatively new, and existing studies into this topic rare, we can provide some preliminary answers to the who, why, and what questions regarding European female jihadists.

Based on what we have been able to learn so far, it is clear that, like for men, there is not one single type of European female jihadist. In general, the majority of these women who left the UK, France, or The Netherlands do not fit the stereotype of the submissive, docile woman. Rather these girls – for most of them are very young – appear to act based on their own conviction. How they reached this conviction is a more difficult question to answer as this process is often complex and personal. The stories and cases that have surfaced so far are too diverse to allow any generalisation. However, existing research suggests that a fanatic religious dedication and strong beliefs have led some to their path to Syria. The same holds for another category of explanations, that of trouble at home and (other) personal problems. Further research is needed to reach more robust conclusions and identify specific categories of reasons for women leaving for Syria, and to identify various types of female jihadists. This is also important in gaining an understanding as to why some women in similar circumstances refrain from going.

The role of European women in Syria has so far been one behind the battlefield. However, this does not mean that their roles are less important. Women seem to play important roles in indirectly supporting the fight. This can contribute to the success and the appeal of jihadist groups. As mothers, these women can raise their children according to the militant Islamic ideology and also help maintain the “freedom fighter myth” through which insurgents are glorified as heroes.<sup>76</sup> As nurses, they can take care of the wounded fighters. As facilitators,

<sup>75</sup> H. Naili, “Teen Recruit to Al-Qaida Branch in Syria Wants Out”, *womensenews*, 25 September 2014; “Schoolgirl jihad: the female Islamists leaving home to join ISIS fighters”, *The Guardian*, 29 September 2014.

<sup>76</sup> M. Loadenthal, “Reproducing a Culture of Martyrdom: The Role of Palestinian Women in Discourse Constructions, Transmission and Legitimization”, *Motherhood and War: International Perspectives*, New York, 2014, pp. 181-206.

they can help raise money for the jihad and by spreading propaganda they can help convince others to join the fight. In these ways, women can play important, indirect roles in the jihad without actually picking up arms.

## Reflection

European society is today grappling with the question of how to stop the increasing flow of European female jihadists to Syria. Better insights into the who, why, and what questions might help to provide starting points for preventing or managing this phenomenon.

While the following reflections are not necessarily gender specific, they are most relevant for women. Problems at home or at school, or feelings of exclusion, seem to make young women vulnerable to the prospect of a new life in Syria as the wife of a *mujahedeen*. Initiatives that provide support for Muslim families and their relatives could help to deal with the issue of these potential jihadists at home and help create an understanding that making a drastic move to a life in Syria may not be as attractive as it is made out to be.

With regard to religious motivations, providing a religious counter-narrative (online, in print, and through dialogue within local communities and families) could be a possible tool in diverting young women from choosing the path of the violent jihad. A counter-narrative to the romanticised image of life under the Caliphate, revealing the ugly truth about war, could also help prevent young women from travelling to Syria. This requires directly countering the propaganda of European female jihadists who actively seek to recruit their “sisters” still back home.

A question that will become more relevant in the months and years to come is how to respond to those (women) who have become disillusioned in Syria and wish to return. They might find it difficult to reintegrate in the societies they left behind. Some might face prosecution for joining a terrorist organisation. Perhaps an even larger obstacle to reintegration, especially for women, will be the social consequences. Will they be accepted by their families, communities, and by society at large? To what extent will they disengage from jihadist scenes after returning from Syria? Authorities and communities together should provide ways and means to guide and reintegrate these women into society, learning from the still very few European examples of returnees.

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