

Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps

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Within the territorial boundaries of the Islamic State's (IS) 'caliphate', women were largely confined to the domestic sphere. Their roles centred on support to militant husbands and the ideological upbringing of children. The physical collapse of IS' proto-state marks a significant turning point in women's commitment and activism for the group. Many IS-affiliated women are now indefinitely detained within Kurdish-run camps in North-eastern Syria. The harsh living conditions therein have fostered ideological divides. While some show signs of disillusionment with IS' 'caliphate' dream, others have sought to re-impose its strictures. This paper contributes to the understanding of women's roles across the lifespan of the Islamic State, and the efficacy of independent female activism to facilitate the group's physical recovery. It argues that IS' post-territorial phase has brought greater autonomy and ideological authority to individual hard-line detainees. However, beyond the camps, women's influence and ability to realise IS' physical resurgence remains practically limited and dependent on male leadership.

Keywords:

Islamic State, al-Hol, Women, Gender, Propaganda, Children, Indoctrination

Introduction

The loss of Baghouz in March 2019 marked the long-awaited territorial collapse of Islamic State’s (IS, or ISIS) ‘caliphate’.¹ As a result, Kurdish forces in Syria captured thousands of its remaining fighters and supporters, with many occupying camps such as al-Hol.² Though once effective to initially detain and process IS-affiliated persons, the population of such camps now far exceeds maximum capacity. As of September 2019, al-Hol alone holds over 68,000 people, 94 percent of whom are women and children.³ As states struggle to reach conclusions or consensus on the long-term fate of detainees,⁴ enduring commitment to IS and its cause remains of critical concern.

IS recruited women on an unprecedented scale. Adult females represent up to 16 percent of foreign nationals who travelled to join the group in Iraq and Syria, together with unknown numbers of locals.⁵ Consistent with the peaks and troughs of IS control, the roles of women within its ranks have developed. This paper examines the evolution of female IS members’ ideological commitment, adopted roles, and independent activism. Shifting from the ‘caliphate’ to Kurdish-run camps in North-eastern Syria, developments in the status of its female members provide insight into how IS may navigate its post-territorial phase and potential recovery.

Inside the Caliphate: IS’ Ideals

At the peak of governance over its proto-state, IS sought to control all aspects of life within its territory. Ideologically justified through its strict interpretation of shari’a law, its influence in both the public and private spheres resulted in disproportionate regulation of women’s lives. At the centre of IS’ policies were a set of gendered norms and expectations—in particular, its vision of womanhood.

IS’ male mujāhidīn are often depicted as ‘lions’. Their virility is lauded as the key to their battlefield successes to overcome weaker and ideologically inferior enemies. Conversely—across IS’ public propaganda, internal documentation, and the testimonies of its supporters—is the image of an ideal woman as a symbol of purity, chastity, and modesty. Most prominently, this is manifested in a series of dress and behavioural codes designed to safeguard women’s honour and end “debauchery resulting from [women’s] grooming and overdressing”.⁶ In fact, billboards instructing women to wear the mandated *Shari’i* attire were among the first signs of IS’ territorial

¹ *Al-Jazeera*, “Hundreds of ISIL fighters surrender in Syria’s Baghouz: SDF,” 7 March, 2019. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/hundreds-isil-fighters-surrender-syria-baghouz-sdf-190306160315079.html>, accessed 11 September, 2019.

² Quentin Sommerville, “Islamic State: The women and children no-one wants,” *BBC News*, 12 April, 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47867673>, accessed 11 September, 2019.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), “North East Syria: Al Hol Camp Service Mapping Snapshot,” 29 September, 2019, p. 1. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA_Syria_Al%20Hol%20camp_Snapshot_as%20of%2029%20September%202019.pdf, accessed 3 October, 2019.

⁴ Brian Michael Jenkins, “Options for Dealing with Islamic State Foreign Fighters Currently Detained in Syria,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (May/June 2019), pp.11-23. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/options-dealing-islamic-state-foreign-fighters-currently-detained-syria/>, accessed 17 July, 2019.

⁵ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (July 2019), pp. 30-45. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/>, accessed 24 July, 2019.

⁶ Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shām, “City Charter – Mosul” [in Arabic], 12 June, 2014.

governance in 2013.⁷ With time, women's bodies were entirely erased. The stipulated dress code—issued by the group's 'Virtue and Vice Committee'—evolved from the niqāb to eventually incorporate long gloves, socks, and a thick, twin-layered covering over the entire face, including the eyes.⁸ Even women's voices were considered 'awra [intimate], and were to be lowered but not flirtatiously soft.⁹ As a result, women were prohibited from being in the company of unrelated men, and were largely absent from the group's propaganda.

Violations of IS' behavioural codes were met with punishments meted out by the group's morality policing brigades. Sentences ranged from lashing for inappropriate attire to death by stoning for adultery.¹⁰ Though extreme to external onlookers, for IS supporters—including women—such strict implementation of shari'a law contributed to the group's appeal and legitimacy.¹¹ Indeed, the social media accounts of some *muhājirāt* (foreign female travellers to IS) reveal that enforced modesty in the 'caliphate'—as opposed to experiences of discrimination and harassment in their countries of origin—contributed to their joining the group.¹² In January 2015, the al-Khansā' Brigade (one of IS' all-female policing units) published its manifesto—reiterating the ideological justifications for the group's policies. Its central argument was that foreign states had failed Muslim women. First, women were not free to wear the modest Islamic dress; thus, their honour was under constant threat outside of the 'caliphate'. Second, Western feminism and 'emasculated' men had forced women to earn a living through corrupt employment, thereby leaving the safety of the domestic sphere and suffering contact with unrelated men.¹³ Conversely, IS' vision of womanhood is centred on a model of hyperfemininity, manifested in "Heavenly [...] sedentariness, stillness and stability" that is protected and fulfilled in the private sphere.¹⁴

According to IS, women's rightful place is in the home. Public outings should be restricted to only necessary instances, as these constitute a distraction from women's domestic responsibilities.¹⁵ Rather than a restriction of freedom, IS framed this ruling as a positive return to women's fundamental roles as wife and mother. Practically, marriage and childbirth contribute to populating the proto-state. Yet, more importantly, women were entrusted with educating their children in the group's ideals and ideological tenets, thus raising IS' future leaders, fighters, and supporters. An IS pamphlet, entitled "Sister's Role in Jihad," advises mothers to read bedtime stories of fighters and martyrs; to encourage target practice through archery and play

⁷ IS, "Speak to the believing women as they lower their eyes, guard their opening and do not show their adornments except what has appeared from them" [in Arabic], Raqqa Province, 2013.

⁸ IS, "Statement of Imposition of the Niqab" [in Arabic], Raqqa Province, January 2014; IS, "Fatwa 40: What is the Ruling on Women Showing Their Eyes and Part of Their Face?" [in Arabic], Research and Fatwa-Issuing Department, 17 December, 2014.

⁹ IS, "Rulings on Muslim Women Going Out to the Market". *Al-Nabā'* Vol. 28, 26 April, 2016, p.14.

¹⁰ IS, "Reprimand Penalties for Various Offences" [in Arabic], Mosul, 2014; IS, "News: Hadd of Stoning - Wilāyat Ar-Raqqah - Ramadān 20", *Dabiq* Vol. 2, 27 July, 2014, p.36.

¹¹ Carolyn Hoyle and Alexandra Bradford, with Ross Frennett, *Becoming Mulan?: Female Western Migrants to ISIS* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), p.12. Available at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf, accessed 31 May, 2017.

¹² Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz, "Explaining Extremism: Western Women in Daesh," *European Journal of International Security* Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), pp. 62-63.

¹³ Charlie Winter, *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khansaa Brigade* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015), p.19. Available at: <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/women-of-the-islamic-state-a-manifesto-on-women-by-the-al-khansaa-brigade-2/>, accessed 16 September, 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ IS, "Abide in Your Homes", *Al-Nabā'* Vol. 50, 13 October, 2016, p.15

with toy guns; and to educate them in the correct targets for violence.¹⁶ Indeed, in the eleventh issue of *Dabiq*, the group's English-language e-magazine, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhājirah (reportedly a female author) penned an article entitled, "To Our Sisters: A Jihād Without Fighting".¹⁷ The author directly addressed the reader: "So have you understood, my Muslim sister, the enormity of the responsibility that you carry? [...] [T]he Ummah of ours [is] a body made of many parts, but the part that [...] is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother".¹⁸ Large images of young pre-pubescent boys dressed in IS military fatigues feature throughout the five-page article. Thus IS repeatedly emphasises that women play a vital role in the indoctrination and education of children as guardians of the group's future.

At the peak of its governance, IS instituted a strict sex-segregation policy throughout its territory. This required every woman to be accompanied at all times by a *mahram* (male guardian), in order to protect her from unwanted attention or contact with other men.¹⁹ However, this also presented opportunities for women's activism inside the 'caliphate'. Within IS' extensive bureaucratic infrastructure, women were required to adopt public-facing roles such as doctors, nurses, teachers, administrators, and even internal security officers. Furthermore, women enrolled within the female *hisbah* (religious police) brigades enjoyed exclusive privileges. They were trained to use weapons; were permitted to drive and earn a wage; and could patrol the streets without a *mahram*.²⁰ However, it is important to emphasise that despite these freedoms, the brigades functioned under a predominantly male leadership structure.²¹ In the context of a strictly sex-segregated society, all-female units provided unfettered access to a segment of the population that would otherwise remain off-limits. As such, although this may empower individuals who seek an outlet for activism beyond the domestic sphere, such roles remain of strategic benefit to IS at an organisational level.

The most significant—and contentious—development in women's activism for IS is their involvement in combat. Some researchers maintain that female combatants would physically and symbolically threaten IS' power system.²² Others acknowledge the possibility, but note that even in an officially declared stage of 'defensive jihad' women's militarisation remains rare and exceptional.²³ Throughout most of IS' 'caliphate' years, battlefield operations were a man's game. IS repeatedly refused female supporters' calls for engagement in *qitāl* (fighting), instead redirecting them

¹⁶ IS, "Sister's Role in Jihad", 2014, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ IS, "To Our Sisters: A Jihād Without Fighting", *Dabiq* Vol. 11, 9 September, 2015, pp. 40-45.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44.

¹⁹ IS, "Fatwa 45: Women's Travel" [in Arabic], 17 December, 2014.

²⁰ Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, "Escaped Isis Wives Describe Life in the All-female al-Khansa Brigade who Punish Women with 40 Lashes for Wearing Wrong Clothes," *The Independent*, 20 April, 2015. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/escaped-isis-wives-describe-life-in-the-all-female-al-khansa-brigade-who-punish-women-with-40-lashes-10190317.html>, accessed 16 September, 2019.

²¹ Asaad H. Almohammad and Anne Speckhard, *The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers* (Washington, DC: International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017), p. 10. Available at: <https://www.icsve.org/the-operational-ranks-and-roles-of-female-isis-operatives-from-assassins-and-morality-police-to-spies-and-suicide-bombers/>, accessed 16 September, 2019.

²² Anita Perešin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 7 (2015), pp. 1-15; Simon Cottee and Mia Bloom, "The Myth of the ISIS Female Suicide Bomber," *The Atlantic*, 8 September 2017. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/isis-female-suicide-bomber/539172/>, accessed 7 October 2019.

²³ Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2014), pp. 780-802.

to auxiliary roles.²⁴ However, some analysts have observed that, when faced with territorial losses and imminent military defeat, IS was forced to concede this critical policy on which it once stood firm.²⁵ The most salient turning point came in October 2017, when IS openly called for women to participate in jihad.²⁶ Debates ensue as to whether this represents a dawning of gender equity and female empowerment within IS or purely responded to tactical necessity.²⁷ Though granted the ‘right to fight’, its justification was framed in highly gendered terms. In the group’s first official video evidence in February 2018, a female combatant was described as a ‘chaste *mujāhid* woman journeying to her lord with the garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for her religion and for the honour of her sisters’.²⁸ Women’s participation in violence is thus legitimised through the defence of their collective honour, and also serves to shame men into action.

Despite on-going debate surrounding IS’ reasoning for female combat, what is certain is that it represented a significant shift in the visualisation of IS women. The aforementioned propaganda video was the first explicit depiction of women’s activism, providing detailed voice-over to accompany slow-motion footage. This shift in women’s roles was a bold statement that IS did not brush over quickly. Instead, it presented solid evidence of women’s battlefield experience and weapons training. This was further reinforced in videos that emerged from Baghouz, where women were clearly seen fighting alongside men to defend IS’ last enclave.²⁹ Irrespective of their defeat, IS successfully communicated the physical and ideological threat that captured female fighters now pose.

Conquering the Camps: Women’s Continued Activism

IS’ loss of territory presents a further potential turning point in women’s roles. As women and children constitute the majority of residents in Kurdish-run camps in Syria, power has shifted from IS’ predominantly male leadership. Although the group continues to release propaganda through its online channels, segregated detention has provided IS-affiliated women with greater autonomy to initiate their own forms of activism. Developments in women’s attitudes and actions for IS provide insight into the viability of the group’s resurgence in a post-territorial context.

²⁴ IS, ‘O Women, Give Charity’, *Al-Nabā’* Vol. 45, 30 August, 2016, p.14; IS, ‘My Being is the Shield of the Mujahideen’. *Al-Nabā’* Vol. 83, 1 June, 2017, p.15.

²⁵ Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, ‘The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State,’ *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (August 2017), pp. 23-29. Available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/>, accessed 7 October 2019; Devorah Margolin, ‘The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups,’ George Washington University Program on Extremism, March 2019. Available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Changing%20Roles%20of%20Women%20in%20Violent%20Islamist%20Groups.pdf>, accessed 7 October 2019.

²⁶ IS, ‘The Duty of Women Waging Jihad Against the Enemies,’ *Al-Nabā’*, Vol. 100, 5 October 2017, p.11.

²⁷ Nelly Lahoud, *Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL’s Gendered Messaging* (New York: UN Women, 2018), pp.18-22. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Lahoud-Fin-Web-rev.pdf>, accessed 11 November, 2018; Charlie Winter, ‘ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention,’ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 13 September, 2018, unpaginated. Available at: <http://institute.global/insight/co-existence/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention>, accessed 19 November, 2018.

²⁸ IS, ‘Inside the Caliphate No. 7,’ Al-Hayat Media Centre, 7 February, 2018.

²⁹ Mutlu Civirolu, ‘In an alleged recent ISIS video a woman is fighting against SDF in #Baghouz In recent videos women and children are seen carrying gun in Baghouz,’ *Twitter*, 22 March, 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/mutludc/status/1108952105367158784>, accessed 16 September, 2019.

Moving from the Baghouz battlefields, camp life has largely reverted women's roles to the domestic sphere. Having lost its 'caliphate', IS is no longer ideologically or practically in a position to support female militarism. Thus, inside the camps, women's responsibilities have re-centred on caring for dependent minors. For older children, this includes education. By June 2019, UNICEF had established three learning centres within al-Hol, reaching 5,500 of the 23,000 resident school-age children.³⁰ Challenges include shortages of space, teachers, and resources, as well as students' multilingualism. However, some women explicitly refuse to send their children to these schools on account of their secular education.³¹ As previously encouraged in IS' centralised e-magazines and pamphlets,³² supportive women now work independently to raise the next generation of the group's adherents. Footage from al-Hol indicates continued ideological indoctrination of children led by female IS supporters. In July, a video showed a group of children—predominantly boys—gathered around a makeshift IS flag raised from a lamppost. Boys hold up their index fingers while shouting “*bāqiyya*” [remaining], from IS' slogan “remaining and expanding”.³³ In the foreground, a crowd of women cheered. Other reports from al-Hol have also observed young children playing with homemade toy guns or even designing IS paraphernalia.³⁴ Importantly, many of these children are too young to have attended IS' schools and training camps, the majority of which closed in 2017. 'Home-schooling' in IS' ideology is thus critical to instil the group's ideals in young minds, and mothers have proven to be effective messengers.

Irrespective of absent male leadership, pro-IS women within Kurdish-run camps continue to implement the group's strictures and have organically started to police other residents' dress and behaviour. Though a continuation in ideals and function of IS' al-Khansā' and Umm al-Rayān Brigades, their structural independence signals a shift in women's ideological entrepreneurship. Inappropriate dress or behaviour deemed “impious” is met with physical punishment. Offences include improper attire, renouncing support for IS, and engagement with aid-workers, lawyers, or journalists. Residents have reported that pro-IS women have brandished knives, thrown stones, and even burned down 128 tents in the first weeks of September 2019.³⁵ Most recently, one woman was killed and seven injured during clashes with camp security, as one detainee brandished a smuggled pistol. This skirmish was prompted by resistance to the “sentence” of lashings for women who refused to attend informal Qur'anic courses.³⁶ These acts are not confined to al-Hol. An Iraqi woman in nearby al-Roj camp was “barred from communicating with her neighbors after she removed

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³⁰ UNICEF, “UNICEF supports self-learning at Al-Hol camp”, 18 June, 2019. Available at:

<https://www.unicef.org/syria/stories/unicef-supports-self-learning-al-hol-camp>, accessed 18 September, 2019.

³¹ Azadeh Moaveni, “I’m Going to Be Honest, This Baby is Going to Die,” *The New York Times*, 5 September, 2019.

Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/opinion/isis-children.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytimes>, accessed 17 September, 2019.

³² Examples include IS, “Sister’s Role in Jihad”.

³³ Richard Hall, Isis Flag Raised at Syrian Camp Holding Jihadi Families, *The Independent*, 16 July, 2019. Available at:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-flag-children-families-terror-islamic-state-camp-a9006566.html>, accessed 18 September, 2019.

³⁴ Louisa Loveluck and Souad Mekhennet, “At a Sprawling Tent Camp in Syria, ISIS Women Impose a Brutal Rule,” *The Washington Post*, 3 September, 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-a-sprawling-tent-camp-in-syria-isis-women-impose-a-brutal-rule/2019/09/03/3fcd4d14-c4ea-11e9-8bf7-cde2d9e09055_story.html, accessed 18 September, 2019.

³⁵ Erin Cunningham, “True ISIS Believers Regroup Inside Refugee Camp, Terrorize the ‘Impious,’” *The Washington Post*, 19 April, 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/true-isis-believers-regroup-inside-refugee-camp-terrorize-the-impious/2019/04/19/a30d4986-556c-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6_story.html, accessed 18 September, 2019; UNOCHA, “North East Syria,” p. 2.

³⁶ Leila Molana-Allen, “Female Isil Supporter Killed in Row Over Makeshift Sharia Court in Syrian Camp,” *The Telegraph*, 30 September, 2019. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/30/female-isis-supporter-killed-row-makeshift-sharia-court-insyrian/>, accessed 3 October, 2019.

her veil”.³⁷ Within IS’ former territory, development of the female *ḥisbah* units allowed for continued policing and regulation of women’s behaviour without infringement on the group’s strict sex-segregation policy. Then, IS policed a version of womanhood—chaste, pure, and modestly [fully] covered—that was created by men. Now, within the camps, women’s organic activism demonstrates their internalisation of the group’s ideals, and continued implementation of IS’ policies without male directorship.

Multiple reports have identified the “*Baghūziāt*” (women liberated in IS’ final stand) to be the most militant and fearsome enforcers of IS’ strictures.³⁸ Although many civilians were swept up and even used as human shields throughout IS’ territorial decay, the group’s most hard-line supporters—men and women—stood firm until the final battle.³⁹ With male IS members detained elsewhere and contact almost entirely severed, a new post-territorial hierarchy is emerging. The longest-serving female members now act as enforcement officers of the group’s dress and conduct codes. This has created divides among the camp community. For some, liberation from IS’ caliphate has sadly failed to grant their freedom. For others, it is an opportunity to enforce shari’a law even within ‘infidel’ territory. In some cases, the pursuance of justice has escalated to brutal killings.⁴⁰ Mirroring IS’ principles and judicial practices, individuals who betray the group are deemed ‘apostates’—a crime punishable by death. Though the women have erected their own shari’a ‘court’ modelled on IS’ judicial system, supporters have criticised the validity of their actions, particularly recent executions. A post on Telegram explicitly chastised killings by “sisters [who] have taken the law into their own hands”.⁴¹ Though ideologically devout women continue to uphold IS’ ideals within the camps, their activism has begun to exceed the parameters of female roles and authority from the ‘caliphate’ era.

Although much of the camp violence is conducted under the cover of darkness, IS’ post-territorial phase has necessitated and enhanced women’s visual prominence. While women were largely excluded from propaganda produced by IS’ central media outlets, female supporters now initiate their own online campaigns. Launched in June 2019, a group of women claiming to be detained in al-Hol camp issued videos and letters in Arabic, German, and English under the title ‘Justice for Sisters’. Holding up cardboard signs reading “Free Prisoners. Your sisters in al-Hol”, the women criticise life under the ‘*kuffār*’ (infidels), noting shortages of water, food, and electricity, as well as poor sanitation and healthcare.⁴² Indeed, up to 240 preventable child deaths have been documented in al-Hol camp.⁴³ Importantly, inequalities between the *muhājirāt* and local Iraqis and Syrians were highlighted. Foreign IS female detainees are held in a segregated area known as the ‘Annexe’, which is fenced off and guarded. These women are considered a greater security threat, and thus face tighter

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³⁷ Loveluck and Mekhennet, “At a Sprawling Tent Camp”.

³⁸ Moaveni, “I’m Going to Be Honest”.

³⁹ Louise Pyne-Jones, “ISIS Using Women and Children as Human Shields in Final Syria Battles,” London: International Observatory for Human Rights, 4 February, 2019. Available at: <https://observatoryihr.org/news-item/isis-using-women-and-children-as-human-shields-in-final-syria-battles/>, accessed 18 September, 2019.

⁴⁰ Loveluck and Mekhennet, “At a Sprawling Tent Camp”.

⁴¹ Black imprisoned diamond, Telegram, 30 September, 2019.

⁴² Richard Hall, Isis Suspects in Syrian Camp Raise Thousands Through Online Crowdfunding Campaign, *The Independent*, 25 July, 2019. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-syria-camp-al-hol-paypal-telegram-online-crowdfunding-a9021006.html>, accessed 26 July, 2019.

⁴³ Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, prepared statement by the Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Human Rights Council, 1st sess., 2 July, 2019. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24773&LangID=E>, accessed 17 September, 2019.

restrictions within the camp. Foreigners are prohibited from using mobile phones or making purchases through the *Hawala* alternative money transfer system, and their access to markets for food and vital supplies is limited.⁴⁴

The campaign is not simply to raise awareness; it is a call to action. In one video a woman states: “We feel forgotten and abandoned by the *Ummah*. *Wallahi* one cannot really represent our situation in this small text. For months we have not received any help from our brothers”.⁴⁵ The women position themselves as victims of injustice, calling on their male ‘brothers’ to rescue them. This was reinforced by a recent audio message released by IS’ central al-Furqān Media outlet. In the 30-minute recording, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi chastises supporters’ negligence of Muslim sisters held in “prisons of humiliation run by Crusaders and their Shia followers”.⁴⁶ Though the women demonstrate agency in the creation and dissemination of the campaign, dependence on their male counterparts reinforces the physical and ideological default to male leadership. Linked to the videos are details of several Paypal MoneyPool accounts to receive donations, which have collectively raised more than €3,000.⁴⁷ Similar crowdfunding campaigns provide funds to free female detainees. Al-Qaeda supporters in Idlib even launched a “Free the Female Prisoners” campaign, and in July 2019 announced the successful escape of a fourth woman from al-Hol.⁴⁸ This coincided with the release of another video of women reportedly inside the camp, who stated, “You think you have us imprisoned in your rotten camp. But we are a ticking bomb”.⁴⁹ Although fully covered, these videos signal a further advance in the visualisation of IS-affiliated women, enabled by their command of both the cameras and campaigns. However, the women’s presentation is framed through a prominent victimhood narrative. Although more vocal, the female detainees remain in limbo. Their reliance upon—and deferment to—the group’s male leadership reinforces their physical and ideological inability to independently lead an IS resurgence.

Camps: Incubation or Incapacitation?

The conditions of the camps—much like the ‘caliphate’—are divisive. Those who left IS’ final enclave largely fall into two opposing groups. For some, military defeat has implanted doubts or disillusionment towards IS’ cause. For others, targeting and eradication of the ‘caliphate’ confirms IS’ message of a ‘war against Islam’. For foreign women in particular, governments’ policies of inaction or refusal of return has led to feelings of abandonment and further resentment. Facilitated repatriation has been slow to start and now piecemeal at best.⁵⁰ Some women have explicitly denounced their affiliation to IS, or even denied volition in their initial involvement with the group, in the hope of clearance to return to their countries of origin.⁵¹ The effects of

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects’ Families,” 23 July, 2019. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/syria-dire-conditions-isis-suspects-families>, accessed 18 September, 2019.

⁴⁵ Justice for Sisters, “#Message_from_noble_sisters_in_al_Hol_Camp,” 20 June, 2019.

⁴⁶ IS, “New Audio Message from the Islamic State’s Sheikh Abū Bakr al-Hussaynī al-Qurayshī al-Baghdādī: “And Say Upon Them, Act,” 16 September, 2019.

⁴⁷ Hall, “Isis Suspects”.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Loveluck and Mekhennet, “At a Sprawling Tent Camp”.

⁵⁰ Cook and Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II”.

⁵¹ Rukmini Callimachi and Catherine Porter, “2 American Wives of ISIS Militants Want to Return Home,” *The New York Times*, 19 February, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/19/us/islamic-state-american-women.html>, accessed 19 September, 2019.

indefinite detention by Kurdish authorities must therefore be analysed in this context. Dire living conditions and human rights violations at the hands of IS' enemies inhibits the rehabilitation of women who would otherwise be open to abandoning the cause.⁵² Despite their ideological disillusionment or even active opposition, their proximity to hard-line IS supporters and continued persecution in Kurdish detention may fuel grievances that frame the group as the only remaining positive, defensive force.⁵³

A recent report from the US Department of Defense concluded that the “residents of al Hol and other, smaller IDP camps [are] potentially susceptible to ISIS messaging, coercion, and enticement”.⁵⁴ Within this setting, the messengers are predominantly female. The unprecedented scale of IS' proto-state afforded women roles beyond the domestic sphere and satisfied individual quests for empowerment. Yet, within the camps, women enjoy greater visual presence and influence among fellow detainees and IS' virtual followers. With regard to pro-IS women's ideological commitment, the collapse of the physical caliphate has failed to deter hard-line supporters, and even presented opportunities for greater engagement in the cause. Evidenced by the above examples of pro-IS activism, ideologically devout female detainees exploit their surrounding conditions to reinforce commitment of sceptics and even sow new seeds of extremism in young minds. Although IS has lost territorial control, women are leading the charge to keep the 'caliphate' dream alive. However, there are practical limitations. Women's physical internment, coupled with highly gendered messaging, has reinforced the dependence on male leadership to facilitate IS' territorial resurgence. Although not the end of women's activism, leadership and physical conquest of the 'caliphate' remains dependent on male authority.

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⁵² The Soufan Group, “Open Letter from National Security Professionals to Western Governments: Unless We Act Now, the Islamic State Will Rise Again,” 11 September, 2019. Available at: <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FTF-Open-Letter.pdf>, accessed 18 September, 2019.

⁵³ Hassan Hassan, My Young Cousin Fled the Bombs ... Only to be Held in a Camp Alongside Isis Supporters, *The Guardian*, 14 September, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/14/my-young-cousin-fled-the-bombs--only-to-be-held-in-al-hawl-camp-alongside-isis-supporters?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other, accessed 17 September, 2019.

⁵⁴ US Department of Defense, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 6 August, 2019), p.20. Available at: https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/06/2002167167/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF, accessed 17 September, 2019.

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