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Cheering on the Jihad: An Exploration of Women's Participation in Online Pro-jihadist Networks

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**CHEERING ON THE JIHAD:
AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN
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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project overview

With the rise of the Islamic State (IS), a great deal of attention has recently been drawn to two issues that have come to be seen as intricately linked: the role of women within pro-jihadist networks (Lahoud 2014; Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015) and the use of social media as an indoctrination and recruitment tool by terrorist organizations (Weimann 2008; Bloom 2013; Klausen 2015). The present working paper is an attempt at improving our understanding of women's participation in online jihadist networks through examination of the nature and scope of their activities within pro-IS and pro-AQ Twitter networks. To explore that participation, we look at women's activities online through two different methodological lenses: a. by looking at gender in relation to female tweeting patterns; and b. by examining the content of women's posts within and across two distinct pro-jihadist networks, one associated with IS, and the other comprised of women from various al-Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated groups.

1.2 Main findings

Based on our analysis, it appears that Twitter does not empower AQ or IS women to take on significantly greater roles within pro-jihadist organizations. That said, the Internet, particularly Twitter and other forms of social media, does open up a new domain for women to engage in pro-jihad activities without having to (at least overtly) compromise proscribed gender roles. Further, the activities they engage in—primarily in the form of offering emotional and ideological support—helps to bolster the sense of terrorist groups as “communities of belonging”, which can be a motivating factor for some individuals to join IS or AQ-affiliated groups.



METHODOLOGY

2.1 Overview

This working paper is based on results derived from analysis of data generated from a larger program of research on women and participation in online radical milieus. The overall project, which began in January 2015 and was completed in January 2016, specifically examined women's participation on Twitter in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Can identifiable patterns of engagement by female posters be discerned based on content of posts?
2. Does the type of the jihadist group studied have any appreciable effect on female members' posting content?

To answer these questions, we developed two separate, but interrelated studies:

3. a qualitative study tracking and analyzing posting activities of 115 Twitter accounts disseminating pro-IS content, and;
4. a second qualitative study of 36 women posting within AQ-affiliated Twitter networks.

2.2 Data collection

Each study began with the process of identifying accounts to follow on Twitter. To locate appropriate accounts, we used snowball sampling, beginning with a popular pro-jihadist Twitter account followed by individuals within both IS and AQ-affiliated networks. We looked at potential accounts for inclusion, and then applied the following selection criteria: the account owner self-identified as female, posted principally in English and was a member of one or more networks associated with IS or AQ. Determinations as to gender were made through examining poster Twitter handles, pictures and avatars, as well as any biographical or other relevant details collected.

For the IS study, almost 100,000 posts were collected from a total of 115 Twitter accounts followed between January 2015 to January 2016. At the time the study concluded, 35 were still being

actively followed. The other accounts had variously left Twitter, blocked the researcher's account, or were lost when they were suspended by Twitter and could not be relocated. Three left the IS fold to join AQ-affiliated networks, and one pretended to disappear but was subsequently found to be running 97 pro-IS Twitter accounts when she was arrested by law enforcement (US v Yassin 2016). Over time, as accounts were suspended or deleted, new accounts were added to the list of those being "followed". As each woman was added, her Twitter account was captured in PDF using Adobe Acrobat and her tweets were collected on a daily basis using the software, Twitonomy. Further information about the account holder's online activities was also sought through searches of her twitter name and handle. These searches yielded women's blogs, YouTube channels and postings on ask.fm.

In contrast to IS networks, there were fewer women in AQ-affiliated networks and thus our sample size in the second qualitative study was commensurately lower. Tweets were collected from 36 women in Twitter networks associated with AQ and AQ-affiliated groups for the period of March 1, 2015 to August 31, 2015. Despite fewer posters being followed, the resulting dataset was comprised of over 14,000¹ posts. Profile pictures, biographies, and tweets were also collected from all Twitter accounts that were followed using Twitonomy software. As each account was added, their profile pictures, biographies, and group affiliations were recorded in a Word document and re-documented again at the end of the collection period.

2.3 Data coding and analysis

To code and analyze the Twitter data collected, thematic analysis was employed for both studies (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the first stage of coding, an inductive approach was used, resulting in a data set containing basic information regarding demographic factors (age, estimated location). To develop a set of thematic codes from the posts, we took copious notes on Twitter data coming through our respective feeds, and compared these notes later to readings of Twitter postings collected daily. As we were interested primarily in themes associated with posting patterns, as well as any roles women adopt within their respective networks, our notes were largely

¹ Groups affiliated to AQ included Jahbat al-Nursa (JN), al-Shabaab (AQ in Somalia), and al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).



focused on identifying patterns in these two areas. To help guide our coding, we also drew on the relevant research literature. Once each researcher had completed coding of her dataset, all coding was subsequently verified by research assistants in our lab. The final step, necessary to the creation of this report, was for both researchers to draft their findings and then compare the results in order to identify themes common to both groups.

2.4 Research limitations

The research presented here is not without limitations. In this section, we briefly identify some of these in hopes that future research will find ways to overcome them and advance the research agenda in this area.

We note there were limitations as a result of the methodological strategies employed and, particularly, in relation to inclusion criteria. In essence, there were a handful of Twitter posters included in both studies who did not overtly identify as supporters or members of AQ or IS. However, they belonged to an AQ or IS-affiliated network and communicated openly with other network members. However, as we have documented elsewhere (Huey and Kalyal 2015), there remains the possibility that some of the included accounts were “sock puppets” — that is, individuals (researchers, newspaper reporters, security intelligence) posing as network members. Without the ability to confirm identities, we are unable to say concretely that all accounts belonged to legitimate AQ or IS-affiliated members.

Moreover, the restriction of only following English-speaking accounts limits the scope of the study². In the initial collection period, there were many females who were AQ supporters who communicated in different languages (e.g., Arabic) but were unable to be included. The ability to collect and interpret postings in different languages may have produced a richer, or perhaps very different sample, including women who do act in critical roles such as recruiters and fundraisers or even as participants in terrorism planning or in forms of direct action. While it is the case that women within some Islamist-based groups, notably in Chechnya (Speckhard and Ahkmedova 2006; Bloom 2011), do take on more active roles within pro-jihadist groups, it is unlikely that very

² In a study by Magdy et al. (2015), the research team was able to interpret Arabic tweets, adding to the depth of their findings.

many women, if any, are permitted to do so within the IS or current iterations of AQ. However, we acknowledge that the possibility of such involvement always remains.

CAPTURING DETAIL: PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT

3.1 Overview

Research on women's participation within pro-jihadist networks suggests that, in keeping with radical Salafist views on gender roles and prohibitions against 'free mixing' between the sexes, they are relegated near-exclusively to secondary, supportive positions within their groups (Von Knop 2007; Lahoud 2014). Our research into both AQ and IS-affiliated women is intended to explore the extent to which this is also the case online and across both groups. This section thus draws on qualitative analyses conducted on data collected from female posters in both AQ and IS-affiliated networks. Our goal is to elucidate patterns of engagement that are either common or unique to women in each group. The forms of engagement observed are: "emotional support", "propaganda sharing", "educational tweeting", "fundraising", "recruitment" and "support for violence".

3.2 Emotional Support

The impact of social media on the ability of women to become involved with pro-jihadist causes cannot be understated. First, social media platforms provide an exponentially greater number of sites in which individuals can meet like-minded others in real time, individuals who they may otherwise have never encountered in real life because of distance and other issues. Within these sites, those sharing common interests and, in the instant case, common ideologies can link to other potential or actual sympathizers within a mutually reinforcing feedback loop (Fisher A. 2015). While that is the case, for the women studied, social media sites such as Twitter, also offer the opportunity to provide and receive emotional support from those with whom they share ideological bonds.

Tweets with supportive and/or emotional content is the most common type of tweet that AQ



women post. Emotional support comes in the form of tweets that request encouragement and *duas*³ for individuals within their social networks.

PHOTO 3.1



AQ-affiliated women also tweet support for AQ-affiliated fighters in Syria and elsewhere: “[RT] Don’t forget to make DUA for your brothers the Mujahideen. #Nusra #Shaam #Jihaad”. There is also a small portion of females who share supportive, emotional tweets and provide *duas* more broadly. Females in this category post tweets supporting Islam and Muslims, generally, with no specific references to any pro-jihadist organization: “I wish all my Muslim brothers and sisters were safe,” one poster tweeted, “May Allah protect Muslims everywhere.” Such tweets are in keeping with the belief in an *ummah*, or universal community of Muslim faithful, which forms not only one of the pillars of Muslim belief, but a version of which also plays a central role in AQ ideology (Quiggin 2009).

IS-affiliated women also provide emotional support to each other, as well as offering prayers and encouragement to others within their larger networks. The concept of *ummah* also plays a central role in shaping the content of women’s posts; however, a much more salient concept for

³ Prayers.

IS-affiliated women is *baqiya*—a view of the IS community as a form of “family”. Women within IS networks frequently referred to themselves and others within their network as a family, one that needed to stay closely bonded against threats from outsiders. A version of this theme can be observed in the illustration below, which was re-tweeted by several of the women followed.

PHOTO 3.2



Although the image is of two male fighters, the message is directed at both genders: when you are not in Islamic State territory (and presumably safe), you need the love and support of your IS family on social media.

The tweeted image above is hardly unique. One of the most frequently observed forms of support provided by IS women is in the form of tweets and retweets announcing that a suspended member has returned: “shout outs”. These shout outs allow returning members to quickly locate their former networks and reestablish their online following. A typical example of such



a post is: “The cats all been working hard to find him so you should follow! [name deleted]”. Also observed were expressions of sympathy and encouragement for network members who are experiencing difficult times: “I’m so sorry to hear this. Please know that you are both in my du’a. I’m here if there is anything I can do.” One also finds requests for personal prayers or other forms of emotional support: “Brothers and sisters I beg of each of you,” one woman posted, “to pls take a moment and make dua for the baby daughter of our sister who is en route to the ER”.

Like their AQ counterparts, IS-affiliated women also tweet general support for and/or solidarity with Muslims across the globe, particularly for those facing any type of persecution. Conversely, anyone perceived to be either an oppressor or supporting oppression is denounced. For example, several tweets in a similar vein to this post were collected throughout the spring of 2015: “Ridiculous! Myanmar Denies Heinous Acts on Thousands of Rohingya [sic] Muslims!” Interestingly, though, while public expressions of sympathy and support are offered to groups such as the Rohingya or the Palestinians without regard for ideological or other concerns, Western Muslims who do not share the same political, religious and other beliefs, are frequently derided as “coconuts”⁴ and made the butt of Twitter jokes.

3.3 Propaganda Sharing

Women’s involvement in pro-terrorist propaganda activities clearly pre-dates the Internet; however, what the Internet has done is provided a medium through which greater numbers of women can participate more easily in the creation and dissemination of propaganda (Rabasa and Benard 2014).

With respect to AQ-affiliated groups, women provide substantial ideological support through disseminating messages that glorify AQ and its adherents and/or denigrate its opponents. Such messages typically take the form of tweets and retweets of rallying phrases, endorsements, and positive or negative imagery (in pictures and video clips). Tweets and retweets devoted to positive propaganda included news of AQ victories, territorial gains and battle successes, as well as content promoting AQ’s tactics, objectives, and goals. For example, one Tweeter

⁴ Meaning “brown on the outside, white on the inside”.

offered the following statement: “Al-Qaeda poses in terms of strategy, ideology and doctrine a greater danger for the West than IS does”.

Tweets about the “enemy” also include a broad range of content, from news on mass civilian killings to questions about the other group’s legitimacy and level of devotion to Islam. Such tweets are constructed in ways intended to not only denigrate or ridicule opponents, but also provoke sympathy for AQ members. In relation to the West, the term “crusader” is frequently used to invoke images of early Western imperialism in the Middle East and rally supporters against Coalition forces in Syria. As an example, one tweet shared among AQ women was: “Crusader coalition Airstrikes target Jabhat Al Nusra headquarters in Reef Idlib killing a number of mujahideen including muhajireen.” Women within AQ groups also posted content taking strong exception to Western ways of living, with topics ranging from disagreements over democracy and gender and marriage norms to US foreign policy. Other frequent targets of negative AQ commentary and images include the Islamic State, Shia Muslims, and the Assad Regime in Syria. To illustrate, IS actions within Syria and Iraq are repeatedly criticized for being excessively violent and directed toward the wrong targets: “IS chose to fight Mujahideen! If only they’d focus on the real enemies! (1) If you want to fight terrorism & get rid of #ISIS, bring those mass killers to justice. #Syria”.

For the most part, although the targets of anti-opponent propaganda may vary, the content of AQ and IS-affiliated tweets shared by women differs surprisingly little. And, certainly, women in both groups post a significant amount of anti-Western propaganda, much of it centred around themes of anti-Muslim persecution. However, one thing that marks IS-affiliated women as different from their AQ counterparts is in their creation of forms of propaganda. Beyond offering ideologically laden commentary in their tweets, we were unable to document any specific examples of AQ women being directly involved in the production of propaganda—that is, developing or participating in blogs, videos, pictures, memes, and so on. In contrast, several of the IS-affiliated women followed created both written and pictorial content intended to be shared within and across their networks⁵. One notable example is the blogger, Shams (also known by the Twitter

⁵ To be clear: we are referring to self-made propaganda aimed at convincing followers of the benefits of life in IS-held territory. We are not referring to official, IS-sanctioned content. In support of this strategy, we note that a good portion of educational tweeting is centred



handle, Bird of Jannah), who has used both Twitter and Tumblr to disseminate highly idealized stories about her migration, marriage and subsequent life in IS-held territory. Other women, in Syria and northern Iraq, post photos purportedly showing themselves or others enjoying life under IS rule.

PHOTO 3.3



3.4 Educational tweeting

Highly defined gender roles within radical Salafist thought means that there are few opportunities for women to engage in active forms of jihad. Proscriptions on women's behaviour have been widely misinterpreted as indicating that women play little to no role within jihad, or that whatever roles they are permitted to assume are minor to the well-being of the group. However, as Von Knop (2007: 397), among others, has also observed, women do play important roles within jihadist organizations, albeit behind the scenes as "ideological supporters" and "operational facilitators", positions she sees as, in many respects, "more important for the maintenance

less on passing on tenets of IS or AQ ideology and more on



of the operational capabilities and the ideological motivation for a terrorist organization” than engaging in direct action. In discussing the creation and sharing of propaganda, we have already discussed one facet of women’s work as ideological supporters. In this section, we share our findings with respect to another element of this work: education⁶.

Previous research on the educative role played by pro-jihadist women has centred largely on the ways in which they pass ideological teachings to their children, thus inculcating pro-jihadist ideology within “future generations” (Von Knop 2007). What we observed through social media was women assuming a wider role as “educators” of the online masses. For example, AQ-affiliated women use Twitter to educate others on the AQ version of Islam by, among other activities, clarifying misinterpreted terms, discussing ideas, and disputing viewpoints with other online-pro-jihadists. Words that are commonly used to describe a “radical Islamist” or “pro-jihadist” from a Western standpoint are frequently contested, including “jihad”, “terrorist”, and “radicalism”. To illustrate, we include some of the Tweets collected from AQ-affiliated women:

“Waiting for the word ‘terrorism’ to be removed from our vocabulary, since it has already lost all meaning & definition through wrongful & overuse”

“[reply] ... ‘radicalization’ is a western construct designed to label Muslims as evil beings.”

“JIHAD is misunderstood by all those who have Maradh in their hearts. ALLAH protect us all, Aameen (1). Jihad is not about raising guns. Jihad is also about giving right education, spreading awareness and speaking against injustices. (2)”

The content of such tweets is not unique to women within AQ networks, we see very similar posts from IS women. In the following tweet, a woman attempts to educate another poster on when it is acceptable to pray for a non-believer: “If a kafir is alive you can make dua for guidance and what not BUT once the kafir dies it is not permissible to make dua for them.”

As has been noted elsewhere, Twitter is viewed as a metaphorical battlefield for many pro-jihadist groups (Amarasingam 2015). Women within both AQ and IS networks, see themselves as active combatants who are fighting jihad through their words and ideas, trying to preserve what

⁶ Although there can be significant overlap between the two activities—“propaganda” and “education”—we follow other authors (Von Knop 2007) by treating these as two separate categories for the purpose of this analysis.



they claim as “legitimate Islam” from apostasy. Part of their mission is therefore also to regulate the conduct of others—in particular, other women—through their online teachings as to how women should behave. “Dear Sisters,” one Tweet from an AQ poster advises, “Don’t Teach Your Daughter How To Dance, Teach Her How To Perform Salah. Don’t Teach Her To Sing, Teach Her How To Recite QURAN.” Within IS circles, women preach against lack of modesty, censoring others for showing their faces in pictures or extoling the virtues of the hijab. “[RT] Hijab is the definition of our modesty, the honour of our womanhood and the best protection for us. It is our choice, our r... [sic]”.

3.5 Fundraising

Sources have claimed that social media is widely used as a platform for fundraising by jihadist groups (Weimann 2014; Fisher A. 2015; Sanderson, Russakis and Barber 2015). While that may be the case with respect to males within pro-jihad circles, we observed few instances of overt fundraising by women within either sample. In relation to the AQ sample, over a six-month period, only four tweets were observed in which a poster urged others to offer financial support for one of the AQ-affiliated groups. The following tweets came from the same poster: “Support [mujahideen] by funding them, raising awareness on their plight, assisting their families and praying” and “Support Mujahideen of #AnsarUIFurqan with your Money.” Interestingly, none of the AQ tweets provided an active link with information on where to send the money.

Conversely, of the handful of fundraising themed tweets posted by IS-affiliated women, specific instructions on where to send money were provided, including to specific gofundme accounts and to charities with ties to terrorist organizations. Whereas the AQ posts were clearly exhortations to support fighters and their families, IS tweets were framed as helping widows and orphans.



3.6 Recruitment

Female involvement in recruiting individuals to terrorist groups is another activity that clearly pre-dates social media (Bloom 2011). That said, what the Internet, and particularly the rise of social media, has done is to facilitate access to a significantly vaster sea of potential recruits than was previously achievable through face-to-face interactions alone. It has also afforded some women increased opportunities to participate more directly in pro-jihadist activities through recruiting others to their cause (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015). However, as we explain shortly, the extent to which women engage in online recruitment remains fairly limited based on our observations.

In our study of AQ-affiliated women we found no evidence of direct involvement in recruitment activities. At most, we found tweets that were intended to encourage Muslim males to go to Syria and other destinations in order to engage in Jihad. The following is one illustrative example of such exhortations: “Dear sisters encourage your husbands to go for Jihad and remind him that you and his children will be in the preservation...” Thus, it would appear that AQ-affiliated females do not use Twitter for this purpose, at least not in any type of overt manner.

By way of contrast, women within pro-IS networks not only function as recruiters, but at least three of the women followed in our IS study were openly identified as key recruiters within multiple IS instructional manuals on migrating to Syria (Huey and Kalyal 2015). One likely reason why IS women play a greater role in recruitment than their AQ counterparts is that a central goal of the Islamic State is to recruit women to raise settler families within territory currently held by the IS in Syria and Iraq, thus firming its claim to actually be a “state” (Hoyle et al. 2015). For this reason, select women are permitted to operate as recruiters. While some of them operate overtly, such as the three women followed, there is reason to believe that other IS female recruiters are utilizing the Internet in much less obvious fashion. For example, police in various countries have investigated, arrested and/or charged several women with IS ties for recruiting others, directly and through the Internet (Wright 2014; Clancy 2015; Janyala 2015; ARA News 2015).



3.7 Support for violence

There is ample evidence of both historical and contemporary examples of women's engagement in violent terrorist activities (Bloom 2011; Gentry and Sjoberg 2011). This is no less the case with respect to women within pro-jihadist groups, some of whom have been involved in suicide bombings and hostage takings (Bloom 2011; Carter 2013). However, the strict gender norms within the forms of radical Salafist thought that animate AQ and IS ideology, have meant that women within AQ⁷ and IS-affiliated groups are generally proscribed from taking direct action. Indeed, in relation to engagement with violence, their prescribed duty is to function as what we have termed here as "cheerleaders", inciting male violence (Cook 2005; Poloni-Staudinger and Ortals 2013). This position is made manifestly clear in several tracts promoted within both AQ and IS camps, including in a work entitled *The Role of the Women in Fighting the Enemies*, accredited to a former AQ leader Al-Hafith Yusuf Bin Salih *Al-Uyayri*:

...we do not want you to enter the battleground because of the crudeness and the trials it contains, but instead we want you to follow the women of the Salaf *in their incitement to fight* and their preparation for it and their patience on this path and their longing to participate in it with everything in return for the Victory of Islam (al-Yayri undated; our emphasis).

On the question of what is the appropriate role for women to play in Jihad, females within both AQ and IS-affiliated networks evidenced a range of views, from fully embracing proscriptions against female involvement to citing Quranic and other texts in support of active participation. Among AQ women, several openly subscribed to the dominant ideological view that they should abstain from direct action, including various forms of violent engagement. For example, one of the more active posters in one of the AQ affiliated networks stated: "I wont do Jihad as I'm just a sister and its not fit for us women to do it." Similar views were echoed among a minority of IS-affiliated women. However, support for proscriptions against women's involvement in jihad and other forms of direct action was not, however, universal. As an example, a prolific poster in the AQ sample raised the spectre of dying violently in support of jihad when she queried: "Do I

⁷ In the case of AQ, we say "generally proscribed" as there have been instances where AQ-affiliated groups have used women as suicide bombers (see Stone and Pattillo 2011).

only die once in my life? So why not make its finale martyrdom?"

In keeping with the ideological stances of their respective groups, what was nearly universal was these women's open support for violence and, in some notable instances, their direct incitement of acts of violence. Among other notable examples, a woman within an AQ-affiliated group praised a recent beheading: "I must thank Usudu Sharqiyah for killing this guy, I hate him too. He beheaded a Jaish Islam member with blunt knife." Violence is not only something to be encouraged, but, echoing al-Yayri's views, something for which women should long. And, indeed, one AQ woman lamented her inability to participate in Jihad as a sniper for Jabhat al Nusra. "The only people I ever get mad jealous of.....Snipers 😏😏😏," she tweeted, "Jubba Dreams 🇸🇾 #JAN_Sniper_Team".

PHOTO 3.3



IS-affiliated women also supported violence in a multitude of ways, from retweeting violent images and posting tweets applauding various forms of violence enacted by IS fighters to threatening violence themselves. In relation to the latter, whenever propaganda videos were released depicting violent acts, IS women generated a lot of supportive commentary. For example, follow-



ing the release of a video, the content of which is self-evident from the title, one young woman posted of its climactic scene: “Allahu Akbar ! The ending of Strike Their Necks was amazing!” Support for violence was also seen in various forms of casual conversation among posters: “stab them [kuffars] eh 😊” was the content of one such Tweet. As has been documented elsewhere (Huey and Witmer 2016), sometimes the posts in support of violence were almost cartoonish, depicting extreme violence through the use of emoticons and emojis, as both the preceding and following examples illustrate: “WALLAHI THE FIGHTING HAS JUST BEGUN, DIE IN YOUR RAGE O’KUFIR. 🗡️🔪💣.” Joking expressions of support for violence were also observed in tweets by AQ women: “A bullet a day.. Keeps the kuffar away.”

Less frequently, we found examples of direct incitement of violence among IS-affiliated women. In these instances, the posts centred on motivating followers in the West to engage in acts of lone wolf terrorism. Two examples collected were retweets by one of the women recruiters of messages originating from her husband:

“Hunt the kuffar. Find them, trap them, slaughter them”

“If you can’t make hijrah, don’t sit at home and give up ... ignite a bomb, stab a kaffir or shoot a politician.”

In response to his publishing a picture of the Prophet Mohammed, Australian cartoonist Larry Pickering generated tweets and retweets shared by several women in this vein: “Australian Muslims must kill the Kafir Cartoonist Larry Pickering.” Consequently, Pickering was placed under police protection (Hatch 2015). Other identified examples of incitement were targeted towards inspiring, or alternately shaming, men into joining Jihad. “Killing the khawaarij is fard as Rasulullah (SAW),” one woman retweeted to a male in her network, “yet why are you sitting back home and writing big status...”



3.8 Other possibilities

Within the IS sample we did note a more diverse range of potential roles that women could fulfill, although these roles were not necessarily in accord with a more active voice online nor appeared to provide avenues for more direct forms of participation online or offline. Indeed, the roles observed—as migrants and mothers—simultaneously conform to gendered norms within IS ideology, while functioning to help the IS fulfil its state-building ambitions. To the latter end, women are encouraged to become migrants to IS territories, so they can marry IS fighters, become mothers and educators of the “next generation”, and help to populate sites conquered by the Islamic State to create the illusion that a legitimate and viable caliphate exists.

OBSERVATIONS

4.1 Overview of findings

While some recent scholarship (Peresin 2015) has suggested that social media empower females and provide opportunities for a rebalancing of gender roles within pro-jihadist groups, others have argued that social media do little more than reflect an extension of women’s inferior position (Bloom 2011). The findings reported here offer support for the latter position: our analysis reveals that women within and across pro-jihadist networks use social media to support network members both emotionally and ideologically, principally in the forms of applauding male violence; propaganda sharing; and educating others on the prescribed behaviour, dress, values, ideals and codes of their groups. With the exception of those few women observed who are permitted to participate in recruitment on behalf of IS, women within both groups remained largely absent from more direct forms of group support and action.

In the title of this paper, we have somewhat facetiously referred to women’s participation in AQ and IS-affiliated networks as being “cheerleaders for jihad”, and, as we noted above, our findings certainly bear this out. Although the primary function many of these women serve within their online communities is to provide emotional and ideological support for group members, the importance of these activities in relation to maintaining existing networks, should not be



underestimated. For example, through their propaganda sharing, their support for violence and their commitments to other members of their “AQ family”, women within AQ-affiliated groups help to promote AQ’s ideology, and may, directly and indirectly, encourage individuals to become new members, or sustain existing members who might be contemplating abandoning their commitment to the group. The same is true of the IS women observed. Emotional bonds between IS “*baqiya* family” members serve as conduits for the transmission of IS ideology, as well as acting to keep individuals committed to the “IS cause” (Amarasingam 2015). The willingness of many women within IS networks to openly cheer on acts of often incredible brutality also serves to normalize that violence in a way that not only binds members together, but can wield influence on potential recruits, who might otherwise find such acts abhorrent.

While perhaps not overtly a threat—in large part, because of the extent to which pro-jihadist groups circumscribe women’s online and offline activities—it remains the case that women’s presence on Twitter, and their active participation in distributing pro-jihadist content, helps to create and sustain “radicalizing milieus”, spaces within which individuals experience ideological and emotional solidarity, as well find support for violent thoughts and actions (Waldmann 2008; Conway 2012). Thus, their activities, indeed some might argue their very presence within these networks, clearly introduces a significant set of concerns for law enforcement and policy makers.



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