



Behind the Veils: The Forgotten Women of ISIS

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Women have been leading contributors to ISIS's strength and capabilities. Female operatives have held influential positions in the group's proto-state which have been crucial to the advancement of the group's cause.

The self-proclaimed caliphate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), poses the greatest terrorist threat to the international community today. ISIS's goal is relatively simple – establish a global caliphate. However, the group's state-building ambitions have faced recent setbacks due to counter-terrorism successes – the [group's territorial claims in Syria and Iraq](#) and foreign recruitment has declined substantially. Faced with the loss of its caliphate, ISIS has become more reliant on local populations to maintain its stronghold. As a result, many Syrian and Iraqi citizens are left vulnerable to ISIS's terror tactics, especially women and children.

ISIS' treatment of women has placed the organization among the world's worst perpetrators of gender-based violence. Their brutal tactics include: imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, and the execution of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi women. Such barbaric treatment is not reserved for non-Muslims; fellow Muslim women are abducted and exposed to horrendous sexual atrocities. Many women become sex slaves and are [sold in markets for a little as \\$13 USD](#). Despite their inhumanity towards so many women, ISIS successfully recruits a substantial number of marginalized Syrian and Iraqi females to the caliphate. In fact, ISIS depends on its population of local [female to obtain their state-building ambitions](#).

Incrementally, Syrian and Iraqi women have attained influential roles in the caliphate despite the inhumane treatment of women in the caliphate. ISIS

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utilizes the local women residents and their cultural expertise to advance its cause. Their responsibilities include caring for ISIS soldiers as wives, birthing the next generation of jihad fighters, and maintaining order within ISIS'S network of women. Despite their work, international media outlets and counter-terrorism reports have primarily focused on the participation of Western women in ISIS, thereby undermining the role of Syrian and Iraqi women. To gain better insight on Syrian and Iraqi women's role in ISIS, delving into the underlying motivations of these women can enable experts to assess and comprehend ISIS's seduction and lure.

Motivations of Local Women to Support ISIS

Image credit: David Dennis Photos

Women are motivated to support terrorist organizations for multiple reasons. It is important to realize that every woman is motivated for a different, or combination of, reasons. Therefore, it is challenging to determine the exact motivation of any one individual. ISIS's three year long terror campaign has spread fear and demonstrated its power to control the community. During an ISIS raid on Syrian and Iraqi towns, many households were permanently destroyed – the group harassed, tortured, and murdered individuals that were not compliant. Often, male family members are killed, leaving females to be easily targeted by ISIS. Many women joined the group in order to stay alive.

The absence of an effective government has allowed ISIS to exploit the local resources and infrastructures. As a result, ISIS is able to operate a quasi-state – developing an Islamic court, a functioning military, and a law enforcement force. Leveraging this advantage, the group controls the local public facilities

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and services including banks, transportation systems, post offices, grocery markets, etc. ISIS's ability to rule the land make joining the organization a viable solution for the deprived. Many women turn to support the caliphate for access to basic necessities, such as food, water, and shelter.

The Roles of Local Women in ISIS

A) Domestic Roles

According to ISIS's Manifesto for Women, a woman's **highest achievement** is being a dedicated wife, mother, and nurturer. Her primary functions are to take care of her husband and birth the next generation of jihadists that will continue ISIS's legacy. Women are expected to remain in the house, hidden and veiled, while they undertake chores such as **providing daily meals, cleaning uniforms, and keeping a spotless house**. Girls are expected to submit to marriage by sixteen or seventeen years old while they are youthful, pure, and attractive. In the caliphate, younger women are quickly married off to ISIS operatives. However, in true ISIS fashion, the group continues misuse outdated Quranic scriptures to its advantage by legalizing the marriage of nine-year-old girls by glorifying the life of Prophet Mohammed and his young wife. Young girls that are be subjected to this perverted act are locals under ISIS's rule.

B) State Building Roles

While ISIS is notorious for its hardline position on marriage and motherhood, the group's state-building ambitions permit certain women to undertake jobs outside of the home. Unprecedented in its scopes, ISIS is critical in explaining the importance of recruiting career professionals to help the group attain its objective of creating a jihadi proto-state. In fact, in 2014, an audio recording of

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi surfaced, urging scientists, preachers, judges, doctors, engineers, and scholars to join the caliphate. Currently, ISIS controls the public and private facilities, which provides them with access to unlimited resources, including existing employees. ISIS's need for skilled professionals is not limited to men; both genders are responsible for fulfilling their "civil duties". Nonetheless, regardless of a male's prior occupation, the majority are placed in ISIS's military, leaving women to handle the daily activities. Subsequently, there is a larger presence of women undertaking instrumental roles; there are growing numbers of female nurses, educators, and administrators from the area.

C) Operational roles

Women of ISIS are also able to participate in offensive combat operations and defensive military activities. In 2014, ISIS created Al Khansaa — an all-female brigade that predominately consisted of Syrian and Iraqi women. The female unit was reportedly formed to enforce ISIS's strict conception of Islamic morality. ISIS has imposed a dress code requiring all women to wear two gowns to conceal their body shape, black hand gloves, and dark layers of two face veils year-round. No makeup is allowed. To enforce the rules, the brigade patrols towns with AK-47s to ensure that women are compliant. However, the force responsibilities have drastically expanded, which demonstrates how influential women are in the terrorist group. The women perform a variation of activities, including recruiting, intelligence gathering, and overseeing prisoners. ISIS depends on the brigade to lure women; spy on the community and bring in individuals that voice unfavourable sentiment about the organization; and monitor detention camps where thousands of kidnapped Yazidi Christian and foreign hostages are imprisoned.

To date, one of the most influential women of ISIS has been a Syrian national, Umm Sayyaf. Before capture by the U.S. military, Sayyaf was a principal advisor to the caliphate leadership on all critical matters relating to women. Her elevated rank highlights how heavily the insurgency has come to rely on certain women to retain soldiers and run day-to-day operations. In her later interrogations by U.S. military personnel, she revealed information regarding the inner-workings of the network including recruitment, intelligence, and sex slavery. Umm Sayyaf also disclosed that the ISIS leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appointed her to supervise the American hostage [Kayla Mueller](#).

Conclusion

Although international news has reported that ISIS has recently faced some setbacks in their territorial claims and foreign recruitment, anticipating the immanent demise of ISIS is a stretch. The group will be maintained for years to come, as a result of its sophisticated network of Syrian and Iraqi women. The participation of local women exponentially raises the threat due to an increasing number of operatives, a unique tactical advantage, and additional technical expertise. Despite their impact, counter-terrorism studies tend to ignore the involvement of Syrian and Iraqi women and in doing so exclusively focus on the participation of foreign recruits. This omission leads to incomplete counterterrorism objectives and possible unbearable consequences.

ISIS has successfully recognized that empowered women are the foundation of a resilient and stable community. Female operatives will continue to participate at all levels, and the international community must not ignore such contributions. Failure to implement significant changes could lead to the regrowth of ISIS territorial claims and capabilities. By understanding the

motivations of, and the roles held by, local women in ISIS this article can help initiatives to counter the group.

Amanda N. Spencer currently works in the counter-terrorism and anti-financial crime division at Deutsche Bank Securities. She holds a master's degree in global affairs from New York University and is passionate about contributing to the world of counter-terrorism. Her research explores the multifaceted roles of women in violent extremism. Her most recent research study on the women of ISIS is [available](#) at the Journal of Strategic Security: *"The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of Women in the Islamic State."*

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