

Message from the Editor-in-Chief

New Directions (ND) is ICPVTR's annual publication, with special issues published on an ad hoc basis, that showcases new and alternative approaches to understanding and explaining violence, broadly conceived. Works selected for publication engage in a conceptual or a theoretical analysis of violence in a variety of different contextual and temporal settings. Typically, contributions are summarized versions of much longer projects (papers or dissertations) completed either under my direction or the direction of other

faculty in RSIS or elsewhere. Occasionally, however, contributions may represent proposals for future projects in which the author/s pose questions that have not typically been posed in explaining violence in the particular case under examination. The maximum contributions per issue are two.

Irm Haleem, PhD

Assistant Professor, RSIS, NTU

Manager (Research and Publications), ICPVTR

CONTENT

ISIS's and Secular Justifications for Violence:

The Sacred as a Justifying Tool 2
AIDA AROSOAIE

The Women of ISIS:

Gendered Roles and Agency within the Caliphate 6
SARA MAHMOOD

Biography 10

The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist research centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. ICPVTR conducts research and analysis, training and outreach programmes aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with field research, which is essential for a complete and

comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups. The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, counter-terrorism analysts and other research staff. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America as well as Islamic religious scholars. Please visit www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ for more information.

ISIS's and Secular Justifications for Violence:

The Sacred as a Justifying Tool

Aida Arosoaie

Following the establishment of the so-called Caliphate, global mainstream discourse portrayed ISIS as a terrorist organization that justifies violence in a uniquely Islamic manner. This paper joins the circle of academic studies which challenge this misconception and claims that, contrary to the common assumption, ISIS and Western secular governments justify violence against each other through the same logic, by resorting to the notion of the *sacred*. Manifested through forms and symbols, the *sacred* constitutes structures of meaning that inform social practices and draw to themselves social collectives based on emotional identification. The sacred has power relations intrinsic because it provides people with normative claims regarding social practices. ISIS appropriates the Islamic sacred forms of *ummah* (collective Islamic identity) and *Caliphate* (legitimate governing authority), and argues they define a Muslim at an existential level. Projecting the *ummah* as humiliated by Western hegemony, ISIS claims that all Muslims have been dishonored by Western supremacy and calls upon them to engage in violence and self-destruction in order to gain meaningfulness, honor and recognition. In the West, sacred forms such as reason, civility and humanity define the public sphere as the secular sacred space and popular sovereignty as the secular collective identity. Based on humanity as a double-standard notion, Western secular societies clearly demarcate their communities of humans from the Other, the sub-human, and justify violence against the latter based on self-defense. Essentially, ISIS and Western secular governments justify violence against each other by means of the same logic characteristic of human societies in general.

In contrast to the understanding of the sacred as religious, the notion here is approached based on its symbolic functions. Durkheim claimed that the *sacred* and the *profane*, the former's radical opposite, represent fundamental parts of the social collective's imagined reality which clearly differentiated what practices are possible, allowed, desired or unnecessary. Thus, he emphasized that,

the distinction between the two concepts is absolute, yet heterogeneous, and that people who identify with sacred forms are morally bound to each other and share "definite obligations of assistance".¹ As a revision of Durkheim's work, cultural sociology defines the sacred as a heterogeneous, historically contingent phenomenon experienced by its adherents as a non-contingent, absolute reality that is separated from mundane life.² According to Gordon Lynch, sacred forms and symbols endow social existence with a normative character, and they attract individuals by means of emotional identification, as well as moral sentiments.³ Lynch deems imperative to understand the specific experiences that certain sacred forms condone in particular historical contexts.

ISIS's notion of the 'sacred'

Defining the sacred in ISIS discourse

ISIS justifies its violence by drawing upon Islamic sacred forms, in particular, the concepts of the *Caliphate* and the *ummah*. For Muslims worldwide, the notion of the *Caliphate* designates a sacred space which, Eliade noted, has an existential meaning for the religious person.⁴ A sacred space entails the conceptual detachment of a territory from its surrounding cosmic environment and bestowing upon it a qualitative difference.⁵ The *ummah*, ISIS claims, can exist only within a *Caliphate*. Since the sacred designates the absolute, non-contingent reality of an individual, living in a sacred space equates to living in the objective reality, in contrast to the subjective reality of the profane.⁶ A good exemplification of ISIS's claim to the sacred space of the Caliphate is the flattening of the border between Syria and Iraq. This was carried out as a symbolic act meant to end the subjective neocolonial world order – the border was created as a result of the Sykes-Picot agreement which was forged by France and the UK at the end of World War I when both countries

¹ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965), p 192

² Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p 27

³ *Ibid*, p 29

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), p 22

⁵ *Ibid*, p 26

⁶ *Ibid*, p 28

carved up the Ottoman Caliphate into zones of influence under the disguise of “artificial, arbitrary and conflict-laden borders”.⁷ By taking down the border which symbolized subjective reality, ISIS installed in its place the Caliphate which was meant to represent an absolute, non-contingent reality.

Social identification with the sacred in ISIS discourse

The crux of ISIS’s rhetoric lies in the collective identification process with the ummah that the group calls for. The *ummah* symbolizes the collective identity of Muslims. This process, Irm Haleem explains, is based on the identification of people with the *ummah*, wherein the identity of the self becomes, by extension, the identity of the collective.⁸ This, she argues, further implies that “any reference to the self is also a reference to the collective, and any reference to the collective – as in broad references to ‘Islam’, ‘victory for Islam’ and the like – are references also to the individual.”⁹ This circular relation between the individual and the collective lies at the core of ISIS’s justifications for violence, as it succeeds in intermeshing individuals from different backgrounds into the same fight – against dishonour, humiliation and meaninglessness. An important characteristic of the *ummah*, which also plays a central role in the rhetoric of ISIS, is honor. By fighting for the honor of the *ummah*, the individual also fights for his self-interest. In contrast to rational choice theory, Fierke conceptualizes self-interest in the case of the individual acting for the ummah through the lens of social ontology. She explains that “self-interest arises from an entirely different grounding of the self, in a social world of others in which welfare of the self cannot be separated from that of the community as a whole.”¹⁰ This constructed circularity also allows the individual to justify his own humiliation and dishonor in society through the lens of the *ummah*.

The notion of the sacred justifying ISIS’s cosmic violence

By constructing its rhetoric around the sacred, all of ISIS’s violent acts are framed into a cosmic war narrative. As the group claimed “there is no grayzone in this crusade against the Islamic State”¹¹, the enemy is satanized, because “it rejects one’s moral or spiritual position”, “holds the power to annihilate one’s community, culture, and oneself”, “its victory would be unthinkable” and “there seems no way to defeat the enemy in human terms”.¹² This makes the enemy a cosmic evil force that is, in essence, faceless. This explains, according to Juergensmeyer, “why so many terrorist acts have targeted ordinary people – individuals whom most observers would regard as innocent victims”.¹³ Another important takeaway from the conceptualization of a cosmic warfare is that its imaginary contains the “victorious triumph” which is a “grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations”.¹⁴ The claim to be a part of a revelatory and new-world-order-project provides ISIS’s adherents with a sense of dignity, greatness and glory.

Regarding the justifications for the act of so-called suicide bombing, Haleem provides a two-fold explanation which emerges as an extension of the circular collective and individual identification with the *ummah*.¹⁵ Haleem adapts the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in the context of Islamist extremism to show how self-destruction is, on the one hand, a means of negating the master and, on the other hand, a self-transcendent victory. According to her, “the logic of negating the masters through an act of self-destruction has two components: killing the self (the Hegelian slave); and killing the other (the Gilgameshian master).”¹⁶ The first dimension, she argues, comes as a consequence of the master-slave dialectic, whereby “there can be no master without a slave”¹⁷ and wherein “death (self-destruction)” is linked with “freedom (which is ‘recognition’ in the Hegelian sense)”.¹⁸ The second

⁷ K. M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) pp 199-200

⁸ Irm Haleem, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism: Recognition through Violence, Freedom through Death*, (New York: Routledge, 2012) p 25

⁹ *Ibid*, p 26

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 59

¹¹ Islamic State, “Reflections on the Final Crusade”, *Dabiq*, Issue 7, Raqqa, 12/02/2015.

¹² Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p 186

¹³ *Ibid*, p 178

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 158

¹⁵ Irm Haleem, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism*, p 74

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 75

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 75

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 79

dimension is related to the “killing of the other” whereby the radical Islamist exploits the “master’s vulnerability in such a way so as to equalize the power differentials between the self and the master”.¹⁹ In the official recounting of the Paris attacks in November 2015, ISIS claimed that “the eight knights [here referring to the eight ISIS members who detonated themselves] brought Paris down on its knees, after years of French conceit in the face of Islam”.²⁰ Here, all three of Haleem’s conceptualizations can be seen as valid.

Western secular notion of the ‘sacred’

Defining the sacred in Western secular discourse

Unlike secularism and secularization, which are political projects, the secular as espoused by Talal Asad has larger ramifications by directing all social, political and economic actions in the modern world. In fact, the secular lies at the basis of modernity itself, an idea also delineated by Timothy Fitzgerald and Charles Taylor. For Asad, the secular is an “epistemic category” which developed across time as a result of certain practices, ideas and emotions and which is neither a continuation of religion nor a marker of its end.²¹ Using the genealogical method, he works his way back through the Western European history and the colonial encounter in order to understand how the secular was constructed, enacted and stripped of its historical circumstances.²² The essentialization of meaning which emerged in the aftermath of specific historical events marked the sacred forms and symbols of the secular. The Renaissance provided the doctrine of humanism and the model of the “universal man” as inspired by ancient Greek thinking²³, and the Enlightenment brought about the essential guidelines of modernity²⁴ – reason, progress and nature.²⁵ Similarly, the notion of civility and the

ancestor of today’s concept of civilization, expanded into politeness in the eighteenth century, to this day, remains one of the main characteristics of western societies.²⁶ This is also visible in the anti-ISIS rhetoric: “Paris shows us: The response to barbarism cannot be more barbarism. It must be civilization.”²⁷

Most importantly, the Reformation process transformed religion into faith as a matter of direct relationship between the individual and God. This eventually led to the individual becoming a sacred person, whereby the ultimate truth was represented by his subjectivity,²⁸ thus triggering the process of the democratic subjectification.²⁹ Simultaneously, the Reformation initiated the discursive process which created today’s concept of religion as an interior and individual experience of faith.³⁰ The essentialization of religion is, I believe, one of the most important conceptualizations of modernity itself, for it helped create the secular sacred space: the public sphere.³¹ Taylor conceived the public sphere in metaphorical terms as the place where members of the society are meant to come together to form the common, rational mind to guide the government.³² For Taylor, modernity is secular not because religion is absent, but because religion comes to occupy a different space that perfectly complements the public sphere where all social action takes place.³³ It is in this context that ISIS appears to shake the conceptual foundation of the secular by espousing a version of religion which supersedes the realm of spirituality and piety. It is on these terms that Obama made the following comment regarding the shootings commanded by the ISIS in San Bernardino, USA, in December 2015: “ISIL [another term used for ISIS] does not speak for Islam. They are thugs and killers. Part of a cult of death.”³⁴

¹⁹ Irm Haleem, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism*, p 81

²⁰ Islamic State, “And as for the Blessing of your Lord then Mention IT”, *Dabiq*, Issue 12, Raqqa, 18/11/2015

²¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) pp. 16, 25

²² *Ibid*, p 25

²³ Talal Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism”, *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2, 2015, p 392

²⁴ Paul Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p 175, 520

²⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p 192

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) p 33

²⁷ Stephen Marche, “Why Parisian Humanity Will Outlast ISIS’ Brutality”, *Esquire*, 2015, <http://www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a39724/paris-terror-attacks-civilization/>

²⁸ Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World - from Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p 22

²⁹ Roger Friedland, “The Constitution of Religious Political Violence: Institution, Culture, and Power”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ronald N. Jacobs and Philip Smith, 1st ed. (New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 440

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 441

³¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p 28

³² Charles Taylor Charles, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p 99

³³ *Ibid*, p 194

³⁴ Z. Beauchamp, “Full text: ‘Obama’s Oval Office address on San Bernardino and ISIS’ ”, *Vox World*, Washington DC, USA, 06/12/2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/12/6/9857270/obama-speech-address-transcript-san-bernardino-isis>

Social identification with the sacred in Western secular discourse

For Western secular societies, the collective identity is associated with the collective agency that emerges from the public sphere. Taylor dismissed the idea that the modern social order is represented by the ascent of individualism to the detriment of community.³⁵ To him, the new sociality of modernity is informed by “the society of mutual benefit, whose functional differentiations are ultimately contingent and whose members are fundamentally equal”.³⁶ According to Taylor, this new type of sociality takes two mutually constitutive forms – the public sphere and the popular sovereignty.³⁷ The public sphere and popular sovereignty are constituted by rational, free and equal individuals. By virtue of their traits, these individuals act together as the collective agency which informs political power. Because the social identification process with the popular sovereignty is also a circular process, individuals not only transfer their traits to the collective identity, but they also individually identify with the attributes of the collective. Charles Taylor named the individual identity informed by the secular collective as the buffered self. This modern, buffered self is characterized as liberated from and invulnerable to the fears associated with “demons, spirits and magic forces,”³⁸ and capable of exercising autonomy over one’s life and providing oneself with self-control and a sense of purpose in life.³⁹ According to Taylor, the negative side to this sense of self represents the ‘exclusive humanism’ that the absolute anchoring of the self in the secular, profane world helped create. This desensitizes the individual to anything beyond the rational world.⁴⁰

A good example of the social repercussions of “exclusive humanism” is colonialism and its foundational “us”-“them” binary. As such, the category of “us” included people who had the right to judge, order and improvise, while the category of “them” included people who, based on differentiations such as religion, gender and race, were perceived as obliged to submit.⁴¹ In this case, as in anti-ISIS rhetoric, one social community was

“us”- the sacred humans who were characterized by humanity, and the other social community was “them” - the profane sub-humans who were either un-enlightened or barbaric.

Humanity as a double-standard concept

Due to the difference intrinsic to the concept of being human, humanity provided the point of reference for determining who could be treated inhumanely by virtue of being sub-human.⁴² Similarly to the case of ISIS, the enemy – the sub-humans – is satanized based on its projection as the opposite of “one’s moral and spiritual position”⁴³ and an existential threat. This argument was central in the war on terror when Al-Qaeda members were associated with the profane and portrayed as “bitter and frustrated, marginal, weak and cowardly human beings”; “they were monsters, not men, and their actions had no principled rationale”.⁴⁴ It remains so in the case of ISIS, as the group is often associated with fascism and an existential threat to the whole of the secular world.⁴⁵

Implications

The failure to understand ISIS as a social phenomenon, as opposed to a black swan problem, will perpetuate the alienating environment and rhetoric that created this imagined Other. Noam Chomsky noticed that most ISIS recruits from France came from oppressed neighborhoods where the low living standards inflicted them with a sense of humiliation and degradation that left them hopeless.⁴⁶ As such, in order to curtail its success, it is important to acknowledge the social circumstances which amounted to the ISIS phenomenon and the way secular standards contributed to its legitimation. Moreover, another implication of this study represents the imperative to find appropriate solutions to counter ISIS and its affiliates. As shown, the use of drones, airpower,

³⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, p 17 -18

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) p 181

³⁸ Ibid, p 135

³⁹ Ibid, pp 38-39

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 302

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, p 186

⁴⁴ Jeffrey C Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge, USA: Polity Press, 2011) p 181

⁴⁵ A. Sparrow, & F. Perraudin, “10 of the best speeches from the Syria airstrikes debate”, *The Guardian*, London, UK, 02/12/2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/syria-airstrikes-debate-best-commons-speeches>

⁴⁶ Melissa Parker, “Noam Chomsky Interview: ‘Enormous Sense of Hopelessness and Anger’”, *Smashing Interviews Magazine*, 20/01/2016, <http://smashinginterviews.com/interviews/newsmakers/noam-chomsky-interview-enormous-sense-of-hopelessness-and-anger-reflected-in-appeal-of-trump-and-sanders>

military intervention and occupation have been demonstrated to have been the very catalysts of ISIS's appeal to youth and disaffected Muslims worldwide. These policies seem to perpetuate the spiral of violence. Finally, there is a need to find inclusive approaches to hybrid identities and to reconsider sacred forms whose ambivalence and consequentialist dimensions have created more harm than good.

The Women of ISIS:

Gendered Roles and Agency within the Caliphate

Sara Mahmood

The study analyzes the role of women under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an extremist Islamist entity, which, according to popular opinion, has denied women agency due to its patriarchal and gendered nature. The research readdresses this misperception by asserting that women are *imperative* to ISIS, which in turn grants them agency. In order to establish this, the study incorporates Anthony Giddens' *duality of structures*, and Irm Haleem's analysis of the *ummah* and the *caliphate*. The research looks at ISIS's official discourse to understand women's roles within the entity as (i) mothers and wives, (ii) victims, and (iii) as combatants and facilitators. Building on the roles conceptualized, the study reasons that women possess dual agency under ISIS. The emergence of agency can be explained by the *internalization* of the said roles, followed by *action*. Within ISIS, agency also serves to validate the existence of the caliphate by strengthening the *ummah*. Women contribute to the *ummah* firstly, through procreating, indoctrinating the future generations with values of the caliphate, and, through complementing and bolstering the roles of the men as defenders of the *ummah*. Furthermore, the women of ISIS also seek *legitimate authority*, *self-representation* and *self-governance* under the caliphate, which is no less similar to what the men who perform their respective roles as defenders of the *ummah* seek to achieve. The study concludes that, despite the evident patriarchy and gendered construction of roles within the group, the women of ISIS do possess agency, due to their criticality within ISIS's *ummah* and due to their centrality in the establishment of the caliphate.

The analysis explains the roles of women under ISIS predominantly through the works of Anthony Giddens and Irm Haleem. The analysis will link Giddens' duality of structures, which accounts for the functioning of social systems and the emerging agency¹ to Haleem's analysis of the *ummah* and

the *caliphate* – two concepts that have been used by radical Islamist groups to justify their employment of violence.²

Here, the concept of the 'essence' is key to Haleem's argument that "...there is nothing distinctly Islamic about Islamist extremism."³ Haleem refers to the essence of a phenomenon as, "the characteristics that remain the same despite the existence of many other variations of the phenomenon."⁴ In this research, essence, then, refers to the inherent characteristics of the roles and subsequent agency of women under ISIS regardless of 'contextual and temporal variations'.⁵ The research is also based on the idea that the roles assigned to women during pre-war and wartime societies are more or less similar. This is in line with Rupp's comparison of the construction of roles for women through propaganda in Nazi Germany with those of wartime United States, which reveals a stark similarity in the traditional role that is assigned to women in these two cases, namely, that of homemaker.⁶ Building on this comparison, it can be said that the designation of traditional roles to women in times of war can also be seen in ISIS's narratives as well.

The research also draws upon Rupp's notion of the universality of sexual asymmetry in human communities, to explain inequalities between the roles assigned to men and women under ISIS.⁷ In this sense, gender inequalities, patriarchy and the subordination of women to men is nothing unique to ISIS. Rupp argues that these phenomena are universally present to varying degrees within different societies. Drawing on this assertion, the research looks beyond sexual asymmetry to understand the criticality of the multiple roles ISIS assigns to women in its discourse. Within this theoretical framework, official ISIS publications, such as Dabiq (the official online magazine), Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade and the speeches of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, are used to elucidate the structure of

¹Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 49-96.

²Irm Haleem, *The Essence of Islamist Extremism: Recognition through Violence, Freedom through Death* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 12-43, 96-135.

³Ibid, pp. 168-172.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German & American Propaganda (1939-1945)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 3-10.

⁷Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, pp. 3-10.

women's roles and agency.

The Duality of Structures: The Islamic State, the ummah and the implications for women

The social system – the Caliphate or the Islamic State

Giddens refers to the social system as a society or an entity that is both empirically observable and constituted of social practices that link people across space and time.⁸ Here, the social system represents the caliphate as a system of governance; with a focus on law, defence and the expansion of religion.⁹ In particular, ISIS seeks the establishment of the caliphate as a social system – portraying it as a legitimate authority – whilst justifying violence.¹⁰ The *caliphate* then becomes the ultimate goal for ISIS, and it encapsulates ISIS's identity as the *Islamic State*.

The structure – the ummah as the collective

Giddens asserts that the existence of social systems, in this case the *caliphate*, is dependent upon its constituent structures.¹¹ The argument here is that the *ummah* is the predominant structure of the *caliphate* that unites the members of ISIS into a collective body. The *ummah* is the core of the *caliphate* based on Haleem's analysis of the notion as representing collective consciousness. In this case, Haleem reasons that the *ummah* represents "a sense of identity of the individual that is inseparable from the sense of the identity of the collective that the individual belongs to."¹² Thus, the concept of collective responsibility or duty¹³ ties the individual (men and women) to the collective, or, in the case of ISIS, to the broader *ummah*.

The rules as gendered roles – sex roles and the sexual division of labour

ISIS relies on rules within the structure of the ummah to make the social system (the caliphate) a

reality. This correlates with Giddens' definition of structures as "rules and resources organized as properties of social systems."¹⁴ In my analysis, I refer to the rules as specialized roles assigned to the members of the *ummah* (women in particular). These specialized roles are constructed based on a primitive divide between the two sexes that in turn benefits the social system (*caliphate*). Broadly, men act as defenders of the *ummah*, while women specifically are relegated to being mothers, wives, combatants and facilitators.

Putting the roles into practice – the women as resources and agents

While observing Giddens' analysis of the link between social systems and structures, it can be said that the notion of the ummah becomes a reality through the agents (both men and women). Thus, *internalization* and *practice*, based on the roles within the structure ensures the 'repeated enactment of structures' or the *ummah*.¹⁵ In this sense, women specifically act as the agents of the structure, and also as resources for the structure that perpetuate its existence.

The Roles for Women within the Structure of the ummah

Women as mothers and wives – children and stable households for the ummah

First, the role of women as mothers is to ensure that the *ummah* (Giddens' structure) grows in numbers through child bearing and gendered indoctrination of the offspring. Gendered indoctrination implies the role of women as mothers who guide the male and female offspring to perform their own specialized roles for the progression of the *ummah*. Second, the women as wives are to make 'the killing machine more efficient'¹⁶ by providing the men with a stable household and sexual intimacy– thereby facilitating their role in waging jihad.

⁸Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 74.

⁹Haleem, *Essence of Islamist Extremism*, p. 108.

¹⁰Ibid, pp. 104 -111.

¹¹Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, pp. 50-55.

¹²Haleem, *Essence of Islamist Extremism*, p. 24.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 66.

¹⁵William H. Sewell Jr, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, July 1992, 98(1), pp. 1-29.

¹⁶Francine D'Amico, "Feminist Perspectives on Women Warriors." *Peace Review*, 1996, 8(3), pp. 379-384.

Women as victims – the protector and the protected

ISIS's discourse often portrays women (mothers, wives, sisters and daughters) as victims in their various manifestations to mobilize men to wage jihad. In this sense, men are the defenders of the *ummah* or protectors, with the *ummah* also constituted of the women, who need protection. The construction of women in ISIS's discourse also represents the construction of a dichotomy between men as life-takers (violent) and women as life-givers (non-violent).¹⁷ In addition, the construction of men's roles as the protector in ISIS discourse mobilizes the men to fight jihad and to guard their women from the enemy, in addition to simply defending the *caliphate*.

Women as combatants and facilitators – temporary transgressions for the ummah

ISIS's discourse makes it permissible for women to defend the *ummah* by waging jihad, if men are unable to do so. This role is constructed as a temporary transgression, reminding women that their broader and more critical roles are as mothers and wives. In addition, women are also assigned secondary roles, such as doctors and teachers, for other women, an assignment which is nested within the notion of gender segregation. Both of these roles, as broad public services, contribute to supplementing the *ummah*, by keeping gender segregation intact, and by making it stronger.

Agency for Women with the Islamic State and the ummah: An Analysis

The research views the caliphate as the social system which consists of a predominant structure that is the gendered *ummah*. The women within the *ummah* are bound by specific rules, which broadly represent their functions or roles within the social structures.¹⁸ Each of these rules, envisioned as broad roles (mothers, wives, victims, combatants and facilitators) are fundamentally critical to the existence of the *ummah*, and by extension, the *caliphate* as well. According to Giddens, while theories of structuration have previously opposed

human agency, structures and agency presuppose each other.¹⁹ In this sense, the study builds on the roles conceptualized, while reasoning that women possess *dual agency* under ISIS.

Firstly, agency emerges from the internalization of the aforementioned roles and action based upon them, which ascertains the existence of the caliphate through strengthening the *ummah*. In this sense, women contribute to the *ummah* through procreation and indoctrination of the future generations with the values of the caliphate (strength of the *ummah* in numbers), providing services as doctors and teachers to the members of the *ummah*, and by complementing and bolstering the roles of the men as defenders of the *ummah* (through being portrayed as victims who need protection while providing a stable household for the men and offspring). Moreover, this conception of agency is equally applicable within the minor exceptions where it is permissible for women to act as the defenders of the *ummah*. Secondly, women under ISIS possess agency because they are seeking the same ends as men fighting jihad: legitimate authority, self-representation and self-governance.²⁰

Implications

The study leads towards three critical factors that address common misperceptions and generalizations regarding the roles and participation of women under ISIS. The first vital implication is that multiple studies conducted on women within ISIS have largely focused on their recruitment through social media and the consequent appeal. In this regard, the role of women after they have joined ISIS has been understudied in comparison. Moreover, these studies have recognized that in certain cases, women do make the conscious decision to join ISIS. However, their roles after joining the entity are referred to being limited officially²¹ and thus, represent a disavowal of agency. This study readdresses such claims by establishing the imperativeness of women's roles under the entity.

The second misconception relates to structural

¹⁷Jean Bethke Elstain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1987), p. 165.

¹⁸The concept of rules is an important component of structures in Giddens theory, and I argue that it essentially represents the roles assigned to women within the *ummah*.

¹⁹Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 64.

²⁰Haleem discusses these notions in the context of radical Islamist discourse espousing violence for its establishment. This logic, I argue, applies to women as well, whereby their specific roles are also to achieve the same ends (the caliphate).

²¹Erin Marie Saltman & Melanie Smith, "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: ISIS and the Gender Phenomenon," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015, http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf.

gender inequalities between the roles ISIS assigns to men and women. Due to the inherent gender inequalities, the roles of women under ISIS are perceived as misogynist and repressive. Viewing the women of ISIS as “nothing more than instruments of male leadership”²² prevents further understanding on the motivations of their participation. In this sense, the study argues that such broad simplifications undermine the importance of women to ISIS, and their subsequent agency. In this regard, certain claims have focused on the ‘divinely’ limited role of women in most extremist Islamist entities.²³ The argument in this study affirms that instead of being limited, the roles are specialized, where women are integral to the functioning and survival of ISIS.

Lastly, the study notes the predominant role of men within ISIS as defenders of the *ummah*, who are waging jihad. It argues that since this role of men is perceived as integral towards establishing the caliphate, then the same notion applies to the roles of women as well. In this sense, women are not agentless actors, being forced to perform their roles of mothers, wives, victims, combatants and facilitators. Women do participate in ISIS through these roles for the achievement of specific political ends and goals as well.²⁴ Thus, the women who continue to be a part of ISIS perform these roles for the same ends as the men.²⁵

²² Nimmi Gowrinathan, “The Women of ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2014-08-21/women-isis>.

²³ Mia Bloom & Charlie Winter, “How a Woman Joins ISIS,” *The Daily Beast*, June 12, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/06/how-a-woman-joins-isis.html>.

²⁴ Gowrinathan, “The Women of ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs*.

²⁵ The notion of ‘same ends as the men’ relates to critical concepts of ‘legitimate authority’, ‘self-representation’ and ‘self-governance’.

Biography



Irm Haleem is Assistant Professor and Manager of *Research and Publication* at ICPVTR, RSIS, Nanyang Technological University. Her research focuses on a conceptual analysis of violence, with a focus on radical Islamist violence. She is the author of *The Essence of Islamist Extremism* (Routledge 2012, paperback edition 2014), as well as a number of other publications (papers, chapters, encyclopedia entries and book reviews). She is a member of the Board of Reviewers for the peer-reviewed journal *Sociology and Anthropology*. She has also served as the external reviewer for the peer-reviewed journals: *Religions, Terrorism and Political Violence*, and *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*. In August 2015, Dr. Haleem was awarded a one-year research grant by the United States Air Force, *Asian Office of Research and Development* (AOARD), towards the completion of her second book: *Death as Existence*. Since joining in August 2014, Dr. Haleem has inaugurated and directed multiple theory workshops (ad hoc), Presentation and Research forums (monthly), and discussion groups. Dr. Haleem is the Editor-in-Chief of two ICPVTR publications: *Quarterly Review* and *New Directions*. Prior to joining RSIS at NTU, Dr. Haleem taught at Northeastern University (Massachusetts, USA), Seton Hall University (New Jersey, USA) and, most recently, Princeton University (New Jersey, USA).



Aida Arosoaie was a Research Analyst with ICPVTR, RSIS. She has a BA in Politics and Hindi from SOAS, University of London, and a MSc in Strategic Studies from RSIS, NTU, where she wrote her dissertation, *ISIS's and Secular Justification for Violence: The sacred as a justifying tool*, under the guidance of Dr Irm Haleem. Aida focuses on the conceptualisation of violence and discourse analysis of religiously-justified violent social movements by drawing on academic approaches from Sociology, Political Theory, Philosophy and Anthropology.



Sara Mahmood is a Research Analyst for the Pakistan desk at ICPVTR, RSIS. Sara holds a MSc in International Relations, with a specialization in Terrorism Studies from RSIS, NTU. Sara wrote her Masters dissertation, *The Women of ISIS: Gendered Roles and Agency within the Caliphate*, under the guidance of Dr Irm Haleem. She has also participated as a presenter in the *International Conference on Women and Jihad* organised by the University of Western Australia. Her research interests include understanding the participation and role of women in violent movements, and the role of terrorism and extremism in the Pakistani state.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Editor-in-Chief

Irm Haleem, PhD

Assistant Professor RSIS, NTU
Manager (Research & Publication),
ICPVTR

Assistant Editor

Stefanie Kam

Associate Research Fellow

Contributors

Aida Arosoaie

Research Analyst

Sara Mahmood

Research Analyst

Layout Designer

Okkie Tanupradja

Senior Language Officer

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific. For more information about RSIS, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg.