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Kittens and Nutella: Why Women Join ISIS

Samantha K. Smith
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

On February 18, 2015 CNN published a reported stating that Western women were leaving their homes to join ISIS because of a social media campaign featuring pictures of kittens and Nutella. This reported propagated the notion that women who join jihadist organizations are brainwashed or feeble minded. The reality is not so simple. This paper explores the motives women may have for joining ISIS through comparison to the motivations that drove women to partake in other violent jihadist organizations' activities.

Keywords

women, Islam, ISIS, extremism, terrorism

Disciplines

Anthropology | Criminology | Defense and Security Studies | Family, Life Course, and Society | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Politics and Social Change | Regional Sociology | Social and Cultural Anthropology

Comments

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Kittens and Nutella: Why Women Join ISIS

by Samantha K. Smith

On February 18, 2015, CNN reporter Carol Costello reported that Western women, young Muslim teenagers and adult converts, are joining ISIS¹ because of kittens, Nutella, and smiley face emoticons.² To report that women would abandon their lives, travel to a war torn region, and join ISIS because of the lure of kittens and Nutella is so laughable that even ISIS supporters have lampooned CNN.³ The content of the report was that members of ISIS are using social media to present a picture of their lives on the battlefield as not terribly different from life in the West in order to appeal to Muslim teenagers living in Europe and the United States; however, the graphics and visual highlights the network chose to accompany this story failed to reflect the depth of the conversation that guest Nimmi Gowrinathan, a professor at City College New York and expert on women and sexual violence, held about female fighters in ISIS. Because of how the network chose to present this story, anyone who did not engage with the report at more than the superficial level was left with the impression that women are *actually* joining ISIS because of cute kittens and tasty Nutella.

The report has become so ingrained into the American pop culture consciousness that Jon Stewart referenced it during the April 14, 2015, episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in a

¹ There is debate as to how the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria should be referred. There are arguments for IS, ISIS, ISIL, and others circulating. As Americans are familiar with ISIS, this acronym shall be used.

² "ISIS Lures Women Recruits," *CNN Newsroom*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1502/18/cnr.02.html>.

³ Umm Khaled, a known supporter of ISIS, tweeted a picture of hands offering a kitten and a jar of Nutella with the caption: "they have learned our secrets. Apparently they intercepted a recruiting packet. lolol." Umm Khaled, Twitter post, February 19, 2015, www.twitter.com/ummkhaled13.

quick quip while discussing the 1998 bombing of Iraq under the Clinton administration.⁴ The kittens and Nutella report was ridiculous, but it was also irresponsible. The report propagated the notion that women who join violent jihadist organizations like ISIS are brainwashed or feeble minded. While it may be tempting to write off people who join these organizations as crazy or otherwise disturbed, the reality of the situation is much more complex. ISIS is not the first Islamist organization that women have joined. It is not the first terrorist organization that women have joined, nor will it likely be the last jihadist group to have a female base of support. The reality is that women have complicated motivations that would inspire them to choose to join organizations like ISIS and choose to be complicit or active in acts of violence. Kittens and Nutella are not the reason women are joining these groups.

So why are they?

Female Jihadis

Before one can answer that question as to why women are joining ISIS, it is important to remember that female jihadis⁵ are not a new phenomenon. In fact, between 1985 and 2005, approximately one third of all violent terrorist attacks worldwide were conducted by women.⁶ According to a study conducted by Yoram Scheitzer, fifteen percent of all suicide bombings worldwide were carried out by women.⁷ The notion that female involvement in jihadist networks

⁴ “Start Wars,” The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, April 14, 2015, <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/jjxzh/start-wars>. His quip was, “Yeah that 1998 bombing fixed Iraq forever, transitioning that country from a dictatorship to an America-loving, kitten-and-fudge-based democracy.”

⁵ “Jihadi” is the Arabic term for one who engages in jihad. “Jihadis” follows English pluralization conventions for the ease of a majority English-speaking audience. While jihad is a complicated religious term with many nuanced interpretations in Islamic theology and philosophy, the term’s usage here refers to the armed struggle against Western occupation which militant Islamists believe they are religiously required to wage.

⁶ Marina Eleftheriadou, “Women and Militant Islamism: The Misunderstanding behind ‘The Woman and the Gun’,” *Middle East Bulletin* 10 (2008): 9.

⁷ Eleftheriadou, “Women and Militant Islamism,” 9.

is uncommon or rare should be disavowed. While most jihadist activity, especially violent activity, is carried out by men, women hold active roles in jihadist organizations.

The Western world views women as creatures of peace to the point that the ideas of “woman” and “jihad” seem contradictory. Western discourse surrounding Muslim women enacting terrorism tends to attribute the cause of their militancy to manipulations by their male family members or to suffering from a child-age trauma.⁸ Western media perpetuates the idea that women are only capable of violence if they are dominated by men.⁹ Characterizing women who participate in violence or jihadist organization as victims of male domination robs women of their agency and contributes to a continued misunderstanding of these groups.

The reality is that, throughout history, women all over the world have been involved in war efforts. Women may function in supporting roles as nurses or caregivers, rarely taking part in active combat. This holds true for much of the contemporary Middle East; women who join jihadist organizations are usually limited to acting only as *mothers*, meaning they support male jihadists’ war efforts.¹⁰ Sharif Kanaana conducted a study about folk legends that were circulating among Palestinians during the first Intifada.¹¹ Of the 237 stories Kanaana collected between 1988 and 1990, 28 percent of the narratives centered on female characters.¹² Through examining these narratives, Kanaana concludes that Palestinian mothers who birth male sons, actually enable resistance to continue because these women raise their sons to be fighters and

⁸ Eleftheriadou, “Women and Militant Islamism,” 11.

⁹ Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁰ Gentry and Sjoberg, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 5.

¹¹ The first Intifada, or the first Uprising, lasted from 1987 until 1993 and consisted of Palestinians throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers in protest of Israel’s policies in the West Bank and Gaza. The second Intifada broke out in the early 2000s with tactics such as suicide bombing utilized by Palestinian forces. Both Intifadas were fought by political parties, individual Palestinians, and armed jihadist militias working separately and at times in conjunction.

¹² Sharif Kanaana, “Women in the Legends of the Intifada,” in *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, edited by Suha Sabbagh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 118, 121.

later offer those sons as martyrs in the resistance.¹³ The role of women in these popular folk legends is understood as vital for the continuance of resistance, but limited to a non-violent form.

While most women in jihadist organizations (both militant and political) do not have an active role in violence, there are women who do participate in violent activity. While working with Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon, Maria Holt interviewed several women who had been arrested in the 1980s for their participation in resistance efforts prior to the first Intifada. One of women Holt interviewed, Abir, a Palestinian female activist living in a refugee camp in Lebanon, relayed, “In the early 1980s, I was part of a cell which was comprised of young men and women together. We were fighting against Israel. We did not only use weapons but facilitated the bringing of weapons and also writing graffiti against the Israelis.”¹⁴ Traditionally, Palestinian understandings of masculinity would require men to protect women from violence, but as Holt explains, changes in modern warfare has caused changes in women’s roles in relation to conflict. Modern warfare has blurred the distinction between the home front and the battlefield, which means that women and children can no longer rely on men to protect them from the dangers of battle.¹⁵ Living under Israeli military occupation since 1967, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are surrounded at all times by an armed force. It is important to keep in mind that while some women engage in violence as a tactic to resist the Occupation, this does not mean that their activism or resistance is rooted in jihadist causes. The example of women engaging in violence during the first Intifada is not meant to imply that there are no differences between resistance and jihad; the example is only meant to demonstrate that there are women engaging in violent acts.

¹³ Kanaana, “Women in Legends,” 133.

¹⁴ Maria Holt, *Women and Conflict in the Middle East: Palestinian Refugees and the Response to Violence* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 159.

¹⁵ Holt, *Palestinian Refugees*, 158.

Another reason for the change in women's involvement in conflict is that women are not content to remain passive victims.¹⁶ Palestinian women during the first Intifada changed the roles deemed acceptable for them to play in society through their engagement in spontaneous protests at funerals.¹⁷ Women would create barriers between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youth who throw stones.¹⁸ After witnessing several protests where this action took place, a professor of Birzeit University remarked, "It has become dangerous for men to participate in demonstrations or marches in the absence of women."¹⁹ Popular stories spread during the early years of the first Intifada about village women, who lived in particularly patriarchal systems, hiding strange, unrelated men, from Israeli soldiers by performing acts such as bathing with these men in order to pass these strange men off as family members.²⁰ Whether or not these popular stories about women bathing with strange men to hide those men are true or not is unimportant; what is important about these stories is that they represent a change in the discourse of Palestinian women's role in the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Palestinian women face threats that Palestinian men do not—the threat of sexual violence from Israeli soldiers. Israeli soldiers have been reported to expose their genitalia and hurl obscene language at Palestinian women in order to isolate and control them, but during the first Intifada women challenged the soldiers by physically assaulting them or using obscene language in return to question the soldiers' masculinity.²¹ In traditional Palestinian culture, honor is everything, and a woman whose honor has been tainted by a sexual assault could be ostracized by society, but during and after the first

¹⁶ Holt, *Palestinian Refugees*, 159.

¹⁷ Philippa Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada: Revolution within the Revolution," in *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*, edited by Suha Sabbah (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 65.

¹⁸ Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada," 65.

¹⁹ Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada," 66.

²⁰ Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada," 67.

²¹ Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada," 67.

Intifada the system of honor changed, enabling women to respond to the sexual threats they faced from Israeli soldiers in new ways.²²

Palestinian women living in Palestine and in refugee camps in surrounding states are directly affected and defined by the on-going conflict. Often they may be lacking in education and opportunities; for such women, their lives are very different from the lives of Western women whom ISIS is seeking to recruit, but education and privilege does not preclude women from becoming jihadis. For example, one need look no further than Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, whom last year ISIS demanded be freed in an email sent to the family of James Foley, a journalist who had been captured and was later murdered by ISIS.²³ Though she was never a member of ISIS, Siddiqui is regarded as an important symbol by jihadis. She received a Western education at MIT and Brandeis but was convicted in New York during 2010 for plotting to kill federal agents in Afghanistan.²⁴ Siddiqui felt that the Muslim world was under attack by Western forces, and she felt that her husband was not fulfilling his religious duty to project their religion.²⁵ She even argued with the Grand Mufti of Karachi, who ordered her to focus on her family rather than jihad, by citing another sheikh who asserted that the duty to wage jihad was greater than any other duty.²⁶ She would go on to divorce her husband and remarry a younger relative of one of the masterminds behind the 9/11 terror attack on the United States.²⁷ Siddiqui was not a naive girl falling prey to male trickery; she was highly educated and resisted efforts to de-radicalize her views.

²² Strum, "West Bank Women and the Intifada," 67-68.

²³ Rafia Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," *Dissent* 1 (2015), 118.

²⁴ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 118, 120.

²⁵ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 120.

²⁶ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 120.

²⁷ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 124. Her new husband was a close relation of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

Rafia Zakaria describes Aafia Siddiqui as fitting into the role of a “Muslim woman warrior.”²⁸ This model of a female Muslim fighter is legitimized in Islamic history. Gentry and Sjoberg note that historical records demonstrate Muslim women performed many of the same activities modern women in conflict perform, including nursing wounded soldiers, defending homes, and even training and fighting alongside male fighters.²⁹ There are several key battles in Islamic history in which women had central roles.³⁰ In the year 656, A’isha, one of the Prophet Mohammed’s wives, lead the Battle of the Camel, a battle that challenged the legitimacy of the forth Caliph, Ali.³¹ After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the early community of Muslims had a disagreement over who should lead the community, and that disagreement would develop into a civil war during Ali’s caliphate. Ali had been unfairly blamed for the murder of his predecessor, and A’isha, who had never liked Ali because he once advised Muhammad to divorce her, joined the rebels in their fight against Ali’s leadership. The question over who had the right to rule would cause conflict for many years. In 680, Ali’s descendants, traveling to modern-day southern Iraq to join a group who was in rebellion against the forces that had defeated Ali, was massacred at the Battle of Karbala. Zaynab, one of Ali’s daughters, took part in the Battle of Karbala, and, for her role in this massacre, she is regarded as a hero by Shiite Muslims to this day.³²

A few female fighters are even mentioned on the Qur’an, the central text of Islam, and one of the most revered of these female fighters is Nusayba bint Ka’ab, who is also called Umm

²⁸ Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy,” 118.

²⁹ Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 32.

³⁰ The Western world often views Islam as a religion steeped in violence, but this is not true. No religion is inherently violent, nor is any religion inherently non-violent. Many people do not realize that the early Muslims founded an empire that would stretch for over 1,500 years. That empire would face political challenges from both external and internal forces. That empire was not continuous: it would under different dynasties, and would be broken into several smaller empires throughout its time.

³¹ Maria Holt and Haifaa Jawad, *Women, Islam, and Resistance* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 37.

³² Holt, *Women, Islam, and Resistance*, 37. Holt notes that, during interviews she conducted with Shiite women in Lebanon and Iraqi Shiite refugees living in Jordan and Syria, interviewees would reference Zaynab as a role model.

Umarah.³³ She would fight in six battles during her lifetime, and during the Battle of Uhud she fought alongside her husband and sons, lost her arm, and suffered eleven wounds while defending the Prophet Muhammad.³⁴ The early Muslims were persecuted by another group of Arabs who felt threatened economically by Muhammad's new community, and so the early Muslims were forced to defend themselves. Jihadist organizations can appeal to the model of the Muslim warrior women legitimized in Islamic history and theology in order to justify women's involvement in the movements today.

Women are no strangers to battle in the Islamic tradition, both historical and contemporary, but how does the model of the female jihadi relate to ISIS?

Women's Roles in ISIS

When ISIS first formed, the organization did not seek to gain female followers, but the goals of the organization have changed. ISIS began as an off-shoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, and fought against the Assad regime in Syria until early 2014, when Al-Qaeda broke off all ties with its more radical affiliate.³⁵ Since the separation ISIS has taken vast stretches of territory in Northern Iraq and Syria, has cells throughout the rest of the Middle East and even Africa, and has utilized a campaign of terror tactics to dominate a region where a power vacuum had loomed. Now, ISIS is seeking literally to build a caliphate.

In order to build a society with social institutions, ISIS requires more than just jihadi warriors—they need women.³⁶ While men wage war on un-believers³⁷, women are necessary for

³³ Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 33.

³⁴ Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 33.

³⁵ Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda Disavows any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html.

³⁶ Adam Kredo, "Islamic State Steps Up Recruitment of Women and Girls," *Free Beacon*, March 24, 2015, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/islamic-state-steps-up-recruitment-of-women-and-girls/>.

the domestic functions of a homestead. Women are needed to cook for the warriors, nurse the wounded, raise the warriors' children, provide sexual satisfaction, and maintain the homes of this new society. Women are necessary in order to support male jihadis' war. This society-building enterprise began through taking women from captured territories, systematically raping those women, and then forcing them to marry members of ISIS.³⁸ Human Rights Watch published a report on April 15, 2015, documenting the violations ISIS had committed against captured Yazidi women.³⁹ Since August 2014, ISIS had captured several thousand Yazidi women, and in October of 2014 ISIS acknowledged in its own publication that Yazidi women and girls are being given to ISIS fighters as "spoils of war."⁴⁰ A UN report from March 2015 suggests that over 3000 captured women remain in ISIS's captivity.⁴¹

Using social media, male members of ISIS began reaching out to foreign women online and began luring those women to travel to Syria with promises of "devout, jihadist husbands, a home in a true Islamic state and the opportunity to devote their lives to their religion and their God."⁴² A greater number of female members means a greater number of male recruits will join, especially if the male recruits are rewarded with Western blonde converts who are viewed as more sexually desirable.⁴³ The newly married women are encouraged to quickly have children,

³⁷ Most of ISIS's victims are other Muslims. ISIS has a particularly draconian understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, and anyone who does not fit this model is deemed an unbeliever. Just a quick news search will uncover countless stories of the violence ISIS engages in against its victims, which included other Muslims, Christians, and the Yazidi people, against whom ISIS has engaged in a genocide.

³⁸ Frida Ghitis, "What Jihadis Plan for Women," 4029tv April 16, 2015, <http://www.4029tv.com/national/ghitis-what-jihadis-plan-for-women/32405536>.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape," April 15, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/iraq-isis-escapees-describe-systematic-rape>.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq".

⁴¹ Human Rights Council, *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Iraq in the Light of Abuses Committed by the So-Called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Associated Groups* (Geneva: UN the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015), 6.

⁴² Emily Daglish, "Recruitment to ISIS: No Longer a Man's Game," Human Security Center, March 23, 2015, <http://www.hscentre.org/policy-unit/recruitment-isis-longer-mans-game-2/>.

⁴³ "Selling the 'Fantasy': Why Young Women Would Join ISIS," 98.1 FM KMBZ, February 20, 2015, <http://www.kmbz.com/Selling-the-Fantasy-Why-Young-Women-Would-Join-ISI/20983989>.

which may make both the foreign female recruits and male recruits less likely to attempt to leave ISIS.

Women are instrumental as supporters of the male jihadis' efforts, but women also function as recruiters to gain more followers. While the number of male recruits rises as more women join, women play a more important role as recruiters of other women. While CNN's report on February 18, 2015, was irresponsible, the reporter was not wrong in stating that ISIS is using social media to reach out to Western women. Mia Bloom, a professor at the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts, claims that female ISIS recruiters use social media platforms in order to quickly build a rapport and develop trust, and the messages sent to the budding recruits are tailored to their ages—older girls are promised a devout husband while younger girls are pressured to join in order to serve an altruistic duty to their people.⁴⁴ Bloom also points out that women's involvement on social media as recruiters can serve to goad men to join ISIS because women's involvement projects the message that, because men are failing to fulfill their duties, women must take up the fight in their place.⁴⁵

Twitter is a particularly popular method of communication as Twitter followers can be quickly amassed.⁴⁶ Umm Layth, a very active ISIS recruiter, had over 2,000 Twitter followers as of April 2015.⁴⁷ Attempts to find her Twitter feed are no longer successful; it appears that her Twitter account may have been deleted when the platform recently purged feeds supporting ISIS. The micro-blog platform Tumblr is another popular means of contact between recruiters and potential female recruits. Umm Ubaydah has run a blog page supporting ISIS since February of

⁴⁴ Emily Canal, "How Does ISIS Recruit Westerners Online? Sexual Predators Use Strikingly Similar Tactics," *Bustle*, March 2015, <http://www.bustle.com/articles/71090-how-does-isis-recruit-westerners-online-sexual-predators-use-strikingly-similar-tactics>.

⁴⁵ Adam Taylor, "Gun-Toting Women Sell Jihadist Recruitment Message," *The New Zealand Herald*, March 28, 2015, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=11424634.

⁴⁶ Taylor, "Gun-Toting Women."

⁴⁷ Daghish, "Recruitment to ISIS."

2014 and, as of writing of this piece, is still an active blogger.⁴⁸ After contact is made and a relationship is built, ISIS recruiters encourage women to switch to untraceable online platforms where information about the safest ways to travel to Syria is shared by current ISIS women.⁴⁹

While women are utilized as recruiters and encouraged to fulfill domestic roles, ISIS does not allow female recruits to participate in active fighting, which differentiates the organization from other jihadist groups.⁵⁰ There is limited opportunity for female leadership. The only role which allows ISIS women to have some authority is within the Al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female police force which patrols ISIS-controlled cities and ensures women are obeying the standards of dress and behavior deemed appropriate by the ISIS leadership.⁵¹ These women, while having limited power over other women, serve to support the interests of the male leadership.

Women have roles which are instrumental to the continued dominance of ISIS in their conquered territories, but the roles they perform do not explain *why* women join.

Why do Women Join ISIS?

In the same piece where she describes the life of Aafia Siddiqui, Rafia Zakaria asks an important question that is worth some thought: “Is it possible that ISIS appeals to some Muslim women, not because they are fooled by it, but because its political vision seems to offer solutions to some of their problems?”⁵² To what problems could ISIS be offering solutions?

It is possible that some Muslim women are joining ISIS because they feel that the secular Western world is in tension with their religious values. For women who feel that the West does

⁴⁸ Umm Ubaydah, *Al-Khanssa*, <http://al-khanssa.tumblr.com/>.

⁴⁹ Daghli, “Recruitment to ISIS.”

⁵⁰ Eleftheriadou references a report from the Canadian intelligence service released and declassified in 2007 that projected women’s involvement in Al-Qaeda would only grow. Al-Qaeda utilized and continues to utilize female members for the purposes of conducting suicide missions.

⁵¹ Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy,” 121.

⁵² Zakaria, “Women and Islamic Militancy,” 119.

not welcome their religious values, a society that identifies as Islamic may be welcome. For example, France, the Western nation from where thus far the most Western female recruits to ISIS originate, has banned Muslim women from certain expressions of Islamic dress in public.⁵³ In order to participate in French society, women must comport themselves in a manner divorced from their religious values. Conversely, women in territories controlled by ISIS are reported as being celebrated for wearing modest dress complying with the strictest interpretations of Islamic dress.⁵⁴ The temptation to join an organization that would celebrate certain expressions of faith may certainly lead some women to choose to join ISIS.

Educated women like Dr. Aafia Siddiqui make calculated political choices when they decide to engage in jihadist activity. These educated women are joining organizations whose agenda are not pro-women, yet women may find involvement in jihadist organizations to be empowering. Women joining ISIS are limited in what roles they are able to perform, but this limitation of available roles does not violate principles of Islamic feminism. In the tradition of Islamic feminism, women's roles are viewed as "complementary" to men rather than "equal to" or "in competition with" men. While this may be baffling for people unfamiliar with this understanding of feminism, some women may choose to join ISIS because they find complementary roles for men and women appealing. This religious understanding of complementary roles is in opposition to secular feminism.

There is a great body of research available exploring the reasons why women become involved in conflict. Maria Holt and Haifaa Jawad's *Women, Islam, and Resistance* explores the

⁵³ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 123. France has passed legislation forbidding women from wearing *niqab* and *burqa*. Women who wear hijab are subject to harassment. Women News held a four-part online series documenting ways in which France's 2004 veil ban has subjected women to increased discrimination in French society. The series overview can be accessed at <http://womensenews.org/story/french-veil-ban-harsh-exposure-muslim-women/141201/french-veil-ban-harsh-exposure-muslim-women>.

⁵⁴ Zakaria, "Women and Islamic Militancy," 123.

contexts surrounding women's roles in the Arab Spring, Shiite women in Southern Lebanon who fought against Israel during the Lebanon wars, Iraqi women's circumstances during US occupations of Iraq, and the role Palestinian women played in constructing a narrative of Palestinian resistance against Israel. All four are examples that Holt and Jawad offer of women choosing to engage in Islamist principles and sometimes violence in order to resist oppression. The reasons women may have for choosing to participate in jihadist organizations are very context specific. As such, there is no one reason why women choose to join a militant jihadist organization.

Palestinian women had a significant role, both symbolically and actually, in the construction of the nationalist narrative Palestinians utilize in their resistance of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Considering the large role attributed to women as the birthers of the resistance, why would be so shocking that some Western women may want to have a role in the formation of a new state whose founders claim to be using Islamic principles?⁵⁵ For these women, ISIS presents an opportunity to engage in society at a level which these women's countries of origin may have denied them. The example of France's ban on the veil was listed above, but France is not the only Western country where Muslim women are alienated from public life. In the United States post the 9-11 terror attacks, Muslims were subject to deeper levels of scrutiny and discrimination.⁵⁶ While the experience of American Muslims is changing, many are still subject to bigotry and suspicion.

While ISIS engages in a social media campaign which promises devout husbands to women who travel to join ISIS, it is important to remember that many women make the choice to join independently of attachment to male figures. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue published a

⁵⁵ The adherence to Islamic principles is certainly up for debate.

⁵⁶ For an example of this, please see <http://www.thedailybeast.com/witw/articles/2013/08/16/being-a-muslim-american-woman-in-the-decade-after-9-11.html>.

report, *Becoming Mulan? Western Female Migrants to ISIS* in 2015 examining the reasons Western women are joining ISIS, as reported on these women's social media posts. According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's findings, there are three reasons which women cite again and again for why they joined ISIS: 1) they view Islam as under attack, 2) they want to take part in the building of a new caliphate, and 3) they believe it is their duty to join.⁵⁷ The Institute also notes that these reasons are the same reasons many men cite as their reasons for joining ISIS.⁵⁸ Since many women are seeking to join ISIS for the same reasons that men join, why does the Western world view women as simple minded for desiring to join jihadist organizations?

Conclusion

Making a single, definitive statement about why women are joining ISIS is not feasible. There are too many factors to consider. They may desire to take part in a nation-building enterprise. They might feel their religion is under attack from the Western world. Perhaps they view joining ISIS to be part of their religious duties, just as Dr. Aafia Siddiqui viewed violent jihad as part of her religious duties. The February 18, 2015, report from CNN asserted that women are joining ISIS because of a social media campaign featuring pictures of kittens and Nutella. This report perpetuates the traditional view that women join jihadist organizations because they are manipulated into joining. While there are certainly women being manipulated by ISIS recruiters using social media, the reduction of this process to "kittens and Nutella" robs women of their agency and contributes to continued misunderstandings about jihadist organizations.

⁵⁷ Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Brandford, and Ross Frenett, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS* (UK: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), 11-14.

⁵⁸ Hoyle et al., *Becoming Mulan?*, 38.

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