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Western women and violent jihad: analysis of ISIS' gendered propaganda and UK's counterterrorism strategies

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the migration of Western women to ISIS-held territories, aiming to evaluate which strategies and narratives ISIS has exploited to convince them to make this decision. After tracing the phenomenon of radicalisation and women's participation in jihadi organisations, the research employs critical discourse analysis and qualitative content research to examine the language used by ISIS in its magazines, namely Dabiq, Rumiyah, and in the Manifesto for Women. The research highlights that there are three gendered narratives exploited by ISIS to recruit women and make them migrate. First, women are solicited to perform hijrah because it is honourable and because women's help in building the Ummah is fundamental. Secondly, women are called to hijrah to carry out violent jihad and to help in the establishment of the Islamic State. The third gendered entails leveraging women into the conviction that living in the Caliphate will allow them to escape from the corruption of the Western world and to live a pious and pure Islamic life. Migrating to ISIS-held territories is therefore fundamental to make women pure again, and to distance them from the ideas of emancipation and freedom. Thanks to the single case study in the framework of policy analysis, it is clear that the importance of Western women's migration to the Islamic State has not been intercepted by the UK's counterterrorism strategy, which deals with ISIS and its multifaceted tactics, but which does not address the radicalisation of British women who joined the ranks of ISIS. Likewise, the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security provides good insights into the gendered tactics used by violent extremist organisations, but it does not cover the migratory flux of British women or their potential return to the UK.

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A note on terms

This dissertation focuses on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which will be referred to as ISIS, due to the wide use of this acronym to indicate the group. In other studies, the same organisation may be labelled in other numerous ways, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), but in this project, the term Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is more appropriate due to the consideration of its initial status. The term Islamic State will be used for the state-like capacities and functions it has had, but its use does not imply any degree of legitimacy towards it.

A neat distinction must also be made between Islam and Islamism. Whereas the former refers to religion and its pillars and does not involve any kind of political ideology, the latter does refer to a political ideology which exploits violence as a means to establish an Islamic society.

Abbreviations

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NAP	National Action Plan on Women
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
VE	Violent Extremist
VEO	Violent Extremist Organisation
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

Introduction

Throughout the past decade, researchers and academics have studied the phenomenon of Western foreign fighters joining the ranks of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Research has been focused on male foreign fighters, while the understanding of the migration of Western women to ISIS-held territories needs to be deepened. Women represent an important part of ISIS's plan to broaden its audience and supporters, and they are part of a state-building project. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, around 41,500 persons travelled to Syria and Iraq and became supporters of ISIS, with circa 10-13% of these being women. Besides radicalising factors such as grievances, networks, ideologies, enabling environments and support structures, it is important to understand which narratives a patriarchal and male-dominated terrorist group has exploited to recruit women and how it has managed to align its values with the active participation of women. Furthermore, since the UK has been one of the Western countries from which most women migrated, it is relevant to understand whether the country has targeted this migratory flux in its Counterterrorism Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

In the literature, misconceptions about women's agency and roles in terrorist organisations are still prevalent. These stereotypes include notions that women are less likely to use violence, do not pose a threat to national security, or are better suited for specific types of preventing and countering violent extremism efforts. This dissertation aims to shed light on the clear political agency of women in ISIS as well as on the overlooked topic of ISIS's gendered strategies targeted at Western women to understand which narratives, themes, and strategies have been used to appeal to women. It also aims to understand whether the UK, which is a country struck by a high number of women migrating to ISIS-held territories, has taken steps to address this phenomenon.

This research project is important to carry out as, even though ISIS has lost its territories in Syria and Iraq, the total defeat or the end of the Islamic State has not yet happened. As a matter of fact, even if the loss of the majority of ISIS territory in Syria and Iraq may give the perception of the fall of the IS, the recent attacks on European soil, after its apparent defeat, have raised questions about IS's ability to conduct new attacks. These attacks have shed light on the continuity of ISIS's life and opened the doors to the virtual Caliphate. In fact, ISIS's propaganda and narrative remain still clear and strong by managing to appeal to Muslims worldwide. Furthermore, even though the reshaping of IS's territories is undeniable, this has not deprived the group of its material and human resources, which can gather strength again and shape their capacities in order to carry out attacks inside and outside of Syria and Iraq. Thus, even though ISIS may not be a proto-state entity anymore, it is still an ideological terrorist phenomenon. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of gendered propaganda aimed at Western women and assessing the steps taken by a Western country is important to keep countering this threat.

In order to examine these research topics, this dissertation will first employ a combination of critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. The former will be employed to understand how ISIS, a terrorist group that reinforces gendered and patriarchal norms, has aligned its values with an agenda to appeal to Western women. This method is crucial to understand the ways in which ISIS exploits gendered propaganda to appeal to women and make them travel to ISIS-held territories. Therefore, it will be possible to uncover how ISIS strategically exploited propaganda to recruit Western women. This involves analysing the language used in ISIS magazines, namely the Dabiq, Rumiyah and the Manifesto for Women. Qualitative content analysis, instead, will be employed to identify patterns and themes used to align ISIS ideology with women's agenda. The combination of CDA and qualitative content analysis

allows to consider the textual elements of ISIS propaganda while taking into account the gendered and patriarchal dynamics at the basis of ISIS. The second part of analysis, which focuses on the UK's counterterrorism strategies, employs the single case study methodology that allows to gain contextual and in-depth knowledge about the UK's tools to prevent and counter terrorism. The single case study will be placed in the framework of policy analysis as analysing the UK's counterterrorism strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security entails evaluating these policies and assessing whether and how they target ISIS's propaganda, and whether they are effectively gender sensitive. Therefore, this framework gives the possibility to evaluate the impact of the strategies considering their ultimate goals.

This study aims to answer the following research questions: what gendered strategies does ISIS employ to recruit Western women? Did the UK's counterterrorism strategy target the migratory flux of British women to ISIS-held territories? If yes, how? If not, is it gender sensitive? Did the UK National Action Plan on Women 2018-2022 target the migratory flux of British women to ISIS-held territories? If yes, how? If not, are the adopted tools effectively gender-sensitive? By answering these questions, the research project aims to assess ISIS's current ideological capabilities in order to verify if this threat is still critical and the phenomenon is relevant. One objective entails understanding the Islamic State's unique strategies to radicalise and recruit women while rationalising its patriarchal ideology. Finally, the dissertation proposes to examine if the United Kingdom, which is a country from where a high number of women departs to join the Islamic State, has targeted this flux in its counterterrorism strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security 2018-2022 by implementing gender-sensitive tools and policies.

In order to meet these objectives, the dissertation first provides give a picture of the state of knowledge on women's participation in Islamist organisations, and

in ISIS. It will then consider the debates around the recurrent concepts of radicalisation, terrorism, and counterterrorism, and lay the foundations for their definition. The dissertation will then shed light on the real threat posed by ISIS and on its material and ideological capabilities and on the relevance of Western women's migratory phenomenon. After explaining the data collection and analysis methods used in this dissertation and considering the dissertation's limitations, the thesis will focus on the analysis of ISIS's unique strategies ISIS to recruit Western women. It will finally consider UK's Strategy for Countering Terrorism and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 to understand whether the UK has targeted the migratory flux towards ISIS-held territories in its strategies and to evaluate whether UK's policies and tools are gender sensitive.

Chapter 1: Literature review

This chapter aims to give a clear picture of the state of knowledge on women's participation in Islamist organisations, and in ISIS. For this purpose, it will first shed light on the research limitations that have characterised women's involvement in terrorist organisations, and after considering these research shortcomings, the historical participation of women in Islamist organisations will be explained. The chapter will then review the literature on women's radicalisation and roles in ISIS.

1.1 Research limitations on Western women's involvement in terrorist organisations

Radicalisation and terrorism have historically been associated with the male gender, and studies have focused on the ways men were recruited and joined terrorist organisations. The latter is presumed to be composed of men, whereas women's roles and agency tend to be neglected. One example of this recurrent dynamic is represented by Sageman (2004: 115) when he defines terrorist cells as 'bunches of guys' since they included only men, not taking into consideration the women's involvement.

Throughout time, even though some researchers of feminist security studies, as well as of terrorism studies, have considered women in the terrorist discourse, women's voices remain unheard and oftentimes contribute to a partial understanding of women's participation in terrorist organisations. This is problematic because it does not allow a full comprehension of the terrorist actors involved in a certain area, their tactics, and strategies, and ultimately the ways to tackle their actions.

Even though, historically, women have been active in terrorist organisations in different regions of the world, having leadership, recruitment, fund-raising, and

direct operational positions, as well as caretaker and nurturer roles, some recurrent issues are present in the discourse of women's participation in these organisations. This is because Western and gender bias has historically affected the research on women's involvement in terrorism. The idea that women would voluntarily support a group that goes against the Western understanding of fundamental rights is not well understood. Besides, rarely are radicalisation definitions and processes comprehensively integrated with gender perspectives. In Jayne Huckerby's words (2015), 'policymakers are playing catch-up when it comes to understanding the full extent of women's roles in jihadist groups', and this has led to a fragmented understanding of female pathways into and out of violent extremism.

First, there is the assumption that women join such organisations because of personal reasons, such as a relationship with a man, or a personal tragedy, such as rape (Cunningham, 2003). Therefore, the first recurrent mistake is to seek the causes of their radicalisation on a micro level and in their personal life (Karen and Taylor, 2008). Even though this can represent the experience of some women, this line of thought is dangerous as it reduces their credibility and agency within and outside the organisation.

Secondly, when women enter the terrorist discourse, they are not considered credible perpetrators of violence but are labelled as victims of this systemic violence. The gender stereotype is evident, and women are labelled as inherently peaceful (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2011). According to Gentry and Sjoberg (2016), female terrorists are also more likely to be perceived as emotionally motivated than their male counterparts and are less likely to be perceived as logical actors. Both the media and security services frequently refer to women as victims and believe that men have persuaded them into joining terrorist organisations rather than contemplating the idea that women have decisional power and exercise their own free will.

1.2 Women's historical involvement in Islamist organisations

Nonetheless, women have taken an active part in Islamic terrorism in various contexts throughout history. Islamist organisations have been joined by women during times of conflict: they stood up for their beliefs and they faced the negative consequences of participating in a manner similar to those of male terrorists. Having considered these historical facts, it can be considered unexpected that female terrorism studies depict the majority of women as victims of male-instigated violence (Bloom, 2011). Women are viewed as filling minor logistical duties, while men are fighting or in jail. Even though these tasks are performed by women, it would be however wrong to assume that these are the only performed roles.

As a matter of fact, throughout history, women have taken on a variety of different positions in Islamist terrorist organisations. These duties range from 'moral and logistics support to espionage, outright terror operations, and the occasional leadership position' (Spencer, 2016: 75). Women's participation also varies depending on the specific terrorist organisation's ideology and methods. For instance, traditionally, in Islamist terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and Hamas, the responsibilities of women have been limited. Indeed, traditional gender roles have always played an important role in Islamist ideology, in which women's space was supposed to be limited to the private sphere. In fact, in the majority of cases, women took care of the 'vertical transmission of family morals and values', therefore they have been mothers who needed to pass down over generations of children Islamist knowledge (Winn and Decker, 2008). At first, women remained in the cage of gender norms and were allowed to hold background roles. Organisations such as Hamas have put emphasis on the necessity of maintaining traditional positions in the home, social circles, and as future generations' educators (Lahoud, 2014). With the passing of time, women have had roles as recruiters, organisers, proselytisers, interpreters, and

fundraisers, thus remaining within the Islamic gender norms (Georges-Abeyie, 1983).

Nonetheless, women have claimed different positions and roles in these organisations, and their roles have often been legitimised, especially considering the need for these organisations to build a strong structure, which cannot be complete without women. As a matter of fact, organisations like Hamas and the Islamic State have made an effort to fill the gap between their extreme Islamist doctrine and the practical role that women play in their groups. Although these Islamist groups differ one from another in many aspects, they defied convention and urged women to take up arms, but only in particular contingencies and for limited time frames.

Therefore, it is clear that the proper place for women in the ranks of Islamist organisations has long been a source of contention, but women have always been considered in these organisations' big picture. As a matter of fact, the discussion on women and jihad [1] was first brought up by Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member and one of the main figures in the early al-Qaeda. Azzam (1979) stated in his book, Defense of the Muslim Lands, that 'We have confirmed what has been agreed upon by the earlier (salaf [2]) and latter (khalaf[3]) generations of hadith scholars, exegetes, jurists, and scholars of religious principles (usul[4]), namely that: When a span of Muslim land is

[1] It does refer to the obligation and struggle of the Muslim community to follow and realize God's will, but in the context of this dissertation and hereinafter, it is understood as violent jihad, which is referred to the jihad carried out by Islamist terrorist organisations.

[2] It means 'predecessor' or 'forefather' and refers to the first three generations of Muslims.

[3] It means 'successor'.

[4] It means 'fundamental principles'.

occupied jihad becomes individually obligatory (fard al-Ayn[5]) on the inhabitants of that piece of land. The woman may go out without her husband's permission with a mahram [6], the one in debt without the permission of the one to whom he owes, and the child without his father's permission. If the inhabitants of that area are not sufficient in number, fall short, or are lazy, the individually obligatory nature of jihad extends to those around them, and so on and so on until it covers the entire Earth, being individually obligatory just like salah[7], fasting, so that nobody may abandon it.' If women were to participate in jihad, they should have complied with Sharī'ah [8] rules, such as covering their faces and being separated from men. In any case, even though Azzam thought women could be part of the public sphere, he did not reserve them a fixed place in fighting, but he claimed they should be constrained in roles involving nursing and cooking.

Another Islamist figure, namely Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif, one of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's mentors, disapproved of women's involvement in jihad, claiming that women should only have performed defensive resistance, and pointed out that 'for this reason, women can receive basic training so they can be prepared to repel their attackers' (Brachman and Felter, 2006). However, in the case of an enemy's attack, jihad is a duty for all Muslims, and 'women could volunteer for jihad in this case but they do not have to' and they should use 'weapons that are used for self-defence' (McCants et al., 2006; 59). Nonetheless, even though women are recognised the possibility of joining the

[5] It refers to legal obligations that must be performed by every Muslim.

[6] It refers to a family member with whom marriage is prohibited in Islam. It also refers to a male guardian who escorts a woman on a journey.

[7] It refers to the daily that is compulsory for Muslims to perform five times a day.

[8] It is the Islamic law, and it is seen as the expression of God's command.

fight, Al-Sharif points out that it is prohibited to participate in leadership positions (McCants et al., 2006).

Furthermore, Yusuf Al-Ayeri, the ideological leader of one of al-Qaeda's Saudi branches, in his work The Role of Women in the Jihad against Enemies (undated), examined both salaf and contemporary women's experiences in jihad. He stated that 'considering that the woman is the cradle of the men and the caretaker of the plant until its build becomes strong, it is appropriate for us to direct to her this address in which we urge her to carry out her active role in the current war between Islam and all the disbelieving nations, without exception. And so long as the woman abandons taking up that battle and is either isolated from it or (is not) present to strengthen the determination (of the fighters), then this is the first step to defeat and it is the way to lose, and this is what has happened to our Ummah[9] today' (Al-Ayeri, undated: 3). Even though active combat roles were contemplated, gendered positions were always included in the perspective of Islamist groups. Al-Ayeri (undated: 4) underlined that "Islam was not victorious in its radiant times over the disbelieving nations who were greater than it in power, in number, and in wealth except when the woman was up for the responsibility, for she is the one who raises her children upon the Jihad, and she is the one who guards the man's honour and wealth if he goes out for Jihad, and she is the one who is patient and helps her children and her husband remain patient in the pursuance of this path. So, the saying, ''Behind every great man is a woman' is true of the women of that time, so we could say, 'Behind every great Mujahid[10] is a woman.'' Therefore, even though gendered roles are always present in Islamist agendas, participating in jihad has been a recurrent activity for both salaf and contemporary women. The same ideas are shared by Markaz al-Dirasat wa'l-Buhuth al-Islamiyya, who

[9] It refers to the Muslim community across the world. It often refers to a nation.

[10] It refers to a person who engages in jihad.

encourages women to take part in jihad, as they did in early Islamic history (McCants et al., 2006).

1.3 Western women's radicalisation and role in ISIS

Nowadays, terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, are increasingly using women in their ranks to achieve their ideological and political goals (Chowdhury-Fink et al., 2013). ISIS purposefully seeks out women for several reasons, including expanding its membership and population and gaining media attention. ISIS sees women as an 'untapped resource' and has growingly become more open to compromise on its doctrine to include women (Sutten, 2009; 17). Women's inclusion turned out to be a tactical advantage for ISIS, as their participation gets global media coverage. Thanks to this, Western women, who are contemporaneously reached by ISIS recruitment strategies and radicalised, decide to do hijrah [11] and join jihad (Gardner, 2015). At the same time, some researchers point out that ISIS deploys women for strategic purposes, such as substituting male jihadists who died in battle (Bloom, 2010) or because women are more expendable than men (Laster and Erez, 2015).

As mentioned before, Islamic law does not forbid the participation of women on the battleship, especially when engaging in defensive jihad, or in leadership positions. Therefore, it is not the law itself that hinders women's agency, but it is ISIS-gendered hierarchies and norms which do not want to modify the status quo (Lahoud, 2014). This is due to the idea that popular support would decrease if women were involved in operational positions (De Leede, 2018). Therefore,

[11] It is historically the journey of the Islamic prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. It means 'migration', and in the extremist context, it is used to describe the journey of foreign fighters from their home countries to terrorist-held territories abroad.

even though women are strategically necessary for ISIS, their recruitment could create a backlash (Loken, 2021).

Within ISIS ranks, women are required to be wives and mothers, as well as to operate in logistics and tactical necessities, and on the battlefield. The number of women foreign fighters travelling to the territories held by ISIS has been growing throughout the years, and with it, there is an associated risk that some may return to Europe to carry out terrorist attacks.

Women who join terrorist organisations are often mistankenly referred to as 'jihadi brides', which deprives them of any political motivation (Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2020; 399). However, recent research demonstrates that women frequently engage in terrorism of their own volition. These researchers show how factors similar to those for men can account for how female foreign fighters enter and behave within terrorist organisations (Bakker and de Leede, 2015). Additionally, it is critical to recognise push and pull factors in order to understand how women come to support violent extremism. Push factors include individual motivations, such as personal victimisation, discrimination, or other historical, political, and personal grievances, that make women more receptive to extremist propaganda (Saltman and Smith, 2015). Instead, pull factors work as motivators for women to join terrorist organisations because they appeal to their desires for independence, adventure, a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and familial ties, or because they romanticise the experience (Sageman, 2008). Jihadist organisations translate these push-and-pull dynamics into expertly designed propaganda.

Academics have recently begun to point out gendered elements in this propaganda messaging (Mehran et al., 2020). Because women encounter gender inequalities, the underlying socioeconomic factors fostering radicalisation processes do not affect women and men equally, which causes terrorist organisations to approach the former differently (Jardoon, 2021). For example,

Muslim women are subjected to more discrimination than Muslim men due to the tangible nature of their faith through the veil. Terrorist groups take advantage of these unjust conditions when looking for new recruits.

When ISIS tries to recruit Western women, it does it by claiming that it is a herald of women's rights and that Western societies are corrupt. They do not respect gender roles, and women are not enabled to achieve their highest morality, therefore ISIS accuses the West of causing society's underpinnings to fall apart and collapse (Bloom and Winter, 2015). The West neglects family obligations by promoting women to take significant jobs that are legitimately reserved for men. Because of this, constant chaos permeates the entire planet, and because of this, ISIS provides women with a way out of the strict rules of Western feminism as well as the chance to play a positive role in the Caliphate. Some researchers claim that ISIS pressures women into fulfilling conventional roles such as wife, mother, and nurturer in order to transform them into stewards of cultural, social, and religious values who subsequently pass these ideas on to the next generation (Hall, 2014).

In regard to marriage, women are on Earth to serve men, not the other way around. ISIS adherents hold the view that a woman's duty is to be a good wife to her husband. Wives of jihadists are expected to carry out a variety of tasks. The primary responsibility of a wife is to care for and sustain her husband, in addition to giving birth to the next generation. She has a responsibility to provide him with support as he fights in the Holy War (Walt, 2014).

Furthermore, expectations for women are to perform household duties like preparing meals every day and keeping the house tidy while remaining concealed and veiled (Sutten, 2009). Women are taught not to fear or be upset by the death of their future husbands before they marry an ISIS soldier. Women must understand that being a martyr's widow is a privilege and an honour. Indeed, many recruits become widows soon after becoming married to their

jihadist husbands (Moaveni, 2015). ISIS also needs women to build the Caliphate, or at least, to help it gain back its strength. ISIS makes it clear in its manifesto for women that the primary purpose of Allah for women is childbearing (Spencer, 2016). Women are expected to pursue their religious education and care for and educate their children while shielding them from the influences of unbelievers. Undoubtedly, a woman's biggest duty is to raise the new jihadi generation (Bloom and Winter, 2015).

The ISIS manifesto states that some women are allowed to work outside of the home walls (Abdul-Alim, 2015). Women can also be involved in jihad. As mentioned before, people are permitted to fight if the enemy invades the country and there are insufficient men to defend it (Spencer, 2016). In addition, women who are widowed or unmarried may be given low-level jobs that are intended to help the organisation. These positions are usually restricted to either a recruiter or a member of ISIS' all-female security unit, the Al-Khansaa Brigade. At first, this Brigade was created to conduct stop-and-search operations at IS checkpoints after its commanders were assassinated by men dressed as women (Bloom and Winter, 2015). The unit carries out tasks related to law enforcement, monitoring slaves, recruiting and intelligence gathering (Abdul-Alim, 2015). According to some researchers, Al-Khansaa Brigade is composed of Western single women, between the age of 18 and 25 (Bhutia, 2015). Al-Khansaa was given the responsibility of enforcing public morality for women in Raqqa. Each member completed a 15-day firearms course where they learned how to load, clean, and fire pistols (The Belfast Child, 2015). After being trained, the women militia started patrolling the city, making sure that female residents adhered to ISIS' stringent Sharī'ah laws while wearing abayas and niqabs (Smith, 2015). All women from adolescence onward are required to adhere to ISIS's dress code, which stipulates that they must always wear two dark face veils, black hand gloves, and two robes to hide their body shapes (Rafiq and Malik, 2015). Al-Khansaa is armed with AK-47s to enter the lives of women at any time and for

any cause in order to enforce the laws (Ali, 2015). These women also track down people who might violate rules, such as expressing disapproval of ISIS policies (Gowrinathan, 2014). Despite the unit's position of authority, women cannot question any ISIS rules or practices, they only enforce the policies. Even though women do not hold authoritative positions, this group works as a militia (Moaveni, 2015).

Furthermore, women hold positions as online recruiters. As a matter of fact, more than 20,000 foreign jihadists have been drawn to ISIS by its massive social media presence (Peresin, 2015). ISIS primarily uses Western women as recruiters to spearhead its social media campaigns on platforms like Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and Whatsapp (Bloom and Winter, 2015). Female online recruiters aim to encourage other foreign women to perform hijrah in areas under ISIS control. ISIS propaganda manages to leverage women who feel detached from society because of social injustices and promises a better life. Female recruiters also offer useful hacks to potential muhājirat[12], such as suggestions on what to bring to ISIS-held territories, what to say to their families, and how to be good wives (Peresin, 2015). Furthermore, women are provided with any kind of information which is useful to perform hijrah, such as ISIS members' phone numbers, and lawyers' names in case of issues with officials in transit countries (Spencer, 2016).

ISIS has sought out people with advanced degrees ever since the Caliphate was established. In 2014, former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made appeals to judges, doctors, engineers, and academics to join the Caliphate (Gowrinathan, 2014). Many foreign women have joined IS because they believe their skills will be valued and appreciated (Bloom, 2015). Therefore, women also work in administration, law enforcement, and welfare roles (Spencer, 2015). In addition, women are employed in the management of social facilities, hospitals, and

[12] A plural word referring to female migrants.

nursing homes (Smith, 2015). Working outside the home is permitted according to the ISIS manifesto for women. A woman's work obligations cannot run longer than three days per week or into the evening to minimize her time away from her family (Kulze and Shiloach, 2014).

To sum up, women hold strategically important positions and perform relevant roles. Women are the repositories of ISIS's ideology as they raise the lion cubs of the Caliphate, and they convey a culture of violent extremism which can survive beyond territorial losses. Women are also fundamental to give the idea of continuity to ISIS, and to create 'the image of a well-developed, fully functioning, safe society' (The Carter Center, 2017: 7). Women also serve as members of the al-Khansaa Brigade, online recruiters and fundraisers. Women are also trained for combat roles, especially after ISIS's loss of territories, and act as militants and suicide bombers.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

This chapter will consider the debates around the concepts of radicalisation, terrorism, and counterterrorism, and lay the foundations for their definitions. This chapter will serve as a roadmap to decline the different topics in their chosen definition in order to develop them in the following chapters.

2.1 The concept of radicalisation

It is fundamental to define the concept of radicalisation, whose meaning raises questions and confusion, in order to be able to analyse the radicalisation of Western women in ISIS. Since the 9/11 events in 2001, the term radicalisation has generally been utilised to guide public policies and has drawn attention from the media, the general public, and academia (Cesari and McLoughlin, 2005). The political climate after the 2001 attacks encouraged a shift in the discourse about radicalisation, as a matter of fact, the term started to be used more than in previous decades. Before 2001, the discourse about radicalisation and terrorism focused on the ideology, on the group and on the individual, whereas after 2001 the discourse shifted leaning toward the individual, 'de-emphasising the wider circumstances – "the root causes"' (Sedgwick, 2010: 480).

Furthermore, radicalisation is frequently used incorrectly as a synonym for extremism or engagement, but its meaning must not be confused with these concepts. What most researchers agree with is that radicalisation is composed of different factors (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 960), such as 'the socialisation into an extremist belief system that sets the stage for violence even if it does not make it inevitable.' The meaning of radicalisation can also vary depending on the context in which it is used, for instance in the security, integration, or foreign policy context (Sedgwick, 2010).

When trying to define radicalisation, academia often uses the word process to refer to it (Vidino, 2011; Helfstein, 2012). However, as pointed out by Hafez

and Mullins (2015), it would be incorrect to define radicalisation as a process, as it would imply that radicalisation should follow consequent and neat steps, while, in reality, it is a phenomenon caused by numerous diverse factors at different stages. As a matter of fact, 'there are multiple and diverse pathways leading individuals and groups to radicalisation and terrorism' (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008).

In light of this, Hafez and Mullins (2015: 959) created a framework called 'the radicalisation puzzle', which well describes the variety of circumstances which contribute to radicalisation. The puzzle metaphor is also used because the question 'why and how do individuals residing in relatively peaceful and affluent societies come to embrace extremist ideologies that emanate from distant places?' offers a complex answer (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 959). It is indeed important to understand the broad and varied pathways to radicalisation and to consider how different factors lead to radicalisation at different stages of one's recruitment. In fact, 'analysts should embrace the multifactor and contextual approach that is implied by the puzzle metaphor' (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 959). This puzzle is formed by grievances, networks, enabling environments and support structures, and ideologies (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 961).

Grievances can be defined as 'feelings of frustration or dissatisfaction with social, political or economic conditions, whether at the local or global level' (Ajil, 2022: 305). As pointed out by Wiktorowicz (2005), grievances can be personal, including feelings of discrimination, alienation, exclusion, and victimhood. They can include personal strong experiences, such as loss or trauma, which 'serve as triggers in that they make afflicted individuals receptive to black-and-white perceptions of the world around them, to easy solutions, and to radical ideologies of all sorts' (Souleimanov, 2018). Grievances can also be group ones: Muslims feel oppressed and disenchanted with European societies and share a common anti-European sentiment. This is true, especially in the

second and third generations, who are stuck between their Muslim families, and the laic values of European societies, not fully belonging to either. They face discrimination because of religion, race, and ethnicity (Mythen et al., 2009). Women face further discrimination because of gender, and because they wear a tangible symbol of Islam, which makes them more exposed to discrimination and exclusion (Aziz, 2012).

Grievances can also derive from European foreign policies toward Muslim states, which are perceived as Western aggressions against Islam (Bakker, 2016). In fact, grievances can revolve around events in the Middle East, where Western nations have caused issues and havoc in the past century as well as during the Global War on Terror (Ajil, 2022). Grievances can also be caused by inequality in the distribution of resources and poor representation in important political positions, as well as by low social-economic status, whose creation and maintenance usually stick with minorities. Poor housing and material deprivation can contribute to already-perceived grievances (Piazza, 2011).

Furthermore, researchers agree on the fact that networks are among the most important factors that lead to radicalisation and recruitment (Sageman, 2004; Hafez and Mullins, 2015). As a matter of fact, existing relations and ties with people are facilitators of the recruitment process, as people who know each other, or family, are more eager to adhere to similar values or to follow peers and relatives. At the same time, people who feel discriminated and marginalised find comfort and a sense of belonging and community in a radical milieu's activism. As a matter of fact, 'the quest for significance is the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect... [including] need for esteem, achievement, meaning, competence, control, and so on' (Kruglanski et al., 2014: 73). At the same time, 'people strive to reduce feelings of uncertainty about themselves, their social world and their place within it—they like to know who they are and how to behave, and who others are and how they might behave.

Being properly located in this way renders the social world and one's place within it relatively predictable and allows one to plan effective action, avoid harm, know whom to trust, and so forth. Group identification is particularly effective at reducing or protecting against self-related uncertainty' (Hogg et al., 2010: 1062). As Willer points out (2009: 23), 'by contributing, individuals display their concern for the group. The group, in turn, conveys respect for the individual. Receiving that respect further motivates the individual to contribute'. People who are like-minded manage to create a common identity, and the group becomes exclusive, therefore it is difficult to enter unless there are bonds of trust and commitment with one of the members. As a matter of fact, especially in recruitment processes, people 'like to know who they are and how to behave, and who others are and how they might behave' Hogg et al., 2010: 1062). The search for sisterhood indeed represents a factor which leads women to join ISIS, as 'sisters' hold the same beliefs and wish to belong to community. Furthermore, it is common to recruit in prisons, religious communities and study groups, as well as in workplaces and professional organisations (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). When people enter these groups, it is difficult to leave them, because of peer pressure, expectations, and the actual cost of abandoning that life and starting a new one.

The third factor which contributes to radicalisation pathways is represented by ideology, which arises when 'an individual engages with a radical group or persons espousing a radical ideology and follows a progressive, though sometimes insidious, progression of subversive behaviours, sometimes culminating in terrorism' (Borum, 2011: 27). Islam is used as leverage to convey a political ideology, which needs a way to justify the use of violence (Sageman, 2004). As a matter of fact, 'terrorists were set apart less by their adherence to a particular school of thought than by their adoption of a specific set of ideas: an exclusionary 'us versus them' ideology, and a rejection of 'the other', which in many cases resulted in an unwillingness to engage with social or political

elements of Western society' (Bartlett et al., 2010: 15). Ideologues, who represent a small part of jihadists, hold ideological knowledge, whereas most people have a partial understanding of the group's ideology (Horgan, 2008). Even though most members of terrorist groups may not grasp the theological basis of their groups' ideology, this does not make them less committed to it. Moreover, Islamist ideology exploits symbols and narratives to create a new identity that goes against what is conventionally accepted, giving individuals the idea that a new world can be created. This ideology is widespread in Europe, where individuals hold, at least theoretically, a devout Salafist worldview, which expresses strong anti-Western values. Salafism has also shaped Islam concepts and traditions to make them more relevant to modern times. Therefore, radicalising forces have exploited Islam as a tool to reframe their violent actions.

Enabling environments and support structures are the fourth factor leading to radicalisation, as they provide material support for it. This factor entails training camps, where radicalised people get trained to carry out violent jihad, and can find like-minded fellows, as well as internet connection and social media (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). Internet and social media have played a fundamental role in the radicalisation of Western women, who are often approached online and are convinced to travel to ISIS-held territories. Such technologies have undoubtedly facilitated radicalisation, which still passes through face-to-face meetings, but has also developed in online teachings and meetings. As pointed out by Hafez and Mullins (2015: 969), 'jihadists turn to the Internet, online forums, chat rooms, and a whole range of social media technologies to circumvent the physical and legal limits on reaching new recruits.' Sageman (2004) affirms that social networks hold a more important role than ideology as they are the means through which contact is facilitated.

A new dimension to radicalisation is added by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which allow users to share, cross-post and disseminate content quickly, without a chance to limit or track the content's viewership.

These technologies have overcome static radicalising materials which can be found on YouTube, or in online magazines like Dabiq and Rumiyah. Communication through social media has been able to show images of Muslims suffering in the world, raising consensus among interested people to change this situation (Hafez and Mullins, 2015). Nowadays it is also very challenging to remove this online content from the internet, giving the chance to potential recruits to be able to always trace materials from the net (Klausen, 2015). Therefore, social media platforms increase the possibility of becoming radicalised by 'facilitating the distribution of propaganda and validating extreme beliefs by like-minded radicals' (Hafez and Mullins, 2015: 970).

In conclusion, it is important to remember that radicalisation is multi-faceted and entails a broad variety of elements, whose convergence changes from case to case. Radicalisation should not be considered a process, but a non-linear phenomenon, whose 'puzzle' is composed of grievances, networks, ideologies, enabling environments and support structures, which hold different weights depending on the individual (Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

2.2 The concept of terrorism

To analyse the radicalisation of women in terrorist organisations, it is also necessary to clarify the concept of terrorism. As a matter of fact, even though the term terrorism has been widely used in the political and public discourse, there is no international consensus about its meaning (Charles, 2007). Researchers have focused on the definition of terrorism for more than half a century, but efforts have not led to any internationally shared result. Among others, the impossibility of arriving at a definition can also be reconducted to political reasons, as different States try to defend their interests and regional aspirations (Fletcher, 2006). Furthermore, although there have been significant improvements in recent years in both the amount and the quality of research output, the field of terrorism studies study still has a long way to go in terms of

theory and methodology. As argued by Martha Crenshaw (2000; 405), the issue is that 'the field is probably still plagued by the enduring challenges posed by a lack of definition (what terrorism constitutes); the inability to build a cohesive integrated and cumulative theory (built around larger data sets and over longer time periods) and the event-driven nature of much research.'

This dissertation proposes a critical approach to the study of terrorism: terrorism analysed through the lens of critical methods is not new in this field of research. As a matter of fact, researchers have long held scepticism about the prevalent discourse and methods of research on those who are labelled terrorists, and, as a result, a large portion of the literature contested accepted ideas about the nature and causes of terrorism (Zulaika and Douglass, 1996). According to left-wing scholars involved in the study of terrorism during the Cold War, the field of terrorism studies was found to be ideologically motivated to justify Western governments' involvement in the repression of left-wing movements in some developing countries (Herman and O'Sullivan, 1989; Chomsky and Herman, 1979). Initially, critical research was not published or considered during important events, and it did not influence the mainstream, international relations-based panorama. However, dissatisfaction in the terrorism studies field has emerged, and the widespread knowledge about terrorism started to be openly questioned by researchers, practitioners, and politicians (Black, 2008). A critical turn began to be more visible thanks to these researchers who encouraged and stimulated it. In fact, even though many scholars continued to accept uncritically a variety of 'myths', and 'half-truths', some voices of dissent stopped treating the terrorist threat facing some Western states as 'not only objectively real, but also unprecedented, extremely threatening, and exceptional' (Jackson et al., 2009: 219).

Taking the definition provided by Robert Cox (1986; 208) regarding the meaning of critical, he mentions that it implies 'standing apart from the prevailing order of the world and asking how that order came about'. As a matter

of fact, Cox (1986; 128) comes from the idea that 'theory is always from somewhere, for someone and for some purpose.' Booth rightfully adds that theory is also 'from somewhere' (2007; 150), meaning that it derives from ideas, assumptions, and takeaways which are not universally accepted but are created by specific contexts and values. In fact, 'what we choose to focus on, what we exclude, how we interpret data, and to what use we put them is influenced by our perceptions and ideological leanings, by the social processes we are part of, by the political and economic structures we inhabit, and the material and ideational interests that derive from them. Thus, adopting a Critical Theory approach to the study of terrorism, first, means uncovering the ideological, conceptual, and institutional underpinnings of terrorism studies' (Jackson et al., 2009: 90).

As Christine Sylvester and Swati Parashar (2009) pointed out, Critical Terrorism Studies must go further and bring gender into the discourse as feminist contributions and points of view are essential to build a complete framework. The two authors claim that, in order to boost critical thinking, gender frameworks should be applied while studying security and violence-related issues. They also contend that women's voices have been marginalised or relegated to stereotyped positions in the prevalent representations of terrorism. Since the number of women perpetrating terrorism has grown, the literature has also flourished, and authors have addressed the lack of gendered analysis of international terrorism and counterterrorism measures.

Considering the importance of understanding terrorism as a varied and complex phenomenon, which must entail gender perspectives, this dissertation uses the term terrorism as conceptualised by Ben Saul (2006) in the volume Defining Terrorism in International Law. He considered and analysed international and regional treaty law, customary international law, human rights and humanitarian law, and understood their common grounds to build a definition. Saul lists the elements which create the definition: (i) prohibited means and methods: serious

violence; (ii) prohibited purposes or aims: motives and objectives; (iii) the threat to international security: an international element; (iv) plain textual meaning: creating terror or extreme fear; (v) exception, before constructing a legal definition of terrorism.

Considering all these elements, Saul declines them in the framework of terrorism, and he offers the following definition of terrorism: (1) 'Any serious, violent, criminal act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury, or to endanger life, including by acts against property; (2) where committed outside an armed conflict; (3) for a political, ideological, religious, or ethnic purpose; and (4) where intended to create extreme fear in a person, group, or the general public, and: (a) seriously intimidate a population or part of a population, or (b) unduly compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act. (5) Advocacy, protest, dissent, or industrial action which is not intended to cause death, serious bodily harm, or serious risk to public health or safety does not constitute a terrorist act' (Saul, 2006: 65).

2.3 The concept of counterterrorism

In the past decades, researchers have focused on the definition of terrorism, developing many studies and theories about it, despite not being able to reach consensus on its definition. Counterterrorism definitions and studies have been left aside, but articulating the concept of terrorism is key to understanding counterterrorism. As a matter of fact, 'defining terrorism nowadays is even harder but more important than ever, since the success of counterterrorism strategies may depend on the proper designation of terrorism' (Romaniuk et al., 2017: 73). What is sure about counterterrorism is the 'antagonism between terrorism in any form and the state(s) it is directed against' (Romaniuk et al., 2017: 92).

Like terrorism, counterterrorism is a political and politicised issue, and this makes it more difficult to study. At the same time, not defining terrorism or its diverse root causes, hinders the efforts to find solutions. Another difficulty is represented by the 'expansive scope of actual and potential counterterrorist policy' (Crenshaw and LaFree, 2017: 29). It can entail many measures, 'from restricting financing to winning hearts and minds and "countering radicalization" through delegitimising counternarratives, to "decapitation" of groups by killing leaders by means of drone attacks, to preemptive military force and invasion and occupation' (Crenshaw and LaFree, 2017: 29). Furthermore, counterterrorism, especially after the consequences and the political climate emerged from the Global War on Terror, must be rethought in a critically oriented manner. In fact, counterterrorism efforts must not be only state-oriented. Critical Terrorism Studies are helpful again to bring new ideas and concepts into the discourse, especially 'alternative policy recommendations for policymakers, which can be used to both increase the efficacy of counterterrorism and address (some of) the grievances of those who have resorted to political violence' (Jackson et al., 2009: 234). Herring (2008: 198) argues that research should take into consideration the political and economic contexts of counterterrorism theory and practice, meaning that it is necessary to 'reconnect these critical analyses to ideas of class, capitalism, and imperialism'.

Therefore, most literature shows counterterrorism from a traditional point of view and this does not allow to broaden its study, whereas it is important to adopt a more comprehensive approach to counterterrorism. As a matter of fact, 'the distinct gap in current literature and practice to understand and address the link between gender and counterterrorism deserves vital and immediate attention by academics, policymakers and security practitioners alike' (Romaniuk, 2017: 875). This is also because it must be taken into account how people, especially women, are considered and impacted in counterterrorism efforts.

Having understood the limitations of counterterrorism research, and the necessity to include gender in it, it is necessary to give a comprehensive definition of counterterrorism to proceed in this study. Silvia D'Amato (2019: 14) affirms that 'counterterrorism has in fact been defined in a variety of ways. Usually, its definition is empirically grounded, and so literature has largely been indifferent with respect to the nuances between anti- and counterterrorism. […] The notion of counterterrorism implies a responsive interaction or the idea of an imperative to react to implemented forms of terrorism. To simplify, this study will employ "counterterrorism to refer to the general decisions that states make across numerous policy areas to fight terrorism. Hence, counterterrorism is understood in a broader sense as a type of security policy addressing terrorism and encompassing a range of actions, both domestic and international.'

Chapter 3: Threat assessment on ISIS

This chapter will shed light on the real threat posed by ISIS and on its material and ideological capabilities. This is fundamental in order to understand the relevance of the migration of Western women into ISIS-held territories nowadays and in the future, as well as their radicalisation which could lead to terrorist attacks in their home countries.

3.1 Material threat: monetary, military and human resources

Despite ISIS's loss of territory, the group remains intact and still has access to a range of $25 million to $50 million in cash reserves in Syria and Iraq. This is possible because the group gathered funds during the 2014-2017 occupation of Iraqi and Syrian swaths of territory, by 'selling oil, extorting local economies, and looting banks' (US Department of the Treasury, 2022). As a matter of fact, ISIS has always generated income thanks to the control of territory and the possibilities this has offered. This money is used as a way to 'support its branches and networks around the world, finance extremist operations, maintain a loyal cadre of supporters, conduct recruitment and fund propaganda, secure the release of its members from prisons and internally displaced persons camps, and pay family members of deceased and imprisoned ISIS personnel' (US Department of the Treasury, 2022). Thanks to its adaptability and its understanding of counterterrorism efforts, ISIS prepared for its temporary withdrawal in the territories along the Euphrates River, stockpiling weapons, fuel, cash, and bomb-making materials, but also supplies such as food and water in prefabricated trenches (Alhohammad, 2019). Reports also say that part of the Islamic State's fighters, those who are not in detention centres, are hiding in remote areas among civilians in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In a 'calculated strategy', IS fighters purposefully 'melted away' in the border area between Iraq and Syria (Hassan, 2017).

It is also true that, as a result of regional law enforcement initiatives and counterterrorism operations from the Global Coalition against Daesh's armed forces, ISIS material resources are dwindling. As a matter of fact, ISIS fighters spend more money each month than they are able to make in the same time frame, therefore the expenses for weapons and training outpace ISIS income. In order to maintain their financial stability, ISIS officials must rely on revenues from kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and sporadic outside donations. ISIS still controls commercial routes, thanks to which it taxes 'smugglers of weapons and narcotics as well as human traffickers' (UN Secretary-General, 2023: 3). It was also reported that oil smuggling is still a source of income in Syria, as well as livestock theft. Reports say that ISIS has also started to 'launder money through investments in legitimate businesses such as hotels and real estate in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic' (UN Secretary-General, 2023: 3). Moreover, 'unregistered informal cash transfer networks and mobile money services continue to be the dominant means by which Daesh moves money, along with cash couriers, currency exchanges, secure payment systems and virtual assets. Daesh increasingly uses virtual currencies, especially so-called stable coins, and continues to fundraise on social media platforms, often using creative means such as the exchange of video gaming points into fiat currency' (UN Secretary-General, 2023: 3). ISIS has also access to weapon systems, ranging from small and light weapons to improvised explosive devices, to unmanned aerial systems bought at low cost for surveillance and reconnaissance and to target accurately and effectively (UN Secretary-General, 2023).

ISIS officials have also recently highlighted the importance of fundraising to their followers since they understand that they will not be able to support their people otherwise. ISIS, due to its particular structure, has always had a population from which it can require taxes, and territories where it could extract natural resources, steal property, and rob banks and stores. Therefore, even if fundraising was encouraged, ISIS has never been as dependent, as the majority

of terrorist groups, on donations (Heißner et al., 2017). But relying on the population and territories has become a problem since its territorial defeat, and this can now be appointed as one of the reasons why ISIS is experiencing financial difficulties. As a matter of fact, losing its territories has deprived ISIS of its main revenues, especially no people to levy taxes and no control over natural resources (Callimachi, 2019). The 'economic model' of the organisation depends on continual territorial growth which gives access to more and more resources. Leaked budget documents show how important this source of income was during the group's apex of popularity, which stopped being beneficial as the expansion was halted (Al-Tamimi, 2016). At the same time, the Global Coalition has contributed to reduce ISIS's finances by launching Operation Tidal Wave II in October 2015 which targeted oil infrastructure, transportation systems, and cash depots, and by putting effort to stop smuggling with Turkey and Iraqi Kurdish areas (Heißner et al., 2017).

When considering ISIS's manpower and its current capabilities, it is also important to remember the attacks on 20th January 2022, when IS conducted two attacks on Iraqi military barracks and on the Syrian al-Sina'a prison, which is the biggest facility for IS prisoners in northeastern Syria (ISPI, 2022). Before the operation, the prison housed about '3500 ISIS detainees, alongside minors, the so-called Cubs of the Caliphate' (Hassan and al-Ahmed, 2022). After this operation, important ISIS leaders were freed, including 'Abu Dujana al-Iraqi, an ISIS military leader' (Hassan and al-Ahmed, 2022). The raid on the al-Sina'a prison is also relevant because it made it possible to free a great number of ISIS fighters, more than 300, who provided ISIS again with 'experience and expertise in various specialisations' (Hassan and al-Ahmed, 2022). This attack highlights the capabilities ISIS can still have, as it is the most sophisticated attack since ISIS's territorial defeat in 2019, and raises questions about the detainment system, which is weak and could be subject to more attacks leading to the further liberation of ISIS fighters (ISPI, 2022). It also underlines ISIS's 'awareness of

the constantly changing realities and its high adaptability to its loss of territorial control' as well as the international community's incapacity to address the ISIS threat (Ajjoub, 2022).

Moreover, ISIS fighters are present in other detention centres and could be liberated at any moment. There are at least 20 other prisons, including 'Ayed Prison in Tabqa, housing about 1,000 detainees, the Juvenile Prison in Raqqa (1,500), the Alaya Prison in Qamishli (approximately 1,500), the Black Prison or Derek Prison (about 2,000 of the most dangerous prisoners), and al-Shaddadi Prison (around 600), along with other local prisons' (Hassan and al-Ahmed, 2022).

It is also relevant to mention ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi's death due to the US Special Operations Forces raid (Wilson Center, 2022) and the rapid naming of a new leader, called Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi in order to show the continuation of ISIS and its ready and strong leadership (The Guardian, 2022). These events are significant in the assessment of ISIS capabilities as they show the group's operational and organisational structure, and the degree of threat ISIS can still be in the region. ISIS, throughout its history, has been adroit in exploiting different phases. As a matter of fact, the organisation has faced different phases, passing from the so-called al-tamkin fighting to the al-nikaya one. The former refers to the 'jihad of empowerment', which happens when ISIS has power and governs over an area, imposing its interpretation of Islam (Ajjoub, 2022). The latter, instead, means 'jihad of vexation and exhaustion', and its target is 'to inflict harm on the enemy's interests with hit and run tactics suited to its lack of territory and manpower' by using 'ambushes, suicide bombings, attacking prisons, and assassinations of leading enemy figures and collaborators' (Ajjoub, 2022). This is important to understand since nowadays jihad al-nikaya is a tactical necessity in order to gain manpower and to build its strengths again to, ultimately, go back to the al-tamkin phase, as it was during ISIS peak. This phase entails 'attacks on

governmental facilities, on banks, the use of car bombs, taking of hostages, and raids on prisons' (Des Roches, 2022).

Furthermore, the US commander in the war against ISIS Votel, agreeing with the intelligence community, affirmed that there are 'tens of thousands of ISIS fighters spread across Syria and Iraq', even though they may be 'dispersed and disaggregated' (Starr, 2019). This number is important to consider as it could attack the mentioned prisons, 'mass in unexpected locations' or 'overwhelm government facilities' (Des Roches, 2022). In the detainment centres, there are ISIS fighters as well as the Cubs of the Caliphate, who have grown with inbred Islamist ideology and who pose a serious threat due to their indoctrinations, and Western foreign fighters. Added to these considerations, it is also important to mention that ISIS claimed 1079 attacks in Iraq and 356 in Syria in 2021, which underlines its constant state of activity (ISPI, 2022).

Beside ISIS's undeniable capabilities to adapt to different situations, it must be considered that COVID-19 has helped ISIS as the pandemic has diverted governments' focus on counterterrorism efforts to shift it toward public health safety measures (UNSC Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020). Furthermore, attacks on strategic points increased after the U.S. winded down its presence in Iraq, due to the lack of pressure against the group (Dent, 2020).

Therefore, ISIS has the material and human capabilities to reestablish its power, as it has demonstrated through numerous attacks after its 2019 defeat by disrupting stability. Even though the number of ISIS fighters is unclear, estimates talk about tens of thousands of fighters, who continue to wage jihad al-nikaya until better conditions unfold. Different agencies talk about different estimates, which arrive at up to 30,000 fighters (Rumman, 2021: 120). ISIS increased its attacks after 2019, showing the capacity and willingness of establishing its forces again. Furthermore, as stated by Adnan Afrin, a

commander with the Syrian Democratic Forces, 'when we go to the front lines, we know who is in front of us, but behind us are sleeper cells', who constitute an even bigger threat (Callimachi, 2019). Therefore, considering human, financial and material resources, it is clear that ISIS still represents a threat.

3.2 Unmaterial threat: ideology and propaganda

As previously mentioned, after losing its last swaths of territory in 2019, ISIS has not disappeared, as it still has material grounds to survive, as well as a strong ideology. ISIS was well-prepared for overcoming different phases in its history, and it has invested conspicuous resources in its media capabilities so that it can thrive again once the propitious events unfold (Clarke and Ingram, 2018). As a matter of fact, 'taking back Iraqi and Syrian towns and cities from ISIS was a major achievement, but the physical destruction involved did not cripple ISIS' (Cordesman, 2020). In fact, the propaganda machine has been working strongly, which means that, despite its territorial defeat, the current lack of a real Caliphate has not left a vacuum.

Predictions said that after its gradual territorial defeat, ISIS 'will likely retreat to a virtual safe haven – a virtual Caliphate – from which it will continue to coordinate and inspire external attacks as well as build a support base until the group has the capability to reclaim physical territory' (Votel et al., 2017), and this has indeed happened. ISIS has been addressing Western audiences asking for sympathy and encouraging them to carry out attacks in its name, also in their home countries. From the beginning, the group started speaking to its audiences in various languages, making it simple for ISIS to get adherents and supporters everywhere (Rumman, 2020). As a matter of fact, ISIS has been capable of attracting new followers, especially younger Muslim generations who respect the previous ones who were successful in establishing the Caliphate (Maher, 2017). Furthermore, thanks to its prolific propaganda, ISIS has managed to exploit the individual and group grievances of Muslims and to understand the

opportunities to intensify conflict situations. Regional and international factors have indeed offered favourable conditions for radicalism, particularly feelings related to marginalisation, injustice, rage, and a desire for revenge (Rumman, 2020). Therefore, uniting the ability to carry out attacks in the West together with the adroit use of media and prolific propaganda has been a winning strategy for ISIS (United States Institute of Peace, 2017).

As a matter of fact, ISIS has taken advantage of the internet's adaptability to rewrite the rules and narrative of the Caliphate in order to meet its current objectives. During the peak of ISIS's success, the narrative was focused on the greatness of the Caliphate, the importance of the statehood, and joining ISIS-held territories, whereas, after its territorial defeat, the focus shifted toward the possibility of being an ISIS member in different ways, such as by carrying out attacks in Western countries and following ISIS's magazines and media accounts to show support. This is also possible because the Quran does not explicitly mention the characteristics the Caliphate should have, therefore its statehood and governance do not necessarily have to be the traditional ones. The doctrine changes according to ISIS's needs and goals.

If defeating ISIS on the battlefield has been difficult and has actually not been possible except for depriving it of its enclaves, defeating it online is unlikely and has become tougher throughout the years. As a matter of fact, the virtual Caliphate has gone beyond propaganda and recruitment, and now it is about the 'proliferation of action and of violence' (Votel et al., 2017). ISIS has established an online thriving community by taking advantage of the socio-political climate and young people's skills and interest in technology through a skillfully designed narrative.

Moreover, the rise of populism in Europe and the United States has made it increasingly challenging for Muslims to successfully integrate and be accepted by society (Zakaria, 2016). Consequently, a large number of youngsters are

growing up in places where they do not feel represented and cannot identify with any part of society, therefore they look for a sense of community and belonging in ISIS, which exploits the struggles of people and recruits them by promising a safe haven in the Islam they present. Therefore, while the gain of its territories remains one of ISIS's targets, the online world presents a chance to maintain the quest for a Caliphate and recruit new members. ISIS takes advantage of this 'quest for significance' (Kruglanski et al., 2014: 70) by promising to give the Caliphate's citizens back their strength and by providing a plethora of opportunities for participating in the Islamic State online and on the battlefield (ISIS, 2014). It is also possible that ISIS shifts its powers completely to a virtual realm, which the group could legitimise without the necessity for a geographical counterpart. Potentially, as the territorial channel closes, the virtual one opens, making it impossible for counterterrorism strategies to attain satisfying outcomes and avoid the dissemination of the organisation's propaganda (Rumman, 2020). At the same time, ISIS has been able to maintain the Caliphate's symbolism among its recruits. This possibility has nevertheless given ISIS the possibility to expand even more, becoming a net of 'dispersed but loyal operators' (Votel et al., 2017). However, it is likely that on the first good occasion, ISIS will try to gain its geographical counterpart again.

Furthermore, ISIS propagandists have been attempting to turn battlefield failures into successes, at the cost of redefining the meaning of success. For this reason, ISIS increasingly looks 'to infuse nostalgia narratives into its messaging to maintain morale in communities of potential support and mobilize true believers toward action' (Clarke and Ingram, 2018). ISIS performs a good job of utilising the conditions and the environment in its narrative, propaganda, and recruitment efforts (Rumman, 2020). Besides, battlefield defeats have been reconverted into glorious martyrdoms that underline the fighters' bravery and willingness to die for the Caliphate's good cause. Therefore,

these emotional appeals provide a way to attract regional as well as international audiences, convincing them to be recruited.

In conclusion, even though the territorial facet of ISIS is not present nowadays, this does not mean it could not exist in the future. Fighters and recruits are ready to take up the sword for the Caliphate, and, thanks to the prolific and targeting ISIS propaganda, they are also willing to travel to ISIS-held territories. Even though recent data on Western foreign fighters, especially women, are not clear or present due to the counterterrorism focus and agenda on other issues, it is likely that the migration of Western foreign fighters has decreased. At the same time, ISIS propaganda leverages young generations who do not feel represented in Western societies, and the migratory flux could start any time ISIS regains its territories. The phenomenon of Western foreign fighters in ISIS is also still relevant as they have travelled from their home countries in recent years and the majority of them are still in the previous ISIS-held territories, detained in centres where ISIS ideology is still eradicated, and where they are raising the so-called Cubs of the Caliphate. Therefore, analysing the counterterrorism efforts of Western countries is important to understand how to counter this threat effectively.

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology

This chapter will explain the data collection and analysis methods used in this dissertation. It will explore the steps of each methodology and why each one was chosen, underlining their strengths and shortcomings. The limitations and ethical considerations of the study will also be discussed in this chapter.

4.1 Ontology and epistemology

This study is based on a constructivist ontology. As a matter of fact, constructivism ontologically highlights how a person creates their conceptions of reality through knowledge, which results in the creation of different realities (Schwandt, 1997). According to Tashakori et al. (2021), adhering to this ontology means holding the view that knowledge is generated by the researcher and participant, therefore reality is socially constructed. Constructivism goes well with qualitative research as well as inductive research methods (Tashakori et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this dissertation shows a feminist epistemology which 'investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge' (Anderson, 1995: 54). As a matter of fact, in order to understand women's experiences, it is necessary to place them at the centre of research. 'And only making women's concrete, life experiences the primary source of our investigations can we succeed in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents women' (Anderson, 1995: 56).

4.2 Critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis

The methodologies which will be employed in the first part of the analysis are critical discourse analysis (CDA) and qualitative content analysis: a

combination of these methodologies will in fact lead to a broad understanding of reality. CDA will be employed to understand how ISIS, a terrorist group that reinforces gendered norms, has aligned its values with an agenda to appeal to Western women. This method is crucial to understand the ways in which ISIS exploits gendered propaganda to appeal to women and make them travel to ISIS-held territories. Thanks to CDA, it will be possible to uncover how ISIS strategically exploited gendered propaganda to recruit Western women. This involves analysing the language and narratives present in the magazines. Qualitative content analysis, instead, will be employed to identify patterns and themes used to align ISIS ideology with women's agenda. The combination of CDA and qualitative content analysis allows to consider the textual elements of ISIS propaganda while taking into account the gendered and patriarchal dynamics at the basis of ISIS.

The researcher will use CDA as it does not only consider language or linguistics, but it goes beyond and 'articulates the relation between discourses and the social practices in which they are embedded' (Brown, 2006: 292). CDA is useful for this dissertation as it takes distance from the trend to 'reduce the social to discourse, and discourse only' (Brown, 2006: 292). As a matter of fact, CDA investigates not only texts but also their contexts and environment. Wodak's 'discourse-historical approach' serves as a model, encouraging reflection on interdisciplinarity itself while also entailing collaborations between discourse analysts and social sciences experts (Weiss and Wodak, 2003). Therefore, discourse is understood as a social practice, and CDA aims to examine concealed power relations present in the discourse (Johnson and McLean, 2020). CDA looks at how stylistic decisions create uneven positions for various social groups. In the case of this dissertation, gendered stylistic decisions build the grounds to recruit women from the West. CDA is a qualitative and interpretive method of analysing written material, which differs from more

systematic methods thanks to its interpretive nature. Interpretation comes from the knowledge of the context as well as from the written materials themselves.

CDA encompasses examining how language works and how meaning is built in different social environments. CDA can be conducted through magazines, newspapers, and books, but also commercial and official documents, social media, and interviews. In this dissertation, ISIS magazines will be analysed. The goal is to better understand groups' different communication patterns. This methodology stresses language contextual meaning, in contrast to other methods that focus primarily on language. The gendered structure of language will be analysed as it builds a clear narrative and strategy.

Furthermore, qualitative content analysis provides a systematic way to shed light on patterns and themes in order to understand the context and meaning of the content. Qualitative content analysis can be defined as 'a flexible method for making valid inferences from data in order to provide new insight, describe a phenomenon through concepts or categories, and develop an understanding of the meaning of communications with a concern for intentions, consequences, and context" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008: 109). This methodology pursues an objective which finds an answer within the content of communication (Mayring, 2000). Furthermore, inductive qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to approach data without using preexisting categories or patterns, and to develop themes from scratch. This method is also useful in order to develop and adjust patterns according to data. Qualitative content analysis is focused on interpretation and comprehension rather than on coding. It offers an interesting framework to research overlooked topics and examine them from different perspectives. At the same time, the analysis may be influenced by the researcher's previous preconceptions. In order to reduce the possibility of biases, the researcher will report both positive and negative

findings and will make sure to underline the limitations of this dissertation. It will also be ensured that findings are not overgeneralised.

The researcher will take the following steps to ensure the accuracy of the analysis and to avoid biases. The researcher will first explicit the research question and select the sources and materials which are necessary to answer it. Gathering information and theory on the context will be the second step of the analysis as it is important to understand in which environment the materials were produced and were thought to be disseminated. The fundamentals to produce this analysis were given in the literature review and constructed in the theoretical framework. The third step will include examining the materials and understanding the major themes presented in ISIS propaganda to recruit Western women. The last step entails analysing and reflecting on the results to further examine the strategic use of language in the presented context.

4.2.1 Research question

The research question that this first part of the analysis will address is: what gendered strategies does ISIS employ to recruit Western women?

4.2.2 Data selection

The sources chosen for this part of the analysis encompass Dabiq and Rumiyah, which constitute the centre of ISIS propaganda and they have primarily been used to gain supporters. The analysis will also consider the Manifesto for Women, which is attributed to the al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-women police unit, and which describes how women should behave and live in the Caliphate. Even though social media material would have been available, going back to the sources and certainly assessing their legitimacy was not possible. The chosen documents, instead, are the only official documents which could be found online, and which can be surely traced back to ISIS, therefore they

constitute a reliable source. These documents have been selected because they represent ISIS's efforts to recruit women.

Dabiq and Rumiyah have sections dedicated to ‘to our sisters’, ‘from our sisters’, or ‘for women’, which are the ones that are considered in this analysis and have been translated into European languages to reach a wider audience. Instead, ‘Women in the Islamic State: A manifesto and case study’ was published in Arabic and was translated into English only for academic purposes by the Quilliam Foundation (ISIS, 2015c). Analysing these materials will provide a broad comprehension of the unique narratives ISIS used to appeal to Western women.

4.2.3 Limitations

The limitations of this analysis must be taken into consideration. In fact, the availability of the Dabiq and the Rumiyah was partial when studying the case, and this represents the biggest limitation of this study. Therefore, primary sources are limited and secondary sources, such as sections of ISIS magazines, have been taken from other researchers’ studies. This implies that the point of view offered by these studies has been different than the one of this study, and the research questions were different. The limitation is also due to the lack of research on ISIS social media channels, which would have offered interesting, and perhaps different, perspectives on women’s agency and on their path to recruitment. Interviews with women involved in ISIS, or with returnees in their home countries, would have also given a bigger picture of the gendered narratives employed by ISIS to recruit women, but this research method was not possible to use due to time constraints, the difficulty of contacting them, and their potential unwillingness to take part in this project. Comparing ISIS’s propaganda targeted towards women with other jihadist organisations would have also provided a bigger picture of how other groups legitimise female recruitment. Due to word constraints, this was not possible.

4.3 Single case study in the framework of policy analysis

This part of analysis proposes a single case study focused on the UK. As a matter of fact, due to the relevant migration of British women to ISIS-held territories, it is important to analyse the UK's counterterrorism strategy, CONTEST (2018), and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 (NAP) in order to understand which steps have been taken.

The single case study allows to conduct a detailed study of the UK's steps to counter terrorism. This methodology is appropriate as it is relevant to gain contextual and in-depth knowledge about the UK's tools to prevent and counter terrorism. Yin defines the case study as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (2009: 14).

The single case study must be placed in the framework of policy analysis for this dissertation. In fact, analysing the UK's CONTEST and NAP entails evaluating these policies and assessing whether and how they target ISIS's propaganda, and whether they are effectively gender sensitive. Policy analysis is important in the policymaking process as it allows to underline a policy's strengths and shortcomings. It can also help address issues that are usually not properly articulated or represented (Vining and Weimer, 2015). Furthermore, 'policy analysis provides a way for understanding how and why governments enact certain policies, and their effect' (Browne et al., 2019: 1032). This framework gives the possibility to evaluate the impact of the strategies considering their ultimate goals.

4.3.1 Research questions

The research questions that this second part of the analysis will address are as follows: did the UK's counterterrorism strategy target the migratory flux of British women to ISIS-held territories? If yes, how? If not, is it gender sensitive? Did the UK National Action Plan on Women 2018-2022 target the migratory flux of British women to ISIS-held territories? If yes, how? If not, are the adopted tools effectively gender-sensitive?

4.3.2 Data selection

This part of analysis will consider the UK's counterterrorism strategy, named CONTEST, published in 2018, and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022, together with its Guidance Note (Implementing Strategic Outcome 6, Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism). These documents have been selected as they are the first ones published after the peak of the success of ISIS in 2014 when a great number of British women travelled to ISIS-held territories. Using these documents will make it possible to understand whether this migratory flux was intercepted and whether the employed gender-sensitive tools are effective to prevent and counter violent extremism.

4.3.3 Limitations and ethical considerations

Even though using a single case study is useful in order to focus on one aspect of a specific country, it would have been valuable to use the comparative case study to be able to compare the UK to another Western country which has faced similar numbers of women travelling to ISIS-held territories.

These strategies can only be considered in theory as their application and their outcomes will be analysed in the next NAP. Nevertheless, considering them is important as the theoretical lacks to fix and merits to persevere should be addressed.

It is necessary to underline that the researcher has been mindful not to perpetrate harmful stereotypes about women and Islam. Sensitivity to the factors leading to the radicalisation of women and to the context represents the basis of this research project to avoid discrimination and harm. Impartiality and objectivity have been maintained by approaching the topics without any intention to reach certain conclusions and being open to any results.

Chapter 5: ISIS's unique strategies to recruit women

This chapter will focus on the unique strategies ISIS has employed to recruit Western women. Besides factors leading to radicalisation, ISIS's propaganda has in fact exploited gendered narratives to appeal to Western women and facilitate their migration to ISIS-held territories.

5.1 Figures of Western women in ISIS

Since the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014, ISIS has tried to widen its territories and influence beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq. Women represent an important part of ISIS's plan to broaden its audience and supporters, in fact for the first time in a jihadi organisation, women are part of a state-building project. The migration of thousands of Western women to ISIS-held territories also shows the effectiveness of ISIS propaganda. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (2018: 22), around 41,500 persons travelled to Syria and Iraq and became supporters of ISIS, with circa 10-13% of these being women.

Even though data about the number of Western women who travelled to ISIS is unclear, studies report that more than 3,000 men and at least 550 women joined ISIS-held territories (Hoyle et al., 2015:8). Regarding their age, recruited men are young, but women tend to be even younger (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018). 'In the first global dataset of its scope and detail, up to 4,761 (13%) of these were recorded to be women, and 4,640 (12%) of these minors. Eastern Asia saw the highest proportion of recorded IS-affiliated women and minors at up to 70%, followed by Eastern Europe (44%) and Western Europe (42%)' (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018: 3). This data may vary from one study to another, as many countries lack data in this regard, resulting in broad gaps in the figures of women travelling to the Islamic State. The United Kingdom does not provide precise figures of

women who travelled to ISIS, but it is estimated that around 145 British women travelled to Syria or Iraq (European Parliament, 2017: 46). Since the phenomenon is so relevant, especially in the UK, it is important to address this flux to ISIS-held territories and to understand how ISIS has managed to recruit Western women.

5.2 The power of ISIS's propaganda

First, it is important to underline that propaganda is useful and has undoubtedly helped ISIS in its objectives of reaching a wide audience, but it would not be effective without pre-necessary conditions, such as grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures. Nevertheless, ISIS's propaganda represents an unprecedented media phenomenon which is important to consider while analysing ISIS's recruitment strategies for reaching Western women.

ISIS's propaganda is composed of different outlets, namely Dabiq and Rumiyah. Each issue of the Dabiq contains different themes, including 'religious discussions and descriptions of Islam, the West, military updates in and around IS territory, celebrations and incitements of attacks against the West, emigration, praising of jihadist groups that ally with the Islamic State (Azani and Dotti, 2021:11). Dabiq was initially published online monthly, and then started to be published in a wider span of time, and the same situation happened with the Rumiyah magazine, which started to be published after ISIS began to lose its territories in Syria and Iraq in 2016. Dabiq was published between July 2014 and September 2016 with a total of 15 issues, and its publication corresponds to ISIS's peak of success (Burke, 2017). One innovative element of ISIS propaganda is surely how it professionalised its techniques, by offering high-quality materials including materials of what daily life in ISIS looks like, as well as interviews and images.

Beside its magazines, ISIS has designed a social media campaign to convince Western women to join the organisation in Syria and Iraq, which is conducted by ISIS female members, 'some of whom seem to have a quasi-official status within the ISIS media wing' (Perešin, 2015: 25). Materials that have been posted on social media cover every stage of recruitment, starting from indoctrination and motivation, that encompass motivating Western women to join ISIS-held territories by providing them with remedies for their grievances and dissatisfactions. Hijrah is also made simpler by providing women with practical travel advice and showing that they will have more benefits to live under the IS Caliphate (Perešin, 2015). Online preparation and support to go through international travel are given to women from ISIS women who already experienced it. Encrypted platforms and private communications are always recommended to obtain accurate information on the journey. This help goes beyond online tips: women are given the contact information of the people who are going to wait for them at airports, guides, and lawyers to handle legal issues with officials in transit countries such as Turkey. Travel tips are always also accompanied by a focus on women's feelings rather than on issues that could impede their migration (Hoyle et al., 2015). Information is given to women as the behaviours and roles they should have, as well as the communication and information they should give to their families back in their home countries. ISIS is the first terrorist organisation that issues instructions to women and 'prepares them for the honour of jihad' (Saul, 2014).

In order to spread its propaganda worldwide, and to be understood by foreign fighters, the propaganda campaign has been carried out in several languages, mostly English and French for Western support, and on several platforms. The campaign is led on several platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Youtube, Tumblr and other sites. ISIS always looks for new social media resources to spread its message even more (Perešin, 2015). Twitter has been the favourite platform for ISIS recruiters and supporters, in fact in 2014,

Berger and Morgan (2015) estimated between 46,000 and 90,000 active ISIS support accounts.

ISIS managed to get its supporters to share their experiences on social media and to diffuse its ideology and narrative. As a matter of fact, personal experiences and stories possess an appeal to Western women. Online supporters are presenting a romantic and alluring image of life in the Caliphate by publishing pictures of their routine, such as cooking, playing with children, and doing chores. Such messages are designed to make it easier for potential recruits to relate to the young female jihadists who are living in the Caliphate (Khaleeli, 2014). This representation of what life is like under the Islamic State is however distorted, and when women face the reality of Syria and Iraq, expecting a romantic way of life, they become quickly disillusioned (Montgomery, 2015).

ISIS media campaign also entails the Zora Foundation, which has been set up to educate potential female recruits about housewives and facilitators' responsibilities in ISIS-held territories. Therefore, women are taught skills such as 'practical competencies such as first aid (to be used to help militants injured in battles), how to work with design and editing programs (to help spread IS propaganda), how to use weapons, and how to cook and sew for militants' (Radio Free Europe, 2014).

At the same time, social media enables ISIS to promote its goals quicker and more easily to the young generation who spends much time on the internet. As a matter of fact, 'the transformation of social media into an offensive strategy of psychological warfare is ISIS's particular innovation of terrorist strategy' (Klausen, 2015: 20). Furthermore, online communications of violent acts and executions serve as an efficient tool in this kind of psychological warfare, which aims to accomplish local tactical objectives of sowing terror and establishing supremacy and projecting authority internationally. Therefore, young women who support ISIS are swayed by the allure of propaganda depicting a just fight,

which includes pictures of torture and the execution of those who disagree with the Caliphate.

ISIS media campaign is effective and well-thought and this can be seen in the number of female users on ISIS social media and in the growing number of ISIS female supporters. Moreover, it demonstrates that ISIS is far more skilled than any other Islamist group at focusing on a female audience in the West. 'It could be said that ISIS is responsible for the evolution of modern jihadist propaganda, named online jihad 3.0, and for the success in expanding its influence, gaining visibility and inspiring recruits from all over the world (Perešin and Cervone, 2015: 504).

Therefore, as pointed out by Gambhir (2014: 2), 'the magazine's significance lies not only in its content but in its very existence. ISIS's consolidation of the Islamic State depends on the formation of a strong base of supporters. Dabiq demonstrates that ISIS is looking not only to nearby areas for support but is undertaking a global outreach strategy to recruit immigrants to build its state.'

5.3 ISIS gendered propaganda to include women: an analysis of Dabiq, Rumiyah and Manifesto for Women

5.3.1 Hijrah as an honourable duty upon women

Firstly, from Dabiq, it is clear that women are expected to make hijrah, meaning migration to the territories of the Islamic State. Indeed, IS's ambition to establish a functional state would not be achievable without female contribution. 'Convincing women to travel to IS territories — in other words, to undertake hijrah — was therefore of paramount importance' (Europol, 2019: 8).

In the magazine, there is a constant reminder of the duty and the honour of undertaking this journey. This clearly shows the patriarchal conviction that

women are the protectors and recipients of family honour. As a matter of fact, Umm Sumayyah Al Muhajirah (ISIS, 2015: 32), an Islamist propagandist, explains that 'this ruling is an obligation upon women just as it is upon men, for Allah, when excluding those incapable of making Hijrah, He excluded the incapable women just as He excluded the incapable men'. The concept of hijrah is seen as something honourable: 'here I call on you to make hijrah to us here in the lands of the blessed Islamic State! Do you not love Allah and His Messenger?', also encouraging women not to 'wait for other women […] to make hijrah before you. Rather, be a model and an example for them all, and what a great honour it would be to be the first' (ISIS, 2015a: 20). Therefore, when women are led to migrate, ISIS draws on eradicated patriarchal norms.

ISIS also associates this migration with words usually related to men, such as strength, willingness, and honour. This way, women's agency appears as of primary importance for ISIS. Indeed, it is important to understand that women are rational and willing actors when joining ISIS, therefore they have a political agency and a clear rationale for joining the organisation, but it is also relevant to understand which promises ISIS makes to women. In Rumiyah (ISIS, 2017: 30), it is written that 'hijrah was a means to strengthen and prepare me to remain steadfast in the face of the hardships we face today'. It is also added that 'Allah had inspired me in strength and the events that followed would require plenty of it' (ISIS, 2017: 32). These words reflect an understanding of women's agency in ISIS that differs from the traditional gendered roles that are usually attributed to women, especially in the Manifesto for Women, which sets the basis for women's domestic-based lives within ISIS. These gender roles are considered important to the Caliphate as they contribute to its establishment, but Rumiyah stresses the relevance of strength which can be linked to violent jihad.

Performing hijrah is also religiously important for women, and women and religion appear intrinsically bonded. Female hijrah, and therefore recruitment in

the ranks of ISIS, is a call from God. As a matter of fact, in Dabiq there are questions like, 'do you not desire to live in a land over which no rule is established other than the rule of Allah?' (ISIS, 2015a: 20). Affirmations like 'hijrah for Allah's cause has many purposes' and 'hijrah for Allah's cause is a great matter' make migration to be perceived as a duty. The religious link between women and hijrah is also reinforced by historical examples of women who fought in the name of Allah. This is a way to legitimise women's embracement of weapons and their increasingly active roles. 'Such was the case on 11 September 2016 when three muwahhid[3] sisters carried out a daring attack […] after voluntarily shouldering a duty that Allah had placed on the shoulders of the men of the Ummah, the duty of fighting for the cause of Allah' (ISIS, 2016a: 3): thus, there is a religious and historical path which explains women's violent agency. Hijrah is so important that Issue 10 of Dabiq (ISIS, 2015a) argues that 'if, however, [your husband] shows arrogance and his pride in his sin takes hold of him, then it's upon you to abandon him in the dunyā [14] so that you may succeed in the Hereafter. And here I call on you to make hijrah to us here in the lands of the blessed Islamic State!'. Therefore, ISIS' gendered propaganda manages to recruit women by exploiting religion and history and to bring forward their violent agency.

Furthermore, especially considering the Manifesto for Women, the traditional gendered roles of women are underlined. Women are fundamental to the Caliphate because they must raise the new generation of jihadis. As a matter of fact, the Islamic State is 'a body made of many parts, but the part that […] is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother'

[13] It refers to a Muslim who is focused on the unity of God.

[14] Its literal meaning is the lowest or the closest, but it is usually translated in English with 'world', meaning the earthly possessions and struggles, as opposed to the hereafter.

(ISIS, 2015d: 44). This representation of women is not passive, in fact the task of raising children is important for the continuation of the Caliphate. Women fight without actually fighting when raising a jihadi: as stated in Rumiyah, 'whoever prepares a fighter for Allah's cause has himself fought, and whoever takes care of the family of a fighter for Allah's cause has himself fought' (ISIS, 2016: 22). Umm Sumayyah Al Muhajirah, an ISIS propagandist, also highlighted the importance for women to support their sons in martyrdom: 'I saw sisters on a night enflamed by battle send their fifteen-year-old sons outside the home saying, 'Allah is the greatest! Go to Jannah [15] whose width is that of the Heavens and the Earth!' O Lord, it is their sons! Their own flesh and blood! But they are not more valuable than religion or this Ummah! Yes, they are muhājirāt who came to the Islamic State! I say it without pride' (ISIS, 2015: 37). This narrative is highly gendered, nevertheless, women hold this important role to ensure the preservation of the Caliphate.

5.3.2 Hijrah as a means to build the Caliphate

The primary goal of ISIS is to build a Caliphate, and in order to do so, women are fundamental. However, men are the first to be responsible for carrying out violent jihad in order to establish the Islamic State. This means that this goal is not reflected as much in ISIS' words to women. This would also be counterproductive as ISIS supporters reiterate gendered norms and roles for women and are not open to women being placed on the same level as men. As a matter of fact, the Manifesto for Women claims that 'women have this Heavenly secret in sedentariness, stillness and stability, and men its opposite, movement and flux, that which is the nature of man, created in him. If roles are mixed and positions overlap, humanity is thrown into a state of flux and

[15] It is the Islamic version of heaven.

instability. The base of society is shaken, its foundations crumble and its walls collapse' (ISIS, 2015c: 19).

However, ISIS offers some gendered ways for women to take part in the building of the Caliphate. In fact, women can find a place when men are not there or are not able to do so. This political and violent agency became clear in 2017 when ISIS started to lose territories in Syria and Iraq (Termeer and Duyvesteyn, 2022). Therefore, it is important to underline that women's violent agency is not a women's right as they are not responsible for it. They cover this task secondarily because men are not able to fulfil the task. 'Why have they [men] sat back idly – if not cowardly – while the Ummah's chaste, noble women, […] stood in all their bravery to fulfil the duty of men?" (ISIS, 2016a: 3). This is a dynamic due to which women are second in any case: women are the means through which men re-establish their combat places, and, at the same time, through which violence is justified. Furthermore, the fact that women become useful the moment men 'sat back idly' presupposes that women perform violent jihad as long as men are not ready or able to do so (ISIS, 2016a: 3). Therefore, it is a temporary position, but not something women are supposed to perform in the long term. This becomes clear in the Manifesto for Women, which affirms that 'the problem today is that women are not fulfilling their fundamental roles, the role that is consistent with their deepest nature, for an important reason, that women are not presented with a true picture of a man and, because of the rise in the number of emasculated men who do not shoulder the responsibility allocated to them towards their Ummah, religion or people' and 'this has forced women away from their true role' (ISIS, 2015c: 17). It is therefore clear that women's violent agency depends on men's agency or expectations.

Even though maintaining the Caliphate is a male duty, women do nevertheless hold roles in it. While 'the weapon of the men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, […] the weapon of women is good behaviour' (ISIS, 2015d: 41).

This is a gendered way to recruit women and to make them believe that honour is the way in which they can contribute to the Caliphate in order to discourage them to take up arms unless it is necessary. This is clear in the Manifesto for women, which advises women to go out and perform violent jihad 'if the enemy is attacking her country and the men are not enough to protect it and the imams give a fatwa for it' (ISIS, 2015c: 22). As already mentioned, this dynamic changed in 2017, when ISIS started losing control of its territories: 'my beloved sisters, our roles and responsibilities have not come to an end. Rather, they have increased and have become of greater importance. It is time to reform ourselves, to wake up from the slumber of heedlessness to the reality of our objectives' (ISIS, 2017a: 13). Women are now encouraged to take up arms in a direct way.

This achievement is not complete as their roles remain in the constraints of gender norms. However, gendered taking up arms and holding combat roles go hand in hand with traditional gendered roles. It is nevertheless important to mention that for the first time, after the loss of its territories, ISIS has given women's violent agency an indefinite time frame, encouraging them to pursue their political goals.

5.3.3 Hijrah as a solution to the gendered hostility toward the West

Women who join ISIS are moved by their willingness to live in a pure society, far from the corrupted and impious Western ones. Women are drawn to the idea of a Sharī'ah-based state with social justice, and no inequity, racism, or prejudice, which they often experience in Western societies. As a matter of fact, 'problems emerged one after another after they – the infidels - took on corrupted ideas and shoddy-minded beliefs instead of religion, Sharī'ah and the methodology of life that was ordained by God' (ISIS, 2015c: 19). Women's morality has been compromised because of Western values such as individualism and secularism. Therefore, women are asked to perform hijrah

from a corrupt world to a pure one. In fact, 'the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr[16] and hypocrisy – the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin[17] everywhere, and the camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr' (ISIS, 2014: 10).

The gendered hostility toward the West is clear because women 'abandon motherhood, wifehood, chastity, femininity' therefore 'the true woman in the West has become an endangered creature' (ISIS, 2016b: 25). But it is also true that 'hidden in the layers of deep darkness […], there is a minute trace of suppressed fitrah[18] buried inside a dead heart awaiting the guidance needed to remove the blemishes left by Christian paganism' (ISIS, 2016b: 20). According to ISIS, Islam can therefore give women the necessary 'guidance' so that they can detach from the corrupt Western world (ISIS, 2016b: 20). Recruiting women is important for their own benefit, in fact 'if she feared for her soul, she would […] reflect on where the paths of Christian paganism lead her, […] and liberate herself from her enslavement to hedonistic addictions and heathenish doctrines. The solution is laid before the Western woman. It is nothing but Islam, the religion of the fitrah' (ISIS, 2016b: 25).

Women should perform hijrah in order to go back to their values of 'chastity, modesty and piety' and to 'defend honour and respect' (ISIS, 2016b: 25). It becomes clear that women can have combat roles in order to 'defend honour and respect' and to carry on gendered roles (ISIS, 2016b: 25). After ISIS lost wide swaths of its territories in 2017, the attack and danger toward women

[16] It is referred to a person who does not believe in God as per Islam and rejects Islamic pillars, a so-called non-believer by extremists.

[17] It refers to a person who engages in jihad.

[18] It means original disposition, innate nature. In Islam, it refers to the innate nature that recognises the oneness of God.

shifted to the Islamic State, therefore the call to the Islamic State is stronger, and women are supposed to perform hijrah due to 'the entire world that gathers against the Khilāfah [19] in an endeavour to extinguish the light of Allah' (ISIS, 2017: 30).

5.4 Discussion

Critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis have made clear that ISIS resorts to three main gendered narratives, and therefore strategies, to recruit Western women and to make them travel to ISIS-held territories. Firstly, women are solicited to perform hijrah because it is honourable and because women's help in building the Ummah is fundamental. It is therefore a duty and an honour to undertake this journey as women appear to be the repository of the family and of family honour. At the same time, religion itself is part of this theme, since women and religion are strictly related. These concepts are the sides of the same coin as they represent gendered ways to bond women to honour – and therefore shame if not respected – and to the importance of the past. The call from God to migrate for great purposes cannot be ignored. This also entails the role of women as mothers as this position leverages recruitment.

Secondly, women are called to hijrah to carry out violent jihad and to help in the establishment of the Islamic State. Even though the use of this terminology is not present in ISIS magazines and Manifesto as much, it is nevertheless true that, especially after 2017, the Caliphate has been leveraging Western women to carry out violent jihad. The Islamic State has not made many references to this as its supporters rely on patriarchal and gendered norms and roles for women, and consensus would vacillate if these foundations were shaken. This call to the Ummah is gendered as women appear to be second to men in any

[19] It is referred to the Caliphate or the so-called Islamic State. In Islam, it refers to the divine government.

way, as they can join violent jihad when men are not able to fulfill this task. Women's agency thus depends on men's agency. Nevertheless, ISIS's strategy entails making the performance of hijrah important to carry out violent jihad.

The third gendered strategy employed by ISIS to convince women to perform hijrah entails leveraging women into the conviction that living in the Caliphate will allow to escape from the corruption of the Western world and to live a pious and pure Islamic life. Women's honour, but also chastity and modesty, have been erased by the Western world, and women, who are the repository of these values, have been corrupted. Migrating to ISIS-held territories is therefore fundamental to make women pure again, and to distance them from the ideas of emancipation and freedom. This is a gendered way to leverage women into ISIS, since the world is supposedly trying to 'extinguish the light of Allah' (ISIS, 2017: 30).

Therefore, the Islamic State manages to recruit Western women through well-designed propaganda and its different ways to achieve this goal remain highly gendered. Women can build, maintain, and defend the Caliphate through numerous actions, yet their role is shaped by what ISIS men allow. Women hold positions in violent jihad, but at the same time, they cover the patriarchal and gendered practices of oppression in the group. While it is likely that Western women find the performance of hijrah and of the holy war as a way to empower and emancipate themselves in a pious and uncorrupted way, it is also true that these behaviours work against their real progress in ISIS and give the chance to the organisation to reiterate patriarchal beliefs and male domination. Thus, the narratives used by the organisation to recruit women show that ISIS capitalised on the gendered and patriarchal ideas that kept women away from the group and changed them into factors to include women. Using patriarchal gender beliefs in order to support these narratives, and therefore strategies, bolsters the traditional gender order. It is also true that women are rightfully perceived as having a clear political agency in the organisation, which is evident in the

language used to recruit them. In fact, ISIS characterises the hijrah of women as a difficult trip that requires strength. This demonstrates the value of avoiding presumptions about 'jihadi brides' that recast women as victims and are informed by Western-centric notions of feminism and agency. It is therefore clear that even though women perform hijrah due to gendered strategies, and even though they do not question the organisation's patriarchal authority, this does not imply they lack agency. This is important to underline as Western women are accused of lacking agency, especially if compared to the Western ideas of agency and emancipation: instead, this demonstrates that agency can function in ways that are different from the Western expectations of it.

Chapter 6: Analysis of the UK's counterterrorism strategies

This chapter will focus on the UK's Strategy for Countering Terrorism named CONTEST (HM Government, 2018), on the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 (HM Government, 2018a) and on its Guidance Note about Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (HM Government, 2018b). This analysis is aimed to understand whether the UK has targeted the migratory flux towards ISIS-held territories in its strategies. In general, the broader goal of this analysis also entails examining whether the actions to prevent violent extremism are effectively gender sensitive.

6.1 UK's Strategy for Countering Terrorism

Considering this study's focus on the UK's counterterrorism strategy, it is first fundamental to define what measures it entails. The UK's approach to counterterrorism is 'built on an approach that unites the public and private sectors, communities, citizens and overseas partners around the single purpose to leave no safe space for terrorists to recruit or act. CONTEST is the framework that enables us to organise this work to counter all forms of terrorism. CONTEST's overarching aim remains to reduce the risk to the UK and its citizens and interests overseas from terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence' (HM Government, 2018: 7). CONTEST is a comprehensive framework which is divided into four strategies: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. Prevent is a guide 'to safeguard and support those vulnerable to radicalization, to stop them from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism', Pursue aims at 'stopping terrorist attacks in the UK and against UK interests overseas', Protect wants 'to strengthen protection against a terrorist attack in the UK or against its interests overseas', and Prepare 'mitigates the impact of a terrorist attack, by bringing any attack to an end rapidly and recovering from it' (HM Government, 2018: 10). It is also mentioned that a change in the approach is necessary to better tackle terrorism. In fact, the UK's

government is currently working on a new CONTEST strategy which should be published in the current year, 2023. Changes will be possible in domestic investigative capabilities thanks to the implementation of the MI5 and CT Policing's Operational Improvement Review's recommendations (HM Government, 2018). The counterterrorism strategy will be renewed because the threats landscape has been changing in the past years.

Throughout the years, thanks to the cross-Government Counter-Daesh Task Force and to the Global Coalition against Daesh, the UK, together with its partners, has tried to weaken ISIS's structure and enablers. Efforts have also been made to counter ISIS's narrative and to disrupt its material and military resources. ISIS's threat was also evaluated as the 'most significant terrorist threat globally, as well as to the UK and our people and interests overseas' (HM Government, 2018: 17). Despite its efforts, the UK recognises that ISIS still has followers, resources and capabilities. It is also mentioned that ISIS's proto-state recruited many people, including women, and convinced them to travel to its territories. This was possible thanks to ISIS's unique propaganda, which managed to exploit people's grievances and encourage them to travel. The propaganda also encouraged people to carry out attacks in their home countries, which is a critical threat to the UK's security. The online presence of ISIS and its propaganda is also highlighted.

Therefore, it is clear that CONTEST does not take into consideration women in its pages and does not target the flux towards ISIS-held territories by British women. In fact, even though this migration is mentioned, CONTEST does not mention the percentage of women who travelled or address this phenomenon in any way. It does not address the reasons or the specific ways in which their radicalisation happened. In general, CONTEST is not a gender-sensitive counterterrorism strategy as it does not address women's agency or roles in any way.

However, it does underline the threat represented by ISIS in its multiple facets. In fact, as mentioned, it underlines that the threat is still relevant today despite ISIS's reduced territorial presence. It also shows interest in ISIS's propaganda and exploitation of British people's grievances. Ultimately, ISIS is clearly perceived as a global threat which still needs to be addressed.

6.2 The National Action Plan on Women

The United Nations Security Council encourages UN Member States to implement Resolution number 1325, which deals with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, including through National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (NAP) to carry out the pillars of the resolution, namely prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. This resolution aims to push States to be responsible for the fulfilment of gender equality and human rights. NAPs are the tools thanks to which States shift the WPS agenda into local and national actions. NAPs are national-level strategic documents which list the actions and approaches States take to implement the WPS agenda.

In the case of the UK, this document lists the goals and actions the country has taken nationally and internationally in order to secure women's rights, prevent conflict and include women in peace and state-building initiatives. The UK adopted its most recent NAP in 2018 for the period 2018-2022: this is the fourth NAP implemented by the country, after the ones in 2006, 2010, and 2014. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence, and Department for International Development developed the 2018-2022 NAP. Collaboration was offered by academics, researchers, and civil society, including UK-based NGOs as well as abroad organisations. The UK NAP outlines seven goals to implement the resolution, namely addressing decision-making, peacekeeping, gender-based violence, humanitarian response, security and justice, violent extremism, and UK capabilities (http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/united-kingdom/).

This study is considering the NAP which covers the period from 2018 to 2022 since it is the one which should address women's migration to join ISIS, and also their eventual return to the UK. In particular, the section which is relevant to the aims of this dissertation is represented by Strategic Outcome 6, which addresses Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) efforts.

Right from the beginning, it is clear that the NAP recognises the ways in which violent extremism impacts women differently than men. In fact, it underlines that women are targeted by extremist groups and gendered tactics such as sexual and gender-based violence are performed. It also shows acknowledgement of women's participation in violent extremism. The NAP also recognises the complexity of women's radicalisation and how factors vary from grievances and ideologies to gender issues. The report also points to the lack of understanding of these dynamics and calls for more efforts to include gender perspectives in P/CVE. As a matter of fact, States are encouraged to include women in developing strategies to counter violent extremism. Activities to counter radicalisation range from social to economic to political ones and address the leadership of women.

Furthermore, even though the NAP considers different focus countries, such as Syria and Iraq, ISIS is not considered. The section dealing with Syria does not name ISIS, therefore it does not show concern about the flux of British women to ISIS-held territories or about the potential return of these women to the UK. Regarding the focus on Iraq, instead, ISIS is named as it is an actor that has worsened Iraqi internal grievances and conflict, but, as in the case of Syria, women's agency is not taken into consideration.

Therefore, even though this document provides good insights into the gendered tactics used by violent extremist organisations (VEOs), it does not name ISIS in the P/CVE section, which clearly indicates that targeting the migratory flux of British women or their potential return to the UK was not taken into account.

Considering the specificity of this document, not finding any figures or interest in the phenomenon shows that it has not been considered sufficiently relevant to be included in the main policy paper (HM Government, 2018).

6.2.1 UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022: Guidance Note – Implementing Strategic Outcome 6: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

Even though the NAP itself reserves only one page to P/CVE, there is a Guidance Note that deals with implementing Strategic Outcome 6 (HM Government, 2018a). This Guidance Note offers interesting material to analyse in order to understand whether, and how, the UK has addressed British women's travelling to ISIS-held territories. Contrarily to the NAP itself, the Guidance Note mentions the migratory flux towards Syria and Iraq and describes the roles played by women in Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) and the exploitation of gender in VEOs' recruitment and propaganda. Even though this document refers to ISIS more than once, its focus is wider and considers VEOs in general at times, while making references to jihadi or right-wing organisations when necessary.

The document deals with ISIS in one case study box, where it mentions the Counter-Daesh Communications Cell, which underlines the gendered messaging used by ISIS's propaganda and the importance of understanding women's agency in the recruitment process. In other parts of the document, the exploitation of gender roles and relations in the territories of ISIS is mentioned, as well as the sections of Dabiq dedicated to women and their role in the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Women's combat roles are also mentioned. Even though ISIS's presence is sporadic in the Guidance Note, it is nevertheless more present than in the actual NAP, and it underlines important points. It does not refer to the migration of British women to ISIS, but it does focus briefly on some relevant aspects that have been brought up in this study as well. It is nevertheless

true that ISIS should be introduced in the policy on its own, without being compared to other jihadist organisations or to other terrorist groups, considering that a relevant number of British women travelled to ISIS-held territories and could be eager to do it if the Caliphate gains its strengths again. Even though ISIS does not regain its full strength or remains a virtual one, it is still important to examine its case so that the radicalisation of women can be countered.

Despite the lack of attention towards ISIS, it is relevant to understand how the document integrates gender in the P/CVE when dealing with jihadi organisations and terrorist groups. The document rightfully considers the necessity to examine each violent extremist context in order to understand what the gendered assumptions of the organisation are. As a matter of fact, as analysed in the previous chapter, ISIS propaganda is highly gendered and understanding what the organisation's basic gendered assumptions and beliefs are is necessary to be able to eradicate it successfully.

The policy entails an encompassing gender-sensitive conflict analysis as it aims to understand gender-related grievances and inequalities in violent extremist (VE) contexts. A relevant point which is mentioned in the Guidance Note highlights the importance of talking to women directly, in a 'meaningful and safe' way, in order to fully understand their perspectives and their specific situation (HM Government, 2018a: 13). In fact, integrating gender also means engaging with women to identify radicalisation signs early on and intervene.

Furthermore, it is rightfully underlined the importance of collecting data and conducting research in a gender-sensitive way, so that the insights of women are integrated in P/CVE efforts. Otherwise, if gender sensitivity is not taken into consideration, policies can, both in the short and long term, harm women by reinforcing gender norms and inequalities. The Guidance Note addresses the importance of designing P/CVE policies that incorporate gender in an effective way. In order to do this, it is important to develop long-term discussions with

women in order to prevent and counter terrorism. Conversations with women are fundamental, and the policy highlights the importance of consulting women in a meaningful way. Also, it should not be expected that all women agree and prioritise the same issues.

The policy recognises that women are targeted by VEOs in gendered ways, and that they hold roles in state building, but also recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising. However, even though attention is given to these roles, there is no suggestion of tools to prevent their radicalisation and recruitment. Furthermore, misinformation and propaganda powers are underlined in the policy as key points, therefore counter-narratives are thought to be able to prevent radicalisation. It is appreciable that one of the tools to develop gender-sensitive counter-narratives consists in showing the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of VEOs narratives. Raising the voices of women who promote peace and tolerance is relevant, through in-person meetings as well as on social media platforms. It is also appreciable that importance is given to ensuring that women participate and hold leadership roles in P/CVE programmes.

It must also be noticed that the role of women as combating agents is scarcely considered, whereas it would be important to understand women's clear political agency. Women's gender-specific grievances are also intercepted by the policy, as well as the VEOs's gendered narratives, ideologies, and recruitment tactics. Thanks to the understanding of these factors, it is possible to intervene and to work on building counter-narratives.

As the Guidance Note underlines, it is also important that any kind of P/CVE programme addresses gender equality and does not harm women. These programmes must avoid the promotion of gender stereotypes and norms, which would only harm women and worsen their situation. Furthermore, ensuring women's active participation in the security field is fundamental to change the status quo and address women's grievances. In order to do so, a tool which is

proposed entails understanding these grievances and developing activities that respond to them. The researcher particularly appreciates the proposal of countering the ways in which VEOs recruit women, including through social media, online activities, but also peers.

The partners which collaborate in the implementation of the policy should also ensure that their work is gender-sensitive and does not harm women. They must be held accountable in this gender-sensitive task, as they should provide and respect a gender policy.

Overall, it must be recognised that this Guidance Note on the P/CVE covers comprehensively the issue of gender sensitivity in P/CVE. As a matter of fact, the tools which are proposed are valid and consider a wide range of topics. This policy addresses the integration of gender into the analysis of the VE context, the design of gender-sensitive P/CVE programmes, policies and strategies, as well as the gendered strategies of VEOs' propaganda and recruitment, and the strategic importance of women in the security sector. These strategies can only be considered in theory as their application and their outcomes will be analysed in the next NAP. Nevertheless, considering them is important as the theoretical lacks to fix and merits to persevere should be addressed.

Even though the policy is overall comprehensive and addresses important topics, it should be noted that little attention has been given to some important factors. First, the researcher finds a lack of attention towards online radicalisation channels. In fact, even though the policy mentions online activities, it should be noted that women are mostly recruited online, and more resources should be devoted to build counter-narratives online and to monitor some channels of communication.

Second, the researcher notices that the policy does not properly address the differences among women, which can vary from opinion or belief differences

to race and religion differences. Women are not all the same and do not always agree, and believing this would only reiterate harmful gendered perspectives. The policy points at this same concept, but the researcher does not note differences in the approach of the different topics.

Third, more attention should be given to the specific gender risks women are exposed to due to P/CVE work: it is important to analyse the different situations and to assess whether women can operate safely. At the same time, the policy hints, but does not go further, to the importance of instrumentalising women. In fact, exploiting women for a certain P/CVE goal reiterates harmful behaviours which go against women, and, ultimately, the policy itself.

Fourth, ISIS should be introduced in the policy on its own, without being compared to other jihadist organisations or to other terrorist groups, considering that a relevant number of British women travelled to ISIS-held territories and could be eager to do it if the Caliphate gains its territorial strength again. Even though ISIS does not regain its full strength or remains a virtual one, it is still relevant that the radicalisation of women should be countered.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that ISIS has lost its territories in Syria and Iraq, it can still count on different branches and on a high number of followers worldwide. It has the material and human capabilities to reestablish its power, as it has demonstrated through numerous attacks after its 2019 defeat by disrupting stability. Even though the number of ISIS fighters is unclear, estimates talk about tens of thousands of fighters, who continue to engage in strategies suited to ISIS's lack of territory until better conditions unfold. Fighters and recruits are still ready to take up the sword for the Caliphate, and, thanks to the prolific and targeting ISIS propaganda, they are also willing to travel to ISIS-held territories. ISIS propaganda leverages young generations who do not feel represented in Western societies, and the migratory flux could start any time ISIS regains its territories. The phenomenon of Western foreign fighters in ISIS is also still relevant as they have travelled from their home countries in recent years and the majority of them are still in the previous ISIS-held territories, detained in centres where ISIS ideology is still eradicated, or hidden in Syria and Iraq, and where they are raising the so-called Cubs of the Caliphate. Therefore, considering human and financial resources, as well as available weaponry, the threat represented by ISIS is still critical.

As demonstrated through analysis, there are three gendered narratives exploited by ISIS to recruit Western women and to make them travel to ISIS-held territories. Firstly, women are solicited to perform hijrah because it is honourable and because women's help in building the Ummah is fundamental. It is therefore a duty and an honour to undertake this journey as women appear to be the repository of the family and of family honour. At the same time, religion itself is part of this theme, since women and religion are strictly related. These concepts are the sides of the same coin as they represent gendered ways to bond women to honour – and therefore shame if not respected – and to the

importance of the past. The call from God to migrate for great purposes cannot be ignored. This also entails the role of women as mothers as this position leverages recruitment.

Secondly, women are called to hijrah to carry out violent jihad and to help in the establishment of the Islamic State. Even though the use of this terminology is not widely present in ISIS magazines and manifesto as much, it is nevertheless true that, especially after 2017, the Caliphate has been leveraging Western women to carry out violent jihad. The Islamic State has not made many references to this as its supporters rely on patriarchal and gendered norms and roles for women, and consensus would vacillate if these foundations were shaken. This call to the Ummah is gendered as women appear to be second to men in any way, as they can join violent jihad when men are not able to fulfill this task. Women's agency thus depends on men's agency.
The third gendered strategy employed by ISIS to convince women to perform hijrah entails leveraging women into the conviction that living in the Caliphate will allow them to escape from the corruption of the Western world and to live a pious and pure Islamic life. Women's honour, but also chastity and modesty, have been erased by the Western world, and women, who are the repository of these values, have been corrupted. Migrating to ISIS-held territories is therefore fundamental to make women pure again, and to distance them from the ideas of emancipation and freedom.

Therefore, it has been demonstrated that the migration of Western women towards ISIS-held territories represents a multifaceted phenomenon which must be carefully targeted by Western governments. The UK, in its counterterrorism strategy, does underline the threat represented by ISIS in its multiple facets. It highlights that the threat is still relevant today despite ISIS's reduced territorial presence and it shows interest in ISIS's propaganda and exploitation of British people's grievances. However, CONTEST does not take into consideration

women in its pages and does not target the flux towards ISIS-held territories by British women. Even though this migration is mentioned, CONTEST does not mention this phenomenon in any way and does not address the reasons or the specific ways in which women's radicalisation happened. In general, CONTEST is not a gender-sensitive counterterrorism strategy as it does not address women's agency or roles in any way.

Likewise, this dissertation has shown that the NAP provides good insights into the gendered tactics used by VEOs, but it does not address the migratory flux of British women or their potential return to the UK. Considering the specificity of this document, not finding any figures or interest in the phenomenon shows that it has not been considered sufficiently relevant to be included in the main policy paper. The Guidance Note on P/CVE, instead, mentions the migratory flux towards Syria and Iraq and describes the roles played by women in VEOs and the exploitation of gender in VEOs' recruitment and propaganda. However, even though this document refers to ISIS more than once, its focus is wider and considers VEOs in general at times, while making references to jihadi or right-wing organisations when necessary. The document underlines the gendered messaging used by ISIS's propaganda and the importance of understanding women's agency in the recruitment process. Furthermore, in other parts of the document, the exploitation of gender roles and relations in the territories of ISIS is mentioned, as well as the sections of Dabiq dedicated to women and their role in the Al-Khansaa Brigade. Women's combat roles are also mentioned. Even though ISIS's presence is sporadic in the Guidance Note, it is nevertheless more present than in the actual NAP, and it underlines important points. It does not refer to the migration of British women to ISIS, but it does focus briefly on some relevant aspects. Furthermore, the proposed tools in the Guidance Note are valid and consider a wide range of gender-related topics.

The study has highlighted that the Guidance Note on P/CVE addresses the integration of gender into the analysis of the VE context, the design of gender-

sensitive P/CVE programmes, policies and strategies, as well as the gendered strategies of VEOs' propaganda and recruitment, and the strategic importance of women in the security sector. Even though the policy is overall comprehensive and addresses important topics, it should be noted that little attention has been given to some important factors. First, there is a lack of attention towards online radicalisation channels. Second, the policy does not properly address the differences among women, which can vary from opinion or belief differences to race and religion differences. Women are not all the same and do not always agree, and believing this would only reiterate harmful gendered perspectives. Third, more attention should be given to the specific gender risks women are exposed to due to P/CVE work: it is important to analyse the different situations and to assess whether women can operate safely.

Moving forward, research is needed to understand whether further gendered narratives are used to recruit Western women, and how these strategies have changed throughout the different phases of ISIS's life. Moreover, further research is important to analyse ISIS's social media platforms in order to examine whether ISIS uses the same gendered propaganda through social networks as it does with its magazines and Manifesto.

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