

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

# Justification of Suicide Terrorism and the Gendered Interpretation

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Case Study: Al-Qaeda & ISIS

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# Introduction

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Suicide attacks have continued to grasp the attention of the worldwide public and provoked debates concerning terrorism, especially around radicalisation. Recent attacks in the West resulted in sharpened security and policies to reduce the amount of threat in the countries. Controversially, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (hereinafter ISIS) have claimed approximately 24,7% of all female suicide attacks, which can be considered as shocking due to the prohibition of female participation in the Jihad in the Islamic ideology (Davis, 2013, p.281).

Terrorist organizations are complex and their primary goals are often linked to certain religious assumptions. Al-Qaeda is connected to religious extremism even though religion is only an aspect of its goals (Martin & Kushner, 2011). In 2014, the publicity of ISIS captured the attention of the global world due to its attacks and affiliation with Al-Qaeda (Perry & Long, 2016).

The main focus of this thesis is on suicide terrorism and female participation in suicide attacks. Ultimately, this thesis tends to answer the research question **“How can suicide terrorism be justified by terrorist groups and how does the gendered interpretation contradict female participation in suicide terrorism?”**. Hence, this thesis investigates the logics behind suicide terrorism to discover how terrorist groups justify their acts by connecting their ultimate goals to suicide attacks and indicate how support is acquired for their actions.

The concept of gendered interpretation refers to the existing ideals about masculinity and femininity that produce prejudices about gender, based on the traditional beliefs of males and females. Men are often associated with violence whereas women are considered as peaceful, which is in turn misleading as this merely enhances the existing assumption of masculine and feminine stereotypes (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007).

This thesis conducts a comparative case study on Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Based on this case study, the justification of suicide terrorism is analyzed in terms of the strategic, social and individual logics set out by Pape (2005). Thus, with the focus on these active organizations that use suicide terrorism as a tool to reach its political goal, this thesis tends to present certain logics behind suicide terrorism and how Al-Qaeda and ISIS managed to justify their actions as a means to reach their goals. Additionally, this thesis aims to highlight the gendered interpretation of terrorism and hence takes into account the masculine and feminine

ideals to present the contradiction of female participation in suicide attacks and the traditional ideals about femininity to highlight how gendered interpretation still exists. Noteworthy is that this thesis incorporates a descriptive rather than an empirical analysis.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide for a different insight and understanding concerning suicide terrorism and women participation in attacks, because terrorism has been broadly discussed and yet little attention has been paid to the women's roles and the ultimate goals of the terrorist organizations. The broader goals of terrorist groups are rarely mentioned as the main assumption of terrorist attacks is connected to the Islamic ideology (Goodwin, 2006). Furthermore, terrorism is considered as a masculine activity with the main perpetrators being male and the role of women in terrorism is limited to supportive roles rather than active violent acts (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Therefore, this thesis draws its attention to the exploration of logics behind suicide terrorism and the inclusion of women's capabilities in order to engage in terrorism studies from a distinct perspective.

Based on gender and traditional associations with masculinity and femininity, existing ideals and stereotypes continue to limit the perception of women's capabilities. Moreover, due to the Islamic ideology of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, women participation in suicide attacks is assumed to be prohibited. This thesis strives to highlight the gendered interpretation that exists and how this contributes to the underestimation of active women participation in terrorism, because this can be used strategically by terrorist groups. Furthermore, it is illustrated how terrorism should not be limited to the gendered interpretation, because women have been active in terrorism for decades.

The structure of this thesis is as followed: the first section presents the scholarly debate in the field of terrorism in a literature review and the gap this thesis tends to fill. The second section illustrates the theoretical framework and the third section focuses on the methodological chapter in which the purpose of the thesis, the analytical framework for the research, case selection and data collection are presented. The analysis and findings of the comparative case study is highlighted in the next section, followed by a discussion. The final section sums up the main points of the thesis and the answer to the research question.

# Literature review

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Terrorism has been explored by many scholars and remains a controversial issue, because of the different forms and definitions of terrorism. There is still no clear definition of terrorism due to the political loaded character and the debate between the “one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter” (Suter, 2006; Boeke, 2016). The events of 9/11 has resulted in an increase of literature that tend to explain this “new” form of terrorism (Duyvesteyn, 2010). An attack on America had caused widespread shock and damage emotionally and physically, which in turn led to increased measures and theories about (counter)terrorism (ibid, p.443). The Islam has been considered as a violent religion due to the perpetrators of 9/11 and the rise of Islamist extremists in the West, which is an unjustified condemnation of the entire religion (Saikal, 2016).

Foreign intervention led by the US in Iraq has been considered as a necessity due to the presence of extremist groups and suicide terrorists amongst others (Roberts, 2006). However, the aftermath of the war has resulted in increased violence and terrorist groups (ibid). Besides the political void, there also has been research conducted on the Islam and how the religion is considered as the main condition for terrorist organizations to operate, which might be fueled by feelings of nationalism (Goodwin, 2006). However, there has been limited research on the main goals of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Another aspect to consider in terms of terrorism is the increase of female participation, because their roles are not merely “passive” anymore (Jacques & Taylor, 2010). Motivations for women to engage in terrorist activities have been thoroughly discussed, in which personal rather than political reasons simultaneously distinguish women from men (Jacques & Taylor, 2008; Sharpe, 2008).

Furthermore, women are driven by vengeance whereas men are driven by religious and nationalistic aspirations (Jacques & Taylor, 2008; Jacques & Taylor, 2010). There is an existing ideology of male domination in the martyrdom in which women are considered as second-class citizens, because of their inability to “gain access to a holy death” (Sharpe, 2008, p.73). Moreover, women have to be modest and chaste, while men provide for a decent life and protect the family’s honor (ibid).

Although there is recognition for female participation in terrorist organizations, their roles are still considered as minor in opposition to the roles of men as Cunningham (2007) elaborates that men are considered as “real terrorists” and that women merely serve a purpose

in delivering weapons and “being a little more than bombs with a brain” (p.117). Therefore, the role of women in terrorist organizations are underestimated, because they are not considered as terrorists. In this sense, women’s contributions are acknowledged based on actions “behind the scenes” rather than their actual capabilities to conduct an attack.

Besides motivations to engage in terrorism and the acknowledgement of women’s roles in terrorist organizations, studies have also shown the psychological aspects that contribute to the underestimation of women’s capabilities (O’Rourke, 2009; Malvern & Koureas, 2014; Aolain, 2013; Ahäll, 2012). O’Rourke (2009) argues that women are considered as less violent than men and therefore less likely to commit suicide (p.691) and Malvern and Koureas (2014) explain how an increase in women terrorists disrupts the discourse of terrorism that is associated with masculinity (p.76).

Aolain (2013) confirms the absence of women recognition in terrorist attacks, because women are considered as “the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of terrorist actors, or as the archetypal victims of senseless terrorist acts on whose effects on the most vulnerable group (women themselves) underscores the unacceptability of terrorist targeting” (p. 1086). Additionally, the connection of women to motherhood undermines the idea of violent women and “their capacity to kill” (Ahäll, 2012, p.107).

There is no doubt that female terrorism has gained attention in the scholarly field. Yet, there are many case studies on the history of women terrorists in Palestine, Chechnya and Sri Lanka (Laster & Erez, 2015), with little representation of the women recruitment in Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Although Islamist groups have been reluctant to recruit women, there has been more claimed attacks by terrorist groups that were conducted by women suicide bombers since approximately 2002 (Martin & Kushner, 2011).

In sum, there have been sufficient studies covering (suicide) terrorism, different motivations for women to engage in terrorism and their roles in terrorist organizations. Yet, little attention has been paid to the justification of suicide attacks by terrorist groups and how women capacities are underestimated in terrorism.

This thesis tends to fill that gap by conducting research on Al Qaeda and ISIS showing the justification of suicide attacks and how the increase of women suicide bombers in the organizations contradict traditional ideas about femininity, in which the gendered interpretation can be recognized. In this sense, a connection will be drawn between the gendered interpretation and the increase in female participation in suicide attacks.

# Theoretical framework

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As this thesis investigates suicide terrorism and gendered interpretation, this section clarifies these key concepts to understand the implications of certain definitions used inherently in this thesis. According to Stepanova (2008), terrorist acts can be recognized based on three criteria. Firstly, the ultimate goal is to reach the political dimension which can be formulated through ideological or religious motivations (Stepanova, 2008, p.12). Secondly, terrorism aims at attacking civilians, either specific groups or intentional indiscriminate (ibid). Finally, Stepanova (2008) addresses the “asymmetrical nature of terrorism”, which implies how terrorists use the victims after an attack as a means to express their political statement in front of a widespread audience, such as a state, community of states or a group (p.12).

Against this backdrop, suicide terrorism includes violent attacks against others conducted by terrorist organizations. According to Pape (2005), suicide terrorism “is the most aggressive form of terrorism”, because it is aimed to kill as many people as possible in the targeted audience (p.10-11). Furthermore, suicide attacks are different, because the methods require the terrorists’ deaths for the attacks to succeed, e.g. car bombs, suicide vests etc. (Pape, 2005, p.10). Although suicide bombings are not considered as the most effective form of terrorism to reach their political goals, these attacks inflict damages on the victims as well as the widespread society in the process of making their statement (Suter, 2006, p.32-33).

Beckwith (2000) explains that gendered interpretations exist even in the most modern societies that focus on masculine power and privileges. Additionally, the image of femininity often results in the denial of women’s capacities in masculine activities, because they are framed as peaceful individuals based on gender (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). An activity is inclined to be treated as masculine when men are the dominant actors, which can be recognized in terrorist activities (Naegler & Salman, 2016). Therefore, the existing gender stereotypes and the idea of femininity undermine the women’s capabilities to participate in a masculine activity such as terrorism (Lunsford & Ouzgane, 2014). Hence, the gendered interpretation is the association of masculine and feminine ideals with the traditional gender roles and activities, resulting in prejudices based on gender.

# Methods and Approach

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In accordance to the research purpose, this thesis is conducted based on a qualitative comparative case study on Al-Qaeda and ISIS and embarks on a descriptive interpretive analysis to answer the following research question: **“How can suicide terrorism be justified by terrorist groups and how does the gendered interpretation contradict female participation in suicide terrorism?”**. Therefore, this thesis conducts research by describing and interpreting information without any specific theoretical underpinnings (Smythe, 2012, p.5).

In order to be critical, it is essential to understand and express the topic in a wider context (Travers, 2001). Moreover, a critical analysis provides for a detachment from existing ideologies by constructing another perspective (Jackson, 2007). The social-cultural context is important, because knowledge about terrorism often tends to be gendered (ibid). Therefore, this interpretive and descriptive analysis is structured according to a critical perspective in which this thesis expresses the existing gendered interpretation in terrorism activities and how this results in the underestimation of women as suicide bombers.

As the research question is a combination of suicide terrorism and female participation, this thesis focuses on the gendered interpretation of suicide terrorism and the logics behind the acts. By analyzing how terrorist organizations tend to justify suicide attacks, the internal and external forces that drive these organizations are examined, which in turn provide for a better understanding of the topic.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify the different logics behind suicide terrorism in order to examine the justifications of Al-Qaeda and ISIS for their suicide attacks and to stress the role of women terrorists and their capabilities, because gender stereotypes tend to result in underestimation of the women's roles in terrorist organizations. The analysis of the gendered interpretation in this thesis presents the contradicting ideals of femininity and the deployment of women for the perpetration of suicide acts. Consequently, the analysis also presents how terrorist organizations use women strategically based on the existing gendered interpretation.

## *Analytical Framework*

In order to tackle the first part of the question, this thesis incorporates the framework set out by Pape (2005) to identify the justification logics behind suicide terrorism concerning the strategic, social and individual logics (p.21). Additionally, these three questions set out the



analytical framework for this thesis in the understanding of the justification of terrorist acts.

The strategic logic of suicide terrorism focuses on political intimidation as attacks are planned by an organized group that are primarily nationalistic, which in turn reflect on an organization's broader political goal (ibid). The social logic refers to the support terrorist organizations gain from the national communities that believe they are striving for a nationalist cause, such as eliminating the foreign troops (ibid, p.22). The individual logic behind suicide terrorism is focused on the aspect of altruistic suicide, in which individuals commit attacks out of respect and duty toward their community values (ibid, p.23). Hence, in order to proceed with a justified cause, terrorists commit suicide attacks as a sacrifice to the nationalistic cause (ibid).

Furthermore, this thesis pursues the gendered interpretation of terrorism and highlights how this is in contradiction with existing feminine ideals. The traditional ideals that exist about women usually relate to the idea of "peacefulness, mothering, care and interdependence" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011, p.4). Furthermore, women are supposed to be "innocent and fragile" rather than associated with violence, because this contradicts the existing concepts of femininity (ibid, p.5). Ultimately, although women suicide bombers are increasing, these gender stereotypes are still prevailing in society and are difficult to overcome (ibid). Therefore, the gendered interpretation refers to the traditional ideas of femininity that are associated with certain roles women are supposed to fulfil in society. In this sense, as suicide terrorism is perceived as a masculine activity, women are underestimated in their capabilities to conduct violent attacks merely based on gender.

### *Case Selection and Data Collection*

Al-Qaeda is selected as one of the cases for this thesis, because it is responsible for a range of terrorist activities all around the world, inspiring societies from around the globe to join the Al-Qaeda movement (Fletcher & Ohlin, 2008). Up until 2003, Al-Qaeda did not employ female suicide attackers, because Islamic fundamentalism disapproves of female combatants (Pape, 2005, p.208). Yet, there has been a shift in this phenomenon as there has been evidence of female participation in attacks deployed by this organization.

ISIS is selected as the second case study for this thesis, because of its recent emergence and how ISIS was able to gain media attention due to its suicide operations as well as its Islamic ideology (Kuronen & Huhtinen, 2016). Meanwhile, it was also able to gain grounds in Iraq due to the political instability (ibid). Despite the Islamic fundamentalism rooted in both terrorist organizations, women participation in terrorism has also been

established in the ISIS organization as attacks conducted by women suicide bombers have often been claimed by the group (Burke, 2016).

Therefore, this thesis tends to illustrate the reasons behind the shift in women engagement and connect it to suicide terrorism as both Al-Qaeda and ISIS have an Islamic ideology and were against female combatants. Moreover, both organizations are active in Iraq and are known for their violent attacks worldwide. In addition, both terrorist groups depend on the media outlets for the spread of violent footages of attacks, speeches and statements by their leaders and the creation of fear on the audience worldwide. Yet, despite certain similar circumstances, these organizations are separate groups. Hence, this comparative analysis strives to tease out the similarities and distinctions in terms of logics and use of women in combat.

The descriptive and interpretive analysis is supported by literature in order to link the data with the findings (Smythe, 2012). Additionally, by finding evidence in literature, the comparative element of the research can be explained while analyzing the similarities and differences (ibid). This descriptive analysis is conducted based on a qualitative study with the main focus on journal articles written by experts on terrorism and women suicide bombers, newspaper articles and statements published by Al-Qaeda and ISIS, in which the elements are supported by literature .

The qualitative approach has been selected for this thesis, because qualitative studies widen the scope of data collection and the understanding of different interpretations by a diversity of scholars and broadens the knowledge on the topics (Travers, 2001). The independent variables for this thesis are the political goals of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the Islamic ideology of both organizations and the gendered interpretation of terrorism. The dependent variables are women suicide bombers in both organizations, the three logics outlined by Pape (2005) and the choice to use suicide attacks as a means to reach the ultimate goal.

Certain scholars form the basis for this research, such as Pape (2005) and Sjoberg and Gentry (2011) providing for background information as well as the theoretical and methodological framework to analyze Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Furthermore, these scholars have expertise on the the justification of suicide terrorism by terrorist groups and the gendered interpretation. Additionally, the statements of both organizations, articles of other experts, opinion polls and newspapers are analyzed, which serve as supportive arguments in the explanation of underestimated women suicide bombers in Al-Qaeda and ISIS and how suicide terrorism can be justified.

The timeframe selected for this thesis is 1990-2016, which incorporates events such as

9/11, foreign occupation in Iraq, Bin Laden's public appearances and the emergence of ISIS. Moreover, due to the limited scope, this thesis only investigates the foreign presence in Iraq, even though Al-Qaeda and ISIS have been operating globally. Iraq has been selected, because both organizations are present in the country with jihadists performing attacks based on the Islamic ideology (Byman, 2015). Additionally, the US led invasion after 9/11 against Usama bin Laden and the presence of foreign troops since 2003 contributed to the political instability in the country and the increase of hostility towards foreign troops (ibid).

### *Methodological Limitations*

Although the goal is to remain objective in the research, choosing a comparative case study has already compromised this objectivity (Scholz & Tietje, 2002), because the guidelines of the case study has been structured in the framework by Pape (2005) and the concept of a gendered interpretation. Furthermore, the outcomes of this case study would be interpreted and formulated according to my understanding due to the qualitative approach, which is in itself a form of subjectivity. Moreover, this thesis is conducted based on English sources which limits the accessibility of information.

Case studies can hinder the general applicability of the research as there is evidence for selection bias due to the inability to analyze every source of information (George & Bennett, 2005). In addition, this thesis is conducted based on a qualitative study and firsthand sources are not included, which in turn reflects on the selective objectivity.

There are also limited English journal articles, opinion polls and information about the terrorist groups, that compromises the objectivity and results of this thesis. The Islam is a broad religion with many branches and ideologies, however, this is not addressed because the goal of the thesis is not to provide for a background on religion.

However, by conducting research on terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the methodological framework that this thesis enhances can be applied to other researches. By focusing on the logics of suicide terrorism of a terrorist organization and the gendered interpretation, the results of this research can be generally reproduced in other case studies. Additionally, comparative case studies provide for an in-depth analysis, which results in a thorough understanding of the different cases and produces generalizable knowledge (Lamont, 2015).

Moreover, the comparative case study approach allows this thesis to tease out the similarities and differences of both terrorist organizations in the justification of suicide attacks

and the role of women in suicide attacks. Consequently, this provides for the opportunity to analyze and understand the reasons and actions of these organizations.

# Analysis & Findings

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This section presents the analysis and findings for this thesis. First, Al-Qaeda and ISIS are individually assessed based on the three logics of suicide terrorism: strategic, social and individual. This in turn reflects on the rationality and justification of suicide terrorism. Second, the gendered interpretation is further analyzed, connecting the increase of women participation in suicide terrorism to the contradicting gendered interpretation. Finally, the section ends with the findings of this analysis.

## *Al-Qaeda and its justifications*

Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization that operates globally, with a fundamentalist ideology that has also been conveying public discontents (Jenkins, 2012). The strategic logic of suicide terrorism is analyzed to comprehend the goals of Al-Qaeda. The war against terrorism after 9/11 sparked a response against ideological terrorists that in turn created a political context between the “good” Americans and the “evil” terrorists (Hellmich, 2011). In this sense, Islam was quickly associated with terrorism as well as the primary goal for terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda (ibid).

Although Al-Qaeda has been known for its commitment towards the Muslim community, other factors such as foreign occupation and injustice are also worth considering in the examination of the organization. Before 9/11, Usama Bin Laden had already expressed his discontent towards foreign occupation in Saudi Arabia and his determination to remove these troops by declaring a defensive Jihad (Blanchard, 2007, p.2). Moreover, attacks on US embassies in 1998 in Tanzania and Kenya were supported by Bin Laden in which he publically stated that these attacks can be justified due to US’ injustice toward the massacres in Palestine and other Muslim communities (ibid, p.4).

After 9/11, Bin Laden continued to express his goals in statements that contribute to the strategic logic of suicide terrorism within Al-Qaeda. In a video message from 2004, Bin Laden explained 9/11 and Al-Qaeda’s actions by drawing the connection to freedom, security and US policy.

*“No, we fight because we are free men who don’t sleep under oppression. We want to restore freedom to our nation, just as you lay waste to our nation. So shall we lay waste to yours.”*  
(Bin Laden, 2004).

*“I say to you, Allah knows that it had never occurred to us to strike the towers. But after it became unbearable and we witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American/Israeli coalition against our people in Palestine and Lebanon, it came to my mind.”* (Bin Laden, 2004).

*“Your security is in your own hands. And every state that doesn't play with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security.”* (Bin Laden, 2004).

These three statements portray (amongst others) how Al-Qaeda justified attacks by bringing justice to its people in Palestine and Lebanon, its goal to be free from foreign troops in their homeland territories and the political aspect of security that Bin Laden mentioned in which states are “warned” to not interfere with the organization to protect itself from terrorist attacks. Therefore, the strategic logic of suicide terrorism of Al-Qaeda can be explained by its desire to remove foreign troops in its territories as well as regaining freedom in those areas.

Furthermore, as explained by Fletcher and Ohlin (2008), Al-Qaeda “claims to be defending itself against American imperialism” to further legitimize its actions (p.5). The US has been viewed as the main enemy of Al-Qaeda due to US presence in Muslim territories, its support towards Israel and the US-led invasion in Iraq in 2003 (ibid). Hence, in order to get foreign military troops out of Al-Qaeda’s homeland, suicide attacks help in coercion (Pape, 2005). Additionally, suicide attacks are conducted on US troops as well as governments that are friendly with the West because of Al-Qaeda’s priority to free the Persian Gulf region from foreign/US presence (ibid). Thus, the nationalistic goal is recognized in the overall objective of Al-Qaeda as the organization is striving to free its nation from the West and its values.

In order to identify the social logic of suicide terrorism, the support towards Al-Qaeda from the national communities in Iraq is investigated. Based on several public opinion polls, evidence has shown that Al-Qaeda is tolerated rather than fully supported by the local communities (World Public Opinion, 2006a; Iraq Center for research & strategic studies, 2006). Among the Iraqi population, there has been an increase of support for attacks conducted on US troops by Al-Qaeda, a rise from 47% to 62% in 2006 (World Public Opinion, 2006). This support can be explained with the correlation between the desire of US withdrawal from Iraq and the pressure the attacks can have on the US to remove its troops (ibid).

Yet, although it is quickly assumed that support for attacks by Al-Qaeda results in ultimate support for the organization, the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA)

has shown that 94% of the Iraqi ethnic groups disapprove of Al-Qaeda despite its shared desire to drive out foreign troops in Iraq (World Public Opinion, 2006b).

Consequently, attacks on US troops stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf region were supported by almost half of all Muslims polled in the Middle-East as these troops were identified as occupiers of homeland territories (World Public Opinion, 2007). Hence, the decline in support for Al-Qaeda does not necessarily indicate favorable attitudes towards the US in the Middle-East as it is still negatively viewed due to its presence in the region (Fox, 2012).

Compared to the US, Al-Qaeda has gained legitimacy among the local communities even though there might not be evidence for a majoritarian support (World Public Opinion, 2007). In this sense, Al-Qaeda is viewed as an organization that stands up for its beliefs in the process of freeing their homelands from the US (ibid). Moreover, anti-American attitudes facilitate the suppression of moral doubts against Al-Qaeda in which the local population can still identify with the terrorist organization based on religion and nationalistic feelings (ibid).

Additionally, the Iraqi communities feel more insecure with the presence of US troops, even though the US believes that its presence is necessary for Iraq (Young, 2008). Opinion polls have shown that the Iraqi population has continued to express its concerns and urged for removal of foreign troops, because the security in Iraq has deteriorated since the occupation (ibid). Therefore, the presence of foreign troops has resulted in provocation rather than the intended prevention of conflict (ibid).

The individual logic of suicide terrorism depends on the respect and duty individuals feel towards the community and its values to sacrifice for a nationalistic cause. Suicide bombers can be considered as rational, because the bomber is sufficiently motivated to perform the attack (Pape, 2005, p.88). Simultaneously, suicide bombers are aware of their sacrifices, because death is necessary in order for an attack to succeed (ibid). Hence, the attackers are used against the enemies as human capitals, who can be controlled and maneuvered accordingly (ibid). Regardless of nationalism or religion, suicide bombers tend to sacrifice their lives as martyrs, because that sacrifice has become integral to their identities as an individual (Michael & Scolnick, 2006). Furthermore, the lives of these suicide bombers gain momentum after their deaths, because the attacks would be remembered by the widespread audience (ibid, p.114).

### *Al-Qaeda and the deployment of women suicide bombers*

After 9/11, the US legitimized its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by claiming that radical

extremists oppressed women and that these women needed to be liberated from the local patriarchy (Morris, 2010, p.15). Terrorism is associated with masculinity whereas women (femininity) are considered as oppressed subjects that need to be liberated (ibid). An attack in Iraq in 2003 by an unidentified woman marked the shift from abstaining to deploying women in suicide attacks by Al-Qaeda (Rubin, 2008; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011). Female suicide bombers challenge the cultural norms in Iraq, gain more media attention and can be more strategic as attacks by women are often unexpected (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011, p.163). Thus, women can pass through security due to their passive characteristics and conduct the attack flexibly and surprisingly without arousing suspicion (ibid).

Global prestige and recruitment for the organization has been facilitated due to the media attention of women suicide bombers (ibid). Hence, Al-Qaeda recruits women suicide bombers due to the greater shock value they bring as women usually claim a more passive role in society and politics than men (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortals, 2013, p.35). Terrorism is often perceived as a masculine activity in which women are gendered as the innocent victims (ibid). Yet, Al-Qaeda's women conducted eleven out of twenty suicide attacks in Iraq during the first half of 2008 (Rubin, 2008). Al-Qaeda expressed its acknowledgement in using women as suicide bombers publically, in which women gained credibility due to their engagement and contributions in violent activities (ibid).

Although the Islam is fairly negative about women jihadists and addresses women to take care of their husbands and the household rather than being potential combatants, Al-Qaeda has shifted from this conservative idea by deploying women as suicide bombers (Cook, 2005).

### *ISIS and suicide terrorism*

The violence in Iraq has existed since the US-led invasion in 2003, however, the emergence of ISIS and its enforcement of the fundamental Islamic ideology has resulted in increased tensions and violence in the country (Basu, 2016). ISIS has been performing suicide attacks in crowded areas to maximize casualties (Al Jazeera, 2017). The post-invasion chaos in Iraq resulted in the rise of extremist groups with an increase of support and sympathy towards ISIS despite its violent attacks and totalitarianism (The Soufan Group, 2015). Furthermore, regional instability facilitates the recruitment and transit of jihadists to join terrorist organizations in Iraq (ibid).

Behind ISIS' strategic logic, religion is combined with identity and political belonging (Haykel, 2016, p.77). In this sense, the cultural products varying from poetry to modes of



etiquette and the political system are controlled through godly rule (ibid). Hence, ISIS' promise for a stable political order combined with an ultimate victory for the Islam facilitates the recruitment of jihadists that are prepared to fight for their territories (ibid). Moreover, ISIS was able to gain grounds and support in Iraq due to the failure of the establishment of security in the country and the continued dissatisfaction among the Sunni Muslims towards the Shi'ite leadership (Kuronen & Huhtinen, 2016). The fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime resulted in suppression of the Sunni Muslims and hence ISIS was able to gain support from this group (ibid).

The leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has mentioned in his various speeches about foreign occupation in the region, consequences for attacks by foreign troops on Muslim soil and drew the connection between terrorism and the Islam for the legitimization of violent attacks (Jihadist News, 2014).

*“Every amount of harm against the Ummah [Muslim nation] will be responded to with multitudes more against the perpetrator.”*(Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 2014)

*The disbelievers were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights. They accomplished this by attacking and occupying their lands, placing their treacherous agents in power to rule the Muslims with an iron fist.”* (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 2014)

*“Terrorism is for the Muslim to live as a Muslim, honorably with might and freedom. Terrorism is to insist upon your rights and not give them up.”* (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 2014)

These statements from al-Baghdadi's speech were published online in which he addressed the global jihadists to join ISIS (Al Arabiya News, 2014). As mentioned above, the leader indicated consequences against those who attack the Muslim nations, how foreign presence has been dominating the Muslim community in the region and his interpretation of Islam that legitimizes terrorism. Therefore, religion plays a role in the recruitment and motivation of jihadists to join ISIS and terrorism is mostly driven by accompanied underlying reasons, such as Western presence and foreign policies that regulate the Muslim territories (Patterson, 2015).

In addition, the opposition against the practices of ISIS consequently reflects on the Western disapproval of the Muslim religion and independence in the region as the Western powers continue to operate in the area (Barrett, 2014, p.6). Moreover, the leaders of ISIS vary from strongly religious to secular Baathists to Sunni tribal leaders (ibid). Hence, with strategic and ideological objectives, ISIS is able recruit concerned Muslims and sharpen them into

weapons (Shahzad, 2011).

The social logic behind suicide terrorism derives from public support towards ISIS. Even before ISIS, a public opinion poll conducted by Gallup already indicated that 85% of the population believes that the governance situation is deteriorating, with main concerns about security, corruption and a civil war (Crabtree, 2014). Hence, ISIS was able to gain support from the dissatisfied citizens due to continued lack of trust in the national government (ibid).

Yet, only 5% of the population believes that ISIS actually provides for security and justice (Orb International, 2015). Despite this low percentage, the Iraqis acknowledge the deteriorating situation in the country and have more confidence in ISIS as the supplier of stability, security and economic prospect than in the local and foreign governments (Shinkman, 2015). Furthermore, opinion polls in Iraq show that 56% of the population is opposed to the airstrikes and 85% of the Iraqi community believes that ISIS is a product of foreign intervention and occupation (Orb International, 2015). Airstrikes are considered as unproductive, because these fuel ISIS' propaganda which would result in the facilitation of recruitment (Al-Dagher, 2014).

ISIS claims its legitimacy by connecting violent terrorist attacks to religion, in which a Caliphate must operate according to the Quran objectives rather than secular governance (Barrett, 2014). The individual logic behind joining ISIS reflects on identity, sense of belonging and empowerment with religious attachments (ibid). Moreover, individuals are thought to be given a chance for a rewarding afterlife by joining the jihad with ISIS (The Soufan Group, 2015).

### *ISIS and the use of women*

Although ISIS has tortured and victimized women to satisfy their needs, there has also been an increased number of women that act as perpetrators in Iraq (Chatterjee, 2016). Due to their appearances and gender, women that are deployed to perform an attack can also be considered as a strategic move, because of the increased chances in a successful attack due to their ability to pass securities and crowds without major problems (ibid). In addition, ISIS is also aware that women can act as one half of a couple, in which suspicion will decrease at security points (Burke, 2015).

Furthermore, the organization has been able to attract women to join the fight from the West, which is interesting, as these women have been exposed to western liberal values and education (Chatterjee, 2016, p.210). As the main priorities of women are stated in the manifesto that they are bearers of future jihadists and supporters for the internal network,

women have also often been called into militant action although men are still perceived as the primary participants of violent attacks (ibid, p.212).

Moreover, the willingness of women to actually join the combat indicates that there is an increase in possibilities for women to gain agency and detach themselves from the status of rape victims that still lingers in the perception of terrorism (ibid, p.214). Due to the fact that ISIS has been losing grounds in Iraq, the male recruits in the organization are decreasing (Burke, 2016). Hence, ISIS deploys women suicide bombers to fill the void despite initial reluctance to assign them combat roles (ibid).

ISIS is also aware of the media attention women gain and consequently the impacts of the attention on society and the organization's platform to attract potential fighters from around the world (ibid). In this sense, the media permits for an insight on the increasing role that women play in suicide activities as well as the presentation of increased opportunities for women to participate in the jihad (Huey & Witmer, 2016).

### *Findings*

In both organizations, there have been statements against foreign presence in Iraq accompanied by attacks on the grounds aiming at civilians and foreign troops. Consequently, the dissatisfaction towards the government and the desire to liberate the country from foreign troops reveal the similarities in strategic goals of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. This phenomenon can be explained by Pape (2005), because suicide terrorism is a response to foreign occupation, used as a strategy of national liberation against Western democracies that pose a threat to control the territory that terrorists view as their homeland (p.10).

Another similarity is the connection of religion to the broader strategic goals in both terrorist organizations. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have been motivating and recruiting (women) suicide bombers to join their cause in Iraq by stimulating the Islamic ideology (Speckhard, 2015). Additionally, both Al-Qaeda and ISIS claim its legitimacy by filling a politico-military void in Iraq that is aimed at achieving stability and security (Ingram, 2015).

However, despite the existence of the Islamic ideology in both organizations, Al-Qaeda's broader goals are structured in a more strategic manner rather than a religious framework (Pape, 2005). ISIS in contradiction tends to focus on recruiting combatants and diminishing foreign troops in order to establish a Caliphate. Hence, the strategic goal is still inclined to lean towards the Islamic ideology.

There is a recognizable distinction in the social logic of both organizations in terms of support by the local communities. Al-Qaeda was more tolerated compared to ISIS after

attacks on US troops that added on to the nationalist feelings among the population. Lack of confidence in the government is a similar factor for the population to tolerate the actions of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. In addition, the inability of the government to sufficiently control and protect its citizens against attacks tend to result in support toward the terrorist groups (Michael & Scolnick, 2006). However, despite the shared desire to remove foreign troops in Iraq, the violent actions of both organizations are still largely condemned by the citizens, because the attacks yield more harm toward the civilians rather than foreign troops.

The individual logics analyzed for Al-Qaeda and ISIS present the individuals' desire to die as a martyr and the realization for these individuals that their deaths are necessary in order for an attack to be considered as successful. Religion can be used as a tool to recruit terrorists of Al-Qaeda, however, the most significant goal of terrorist organizations are related to the withdrawal of foreign military forces (Pape, 2005, p.4). As for ISIS, the sense of religious identity and belonging are appealing to the terrorists, because the benefits of the afterlife promised in the Islam is considered as rewarding (Barrett, 2014). However, there is still discrepancy between the actual religious beliefs and the individual logics in terrorism (ibid).

Martyrdom can be perceived as an instrument to gain legitimate claim by terrorist organizations in light of protecting the community from the foreign forces (ibid, p.189). Terrorist organizations can also be legitimized based on the connection to their political goals for their societies and a suicide attacker is often identified as altruistic, because the attacker is willing to sacrifice for the community (Pape, 2005, p.188).

Suicide terrorism can be perceived as “propaganda by the deed”, because of the sensational effects that would ensure media coverage and the range of a global audience (ibid). The audience would be intimidated due to the horrific events or support can be acquired from the communities based on the selfless example of the martyr. This therefore facilitates the recruitment of terrorists (ibid).

Suicide bombers gain publicity through their actions, which in turn allow for the organizations to express their political statements (Nacos, 2003, p.3). The media platform facilitates the spread of the organizations' interests and world views and reaches those who share similar opinions across state borders (ibid). Simultaneously, the quantity of victims as a result of a suicide attack also contributes to the increase of fear and anxiety and reiterates the fact that terrorists are able to strike at any time and at any place (Dronzina & El-Houdaigui, 2012).

It is clear that in both cases, women are also used as strategic tools to create

sensational news and to penetrate crowded places to maximize the targets and casualties. In addition, despite the Islamic ideology, both organizations have shifted from the conservative idea and used women in violent attacks. In the case of ISIS, an additional factor to deploy female suicide bombers is to fill the military void due to the increased loss of men. Moreover, terrorist groups strive for shock and awe, which can simultaneously be effectively achieved by using women in suicide attacks (Burke, 2015). Hence, the media attention that is received as well as the successful attacks are already evidence that women should not be underestimated as valuable assets for terrorist organizations (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011, p.165).

Although the Islamic ideology might indicate the gendered roles for men and women, there has been an increase in female suicide attackers in both Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The cultural norms in Iraq facilitate the attacks conducted by females, because the searches at checkpoints are less intrusive, in which explosive belts and vests are hidden in loose robes and clothing worn by women (Myers, 2009). Moreover, women can disguise as pregnant or wear clothing that covers their bodies without arousing much suspicion in society (Bloom, 2005).

The gendered interpretation that exists plays a role in the successfulness of the attacks, because women are able to penetrate crowds and avoid security checks based on their appearances. Simultaneously, their appearances contribute to the harmless image of women and femininity that is in contradiction to the reality of female suicide bombers (ibid). Therefore, women appear innocent which adds to their agency and capabilities to conduct attacks that have a larger impact on society with deadlier consequences than men, because existing femininity ideals emphasize on the less dangerous image of women. Ultimately, the gendered interpretation actually allow women to be more dangerous, which contradicts the traditional idea and representation of femininity.

# Discussion

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Terrorists can be considered as rational actors in which terrorism is used as an extremism of means rather than ends (Abrahms, 2008, p.86). Ultimately, the goals of these terrorists can be reflected on the communities' ideas of self-determination that coincide with nationalist ideologies (ibid). Although terrorist attacks are conducted to reach an ultimate political goal or to address a statement, suicide terrorism still relies on the emotional and social effects rather than the suicide attack itself (Stohl, 2008). Hence, the reactions of the audience and targets are more important than the victims of these attacks (ibid). In this sense, fear is instigated and the terrorist organizations have simultaneously expressed their statements.

Moreover, Al-Qaeda seems to be losing public sympathy as the attacks in Iraq kill innocent Muslims rather than the foreigners operating in the territory (Haykel, 2016). Dissatisfaction with current governments might result in additional support for ISIS, because ISIS believes in governance according to the teachings of the Quran, an ideology that is still appealing in the region (ibid; Barrett, 2014). However, there has also been a shift towards support for secularism in Iraq (Al-Dagher, 2014). Therefore, governance under this religious rule tends to be unfavorable among the Iraqi population as the population self-identify with the nation rather than religion (ibid).

There is hence a contradiction, because military victories and violent attacks against enemies must continue in order for both Al-Qaeda and ISIS to preserve support and yet it simultaneously reduces public support toward both organizations (ibid). In addition, due to the Islamic ideology that drives both terrorist groups, it remains challenging to recognize the ultimate goal, because politics and religion are combined rather than a clear distinction between the Islam and (political) ultimate goal of the terrorist organizations (Sedgwick, 2010).

Besides the male domination, certain characteristics tend to be associated with men (e.g. power, control, pride, honor), whereas attention to women are drawn by notions of oppression, inferior, peaceful and housewives (Naegler & Salman, 2016, p.359). Consequently, women are generally presumed to be innocent who are in need for protection by men in terms of violent situations such as wars and conflicts (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). In this sense, the idea is based on the notions of masculinity protecting femininity rather than men protecting women in real material sense (ibid, p.167). Therefore, men who protect women gain honor that consequently defines their masculinity, in which the gender distinction is made between men and women and their roles in society (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011).

Furthermore, a common stereotype for suicide attackers appear to be male with the speculation that the individual has no further prospects of life due to the absence of education, hope, employment and economic benefits (Pape, 2005, p.199). Women on the other hand are provided with a stereotype in which they symbolically have to be protected (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011, p.168).

In addition, as both terrorist organizations are associated with the Islam and Jihad, the gendered interpretation also exists in religious spheres. In this sense, religion can also be used as a tool to associate gender with religious expectations, such as bravery, ego or honor (Aslam, 2012, p.31). Furthermore, culture is also an important aspect to consider, because cultures produce gender ideals that can be borrowed from certain religions and traditions (ibid, p.34). Hence, society has constructed gendered perspectives by linking masculinity to war and militancy and femininity to nurses, mothers or rape victims (ibid). In this sense, gender roles are associated with the existing traditional norms and constructed based on the circumstances, which is in this case war and terrorism.

Although there has been an increase in female participants in combats, this is still considered as a threat to the masculine norms and the concepts of masculinity (rational) and femininity (emotional) in the widespread society (Harel-Shalevh & Daphna-Tekoah, 2016, p.313). Women combatants are believed to endanger male domination and the common knowledge about gender relations that still exist today (ibid). In addition, the gendered perspective of terrorism does not capture the complexities in the region but provides for a narrow lens on the subject (Chatterjee, 2016).

Consequently, politics and the gendered interpretation are connected, because politics mobilizes the actions whereas gender roles justify the situation (Aslam, 2012, p.35). In this sense, terrorism is often associated with masculinity and thus perceived through a gendered lens (ibid). However, attacks conducted by women are experienced to be more shocking, because of the existing norms in society that prevents the inclusion of women in violent situations and therefore underestimating women's roles in suicide terrorism (Bloom, 2011). Ultimately, the female participation in suicide terrorism should gain more attention, because the underlying message of these terrorist organizations reflect on the idea that "the insurgents are all around you" (ibid, p.24).

# Conclusion

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Terrorism remains a controversial issue, in which every element is significant to consider. This thesis was guided by the research question “**How can suicide terrorism be justified by terrorist groups and how does the gendered interpretation contradict female participation in suicide terrorism?**” and divided into two sections.

Suicide terrorism can be justified by Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the framework of the strategic, social and individual logics behind suicide attacks. The strategic logic reveals how terrorist organizations are driven by the goal to free their homelands from Western/foreign presence, in which suicide attacks can be used as a tool for coercion and recruitment. By referring to the Islam and nationalistic sentiments, both groups justify their attacks by connecting these to “God’s will” and resistance against foreign influences.

The social logic of suicide terrorism implies how terrorist organizations need support from the communities, because their actions are difficult to justify without it. In this sense, Al-Qaeda and ISIS tend to draw upon the shared grounds with the local communities to gain support and justify attacks in Iraq. Moreover, deteriorating confidence in the government and increased tensions result in tolerance toward terrorist groups. Yet, support is not evident, because the attacks usually inflict damages on civilians rather than the foreign troops in the country.

Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS showed trends of individuals acting in light of the Islamic ideology and the desire to die as a martyr. Furthermore, the sensational effect of their deaths are also part of their logic to participate in suicide attacks, because their deaths would gain worldwide attention due to media coverage.

The gendered interpretation contradicts female participation in suicide attacks, because of the traditional ideals about femininity. In this sense, terrorism is associated with masculinity in which female participation is underestimated as this is in contradiction with ideas of “peaceful, mothering and innocent” women. Due to the prevailing gendered interpretation on activities and roles in society, women tend to be underestimated in their participation in suicide terrorism.

Furthermore, terrorist groups are aware of the strategic value women have in terms of violence and hence the deployment of women for suicide attacks tend to be more successful due to their innocent image. Additionally, women have a larger impact on the worldwide audience as the underestimation of their capabilities are portrayed in the larger amount of



shock they are able to initiate. Moreover, women in disguise are able to penetrate larger crowds with more casualties.

Limitations for this thesis are the lack of detailed background informations on Al-Qaeda, ISIS and the Islamic ideology. Moreover, this thesis did not cover specific in-depth cases of gendered interpretation and inclusion of other countries in which both terrorist organizations are operating. In addition, other researches might produce discrepant results by interpreting suicide terrorism differently or by engaging terrorism from another aspect. Yet, this thesis provides for another perspective on suicide terrorism focused on the justification logics and underestimation of female roles in terrorism.

Further research can be conducted on other Islamic terrorist groups using suicide attacks as a means to achieve their ultimate goals. The similarities and differences with Al-Qaeda and ISIS can be drawn and determined if there is a correlation between foreign presence and suicide terrorism. The gendered interpretation can also be analysed as a tool to raise awareness of the capabilities of women rather than focusing on men in (counter) terrorism studies.

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