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The Continuation of an Idealized Past:
Aḥlām al-Naṣr and the Legacy of Poetry in the Islamic State

MA dissertation

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Content

Notes on transliteration

ء	hamza	ʾ
ا	alif	a/ā
ب	bā	b
ت	tā	t
ث	thā	th
ج	jīm	j
ح	hā	ḥ
خ	khā	kh
د	dāl	d
ذ	dhāl	dh
ر	rā	r
ز	zā	z
س	sīn	s
ش	shīn	sh
ص	sād	ṣ
ض	dād	ḍ
ط	ṭā	ṭ
ظ	ẓā	ẓ
ع	ʻayn	ʻ
غ	ghain	gh
ف	fā	f
ق	qāf	q
ك	kāf	k
ل	lām	l
م	mīm	m
ن	nūn	n
ه	hā	h
و	wāw	w/ū
ي	yā	y/ī

Introduction

Since its appearance in 2014, the Islamic State has been the world's most feared enemy as well as the centre of attention to many scholars intent on clarifying the nature of this new militant Islamist movement.[1] There is no shortage of works on the history, ideology, objectives, and propaganda of the Islamic State; whilst very little attention has been posed on some of its narratives. Those which are aimed at constructing an authentic, and solid identity at the eyes of its recruits. The familiar picturing of the Islamic State as a mere terrorist organization, perpetrator of inhuman acts has shadowed one of the important objectives set by IS, namely the creation of a real State in which the recruits can feel integrated by offering them the idea of a strong collective identity. Culture, conceptualized as a set of ideas, social behaviour, customs and way of life of a given society, or people, has played an important role in meeting this objective; in fact, besides the incorporation of the rules that shaped the state founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, the Islamic State has been focusing its attention on the publicization of poetry, used as a propaganda tool, and on the promotion of their official spokesperson, the female blogger Aḥlām al-Naṣr.

With her arrival in Raqqa (IS' proclaimed capital), the militants and the supporters of the organization have shown a very strong interest in supporting this young poetess by announcing her arrival in IS' media outlet, *Fursān al-balāgh li-l-iʿlām* (فرسان البلاغ للإعلام), as well as by publishing in the same site her collection of poems, "The Blaze of Truth" *(Uwār al-Ḥaqq*), followed by a second one known by the title of "The Uproar of the Battle" (*Hadīr al-Ma'āmaʿ*). With regard to the history of Jihadi movements, while many people have frequently analysed the presence of al-Naṣr as a challenge against the traditional and patriarchal society, which an Islamic community is frequently believed to be, the Islamic State has been projecting her as a traditional and authentic figure; in their picturing, Aḥlām al-Naṣr represents the symbol of women's empowerment and individualism, an important contributor in the success of the movement, as well as the perpetrator of a long tradition of Arab women poets.

[1] See for example: Fawaz Gerges, *Isis: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), and Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," in *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, no. 19 (2015) and William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), and Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), and Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *Parole Armate* (Milano: Bompiani, 2016).

The familiar vision deployed by the Islamic State in which the Arabs are described as excellent in mastering poetry has created, over the century, a sort of Russian nesting doll by which the studies on Arabic literature, both from Arabic and Western sources, have perpetuated this historical establishment of a stereotype. Moreover, the limited presence of poetesses in this narratives has frequently been justified by claiming the patriarchal society in which these women are forced to live in, as well as with the limited field of work in which women are required to write for, that is mostly reserved to the composition of *rithāʾ* (elegy). Compelled by this vision, the very few scholars that have focused their attention on the composition of poems in the Islamic State, and on the analysis of the figure and role of Aḥlām al-Naṣr, have approached the topic basing their researches on these stereotypes and common beliefs built over time that, apparently, the Islamic State has been using to further its own cause.[2]

Scholars like Elisabeth Kendall, Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel have given a great contribution to the research on this topic; what is worth noting, though, is that in their analysis they have been supporting the idea that poetry is deeply rooted in the Arabic/Islamic tradition, hence the justified and accepted use that those movements made of it for the creation of their identity. While talking about the relation between poetry and jihadis, in fact, Creswell and Haykel write that "poetry is central to the self-fashioning and self-presentation of the jihadis; it lies at the core of their identity as well as their ideology,"[3] and also the fact that poetry is not 'aesthetically innovative' highlights "the poets' rootedness in tradition, presenting itself as an 'authentic' expression of Muslim identity in a world that has perverted true Islamic principles."[4] The analysis and the understanding of Aḥlām al-Naṣr figure in the Islamic State, has also been discussed with reference to tradition and continuity with the past, and it has also been used to underline the exceptionalism of this figure who stood out to a patriarchal and conservative society. Thomas Pierret and Mériam Cheick have comprehensively dealt with al-Naṣr's character, focusing on her personal background and the motivations that have pushed

[2] See for example: Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 22-41.

Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*.

Elisabeth Kendall, "Poetry as a Weapon of Jihad," in *Twenty- First Century Jihad.* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 247-269.

Thomas Pierret and Mériam Cheick, " 'I am Very Happy Here'," In *Hawwa* 13, no. 2 (2015), pp. 241-269.

[3] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 22.

[4] Ibidem.

her in joining the Islamic State. Nevertheless, in their account of Aḥlām's status as the Poetess of the Islamic State, these two scholars highlight how her role as a poetess should be considered as "nothing revolutionary from the viewpoint of the Islamic tradition," which is a statement that they are ready to justify by highlighting the fact that "the blueprint here is the famous al-Khansāʾ, a contemporary of Prophet Muhammad and early convert to Islam known for her elegies of male relatives killed on the battlefield."[5] In the same way Creswell and Haykel raise this issue of continuity and closeness to this ideal past celebrated by IS, and they do it by pointing out how the women brigades of the Islamic State, the 'al-Khansāʾ Brigades', are named after this pre-Islamic poetess; hence the deep connection of the institution with the past.[6] Among those scholars, though, Halla Diyab has analysed al-Naṣr in a more neutral way, by always taking in consideration the Islamic State's aim in publicizing her and giving space to her works; hence, she states: "Poetry has deep roots in Arabic culture and tradition, yet al-Naṣr poetry is not an expression of devotion to Islam, but rather the utilization of a cultural art form to make the personal identity of terrorists resonate with the wider public."[7]

The creation of what is an authentic Arab/Muslim has given the Islamic State a wide range of action; the historical stereotypes created around this culture, then, has also widened their strategical ways to result more appealing at the eyes of its future recruits. By looking beyond the vision of the Islamic State as a terrorist organization, this paper seeks to analyse the cultural-based propaganda that IS has been making in order to construct an appealing and authentic identity at the eyes of its recruits. As the Islamic State has been giving much attention to the publicization of her role as the poetess of the Islamic State, hence an important piece of the movement's propagandists, the main focus of this research will be Aḥlām al-Naṣr and her representation of responsibility, empowerment, and most of all continuity with a past in which, the sentence "Poetry is the Arabs"[8] has established an historical truth, and where poetesses like al-Khansāʾ become the 'atypical' strong woman that has been able to 'stand out' and become famous in a patriarchal society. Hence, this paper seeks to answer two questions: is poetry an

[5] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015), p. 244.

[6] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*, no. 15 (June 2015), p. 108.

[7] Halla Diyab, "Ahlam al-Nasr." In *Militant Leadership Monitor* Volume 6, Issue 6 (June 2015). The Jamestown Foundation. https://jamestown.org/program/ahlam-al-nasr-islamic-states-jihadist-poetess/

[8] Ibn Qutaybah, 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim, Sarah Bowen Savant, Peter Webb, and James Montgomery, "Poetry," in *The Excellence of the Arabs* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 151.

acceptable tool to use to claim the Islamic State's authenticity and continuation with tradition? And, is the comparison between al-Naṣr and al-Khansāʾ built by the Islamic State and some scholars used in an objective way, or is just an association built up on the stereotyped idea of the two poetess seen as the 'other', the 'atypical' women in an Arabic/Muslim society? To answer these questions, this paper will be divided into four different chapters, each chapter addressing a different issue on which both the Islamic State and many scholars have constructed an idea of identity, hence authenticity and tradition.

The first chapter is a presentation of the general context of the Islamic State and part of work of propaganda. The focus will be on IS's use of the web to recruit its adepts, and the wider range of public it is able to appeal to by using this modern source. It is right in this sector that Aḥlām al-Naṣr has the major, if not the complete, visibility. It is in fact with the advertising of her poetic compositions and her personal blog that she became very popular among jihadi circles. Therefore, the last part of the chapter will be mainly focus on the poetess, her biographical information, her life as a member of the Islamic State, as well as her poetic activity.

The second chapter will switch the attention on the analysis of poetry as one of the propaganda tool used by the Islamic State, and the traditional and 'authentic' identity the Islamic State is trying to foster by taking advantage of the historical conception that sees poetry as the badge of honour for Arabs and Arabic culture. This second chapter will take into examination the historical importance and legacy of Arabic poetry, and the key points on which the Islamic State is trying to construct its legitim and authentic 'Arabness'.

The third chapter will be mainly focused on female jihad and the idea of women's empowerment displayed by IS. With the importance attached to women in the *jihadi* circle, and the publicization of Aḥlām al-Naṣr as a 'sister' and a 'role model', the Islamic State has shown a remarkable response from women around the world. The publicization of the figure and role of Aḥlām al-Naṣr by the Islamic State will be analysed in terms of a strategic plan to attract more women by showing this girl's important role, her individualism, and confidence.

On the heels of the supposed authenticity claimed by the Islamic State, and the traditional role attributed to al-Naṣr, the fourth and last chapter will take into analysis the relation built between the pre-Islamic poetess al-Khansāʾ and al-Naṣr. After a brief introduction on the life and the poetic activity of al-Khansāʾ, the analysis will continue with the examination and comparison of these two poetess in terms of their persona, the main feature on which the Islamic State and the scholars have put more attention in finding similarities between the two women, and their poetic activity, with a specific focus on one poetic genre *rithāʾ* and the use

of imagery made in their poems and their language. Given the lack of space, this research will take into account just one of Aḥlām's *dīwān*, "The Blaze of Truth" (*Uwār al-ḥaqq*) and, given the absence of a translation her *dīwān*, I have personally selected some of her poems, translated it from Arabic to English and reported some of the verses which I thought would be the most appropriate for the purpose of the research.

Through the analysis of the character embodied by Aḥlām al-Naṣr, and the publicization of her role as the Poetess of the Islamic State, this paper seeks to analyse the above-mentioned issues related to the construction of secular stereotypes built around the Arabic/Muslim culture, with specific attention to the projection of poetry and women, and how the Islamic State has deployed those ideals in favour of its image and propaganda.

Chapter one

The Poetess of the Islamic State

"I offer this humble work, and I am completely ashamed of it, and with the grace of God the Almighty, I hope to make it honourable and acceptable at his generous eyes, and hence to my professors' kindness and that of my elderly: accept a present from a Muslim girl which is part of the *umma*[9]; a girl that has seen in them the desired hope to restore the lost glory, and the pursued Islamic power."[10]

It is with these simple and catchy words that Aḥlām al-Naṣr presents her *dīwān*[11] to the people of her *umma*; those people whom she recognizes as eager to bring back the lost glory of 'true Islam', those people that in the past five years have become known to the world as the combatants of the Islamic State, and have found in this woman a colleague or, as they would say, a 'sister'.

As Creswell and Haykel point out in their work *Poetry in Jihadi Culture*, Aḥlām al-Naṣr was already "something of a literary celebrity in jihadi circles, and her poetry collection, equipped by senior ideologues, quickly circulates in social media."[12] Her arrival in Raqqa[13] and her marriage to one of IS ideologues, known by the name of Abu Usama al-Gharīb[14], were in fact celebrated by the members of the Islamic State on their Twitter accounts and, from that

[9] Arabic term that means "people, community", and it is mostly used to refer exclusively to the Muslim community.

[10] My translation from Arabic to English. For the original text look at: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Uwār al-Ḥaqq*, p. 12.

[11] Arabic word used to refer to a "collection of poems".

[12] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 24.

[13] City in Syria; In November 2013 was occupied by ISIS and it would soon become its capital.

[14] His real name is Muḥammad Maḥmūd, a young Austrian of Egyptian origin, who was arrested in Vienna in September 2007 and later sentenced to four years prison because of his internet propaganda. Later, in spring 2013, he was arrested in Turkey and he remained in custody until 2014, when he eventually arrived in Raqqa and joined IS. For more information look at:
Guido Steinberg, *German Jihad*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 133-139.
Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015), p. 263.

moment on, when talking about Aḥlām al-Naṣr, the people of IS would refer to her as the "Poetess of the Islamic State".

Aḥlām is, hence, a poetess whose role is that of writing verses in honour of the combatants of the Islamic State and, as such, she has become the 'spokesperson' of the organization. Although the research on her figure and her role in the Islamic State is not very developed, few authors like Robyn Creswell, Bernard Haykel, Thomas Pierret and Meriam Cheick have given an important contribution on shedding light on her life before and after she decided to join the Islamic State. Moreover, another important source of knowledge about her figure and her role in the Islamic State can be found in the introductory part of her *dīwān*, "The Blaze of Truth" *(Uwār al-Ḥaqq*). Here, in fact, in addition to the poetess' introduction to her work, there are two letters of presentation written by two members of the Islamic State, in which they introduce the figure of the young poetess to the readers.

Relying on the few, but nonetheless important information found in the works of the authors cited previously, in this chapter the attention will be focused on Aḥlām al-Naṣr and her presence in the Islamic State. The first part of this chapter will be presented as an introductory part on the Islamic State, and on the work of propaganda developed by IS on internet based platform, which is what has helped the organization recruiting people on an international level, as well as the main space of Aḥlām's poems disclosure. The second part, instead, will provide some biographical information on the poetess, followed by the presentation of her role in the Islamic State, as well as a first introduction to her poetic activity.

1.1 The Islamic State

On June 29,th 2014, the jihadi organization known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) announced the establishment of a worldwide Caliphate, changed its name to just "Islamic State" (IS), and named its leader Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī as "Caliph Ibrahim". The image of this bearded man wearing a black robe, giving a speech on the pulpit of the al-Nūrī mosque in Mosul, not only set the beginning of the new "caliphate", but it also started a very sophisticated and unparalleled work of propaganda aimed at presenting this new 'project' to the enemies and, most importantly, to the future followers of the Islamic State.

From the very first moment of its activity, the Islamic State has presented itself with a very clear project, as well as a defined message both related to the necessity to create a proper

Islamic State, i.e. a state with rules, a political plan, a defined organization and a long-term strategy. To make this project real, the State needed citizens, or perhaps followers inside its territories but also, and foremost, in the rest of the world. It is indeed in the lens of recruitment that the Islamic State has never lost the chance to present itself with strong narratives that resulted appealing to its public: as for instance, it has never lost the chance to claim to be a successful example of a state in which the jurisprudence is based on the *sharī'a*[15], the Islamic law that, according to the modern theories of the Islamic State, should characterize the legal system of all Muslim countries.

This kind of propaganda based on the triumph of the Islamic State and the realization of a "better world for Muslims" is just a small part of the communication project set by the Islamic State based on fulfilling one objective: being successful in the constitution of the always dreamed Caliphate. A goal that, in order to be reached, requires the Islamic State to unite all Muslims around the world; hence, men and women need to be convinced to be all united and ready to fight for this cause that, in IS' vision, resembles the fight and the struggle that the Prophet Muḥammad and the first community of believers have gone through in the early days of Islam.

1.2 IS and the Web

With its appearance in the world's scenario, IS has established itself as "the organization that has reached the most sophisticated level of media production, not only in its technical quality, but also in the differentiation of its offer, which has to deal with a heterogeneous public."[16] Social media like Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr have become one of the favourite sources for IS militants to communicate with their public within close and distant range; by the

[15] "… *sharī'a* designates the rules and regulations governing the lives of the Muslims, derived in principal form the *Qur'ān* and *ḥadīth.*" "Sharīa", Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition, Google, accessed December 05, 2019, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sharia-COM_1040?s.num=0&s.rows=20&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=sharia.

[16] Michele Bortolini, " Il fascino strategico del messaggio dell'ISIS" (Bachelor's dissertation, Università degli Studi di Torino, 2015), p. 11.

use of the web, IS has been able to constitute a *umma* without having the limitation of any territorial border; just a global community able to communicate and feel part of something.

As some scholars have pointed out, "the internet provides a global, yet also highly individualised way for terrorist groups to communicate with target audiences, including current and potential supporters, the international communities and their enemies."[17] Videos of beheadings, images of crucified men, as well as pictures of children and women holding weapons in their hands, are some of the "tweets" posted on the profiles of those fighters living in the Islamic State. By releasing this kind of videos, IS has indeed been able to reach a different public, leaving different feelings in the eyes of the people that were watching. It is in this circumstances that IS' propaganda can be defined as a double-edge sword because, if on one side the Western community has been deeply terrified and intimidated by those images, on the other side those videos have reached the 'hearts and minds' of many young Muslim men and women, who eventually decided to leave their countries to travel to Syria and Iraq, and join the new-born community.

What is important to understand, though, is that: "terrorists also use the Internet for the same reasons everybody does: organization and planning, proselytizing and entertainment, and to educate the believers,"[18] as Jytte Klausen points out in her consideration on the use that organizations like IS make of the web. It is indeed with the aim of entertaining and educating that the Islamic State, then, has maximised the use of the internet by giving space to Aḥlām al-Naṣr and her poems.

1.3 Aḥlām al-Naṣr

As mentioned, the news related to Aḥlām al-Naṣr are very little. Apart from the three sections in the preface of the *diwān* written by her, and two other men participating in the work of propaganda for the Islamic State that, nevertheless, represent some of the most relevant sources for the aim of this research, there are just two other important sources that focus the

[17] Claire Smith, Heather Burke, Cherrie de Leiuen and Gary Jackson, "The Islamic State's Symbolic War," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (2016), p. 168-169.

[18] Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the *Jihad."* In *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, ed. Taylor and Francis Group (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 2.

attention on this poetess, and those are: a recent article published by the New Yorker[19], and another article published by the "Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World."[20] Although this last two articles do not focus their attention on the poetic activity and the image of this girl as the "Poetess of the Islamic State", they have been very useful to get to know more about her life and her personal background before joining ISIS.

According to these articles, Aḥlām al-Naṣr is a pseudonym by which Shaimāʿa al-Ḥaddād has decided to introduce herself as a member of the Jihadi world; a pseudonym that in English means "dreams of victory". Shaimāʿa is a Syrian girl in her twenties, born and raised in a family of prominent religious scholars that have always believed in the necessity of *jihād*, a strong sentiment that has inevitably influenced also the education that they have given to their children. Her father, Tawfīq al-Ḥaddād is a pharmacist and "a reputed Quran memoriser"[21]; Iman al-Bugha is the name of Shaimāʿa's mother, and she was a former professor of "*usul al-fiqh* (sources of jurisprudence) and Islamic economics at the University of Dammam."[22] According to the information provided by her mother, Aḥlām al-Naṣr "was born with a dictionary in her mouth"[23]; as a matter of fact, since she was little, Aḥlām has always dedicated herself to the writing of poetic verses and, as a grown up girl, she started composing poems aimed at denouncing the social and political events that were shocking several Arabic countries and their people. It is known that, in the very first years of her poetic activity, the Syrian girl has produced some poems in defence of Palestine; in 2011, with the outbreak of the first riots in Syria against the regime of Bashār al-Asad, Aḥlām al- Naṣr was siding the protesters and, thanks to some of her compositions, it has been possible to understand that she was part of the riots and that she has witnessed many scenes of repression.[24]

In the aftermath of these events, Aḥlām al-Naṣr left Syria, and found shelter in one of the Gulf countries (probably Kuwait); it is just in 2014 that she is back in Syria, specifically in Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State. Here, she is soon married to "an enormously important

[19] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*, no. 15 (June 2015). This has been a very important source for the writing of this chapter.

[20] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015).

[21] Ivi, p. 248.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Ibidem.

[24] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*, no. 15 (June 2015), p. 102.

figure among global Jihadi networks"[25], Abū Usāma al-Gharīb, and she is officially recognized as a "sister" and, more importantly, as the "Notable Poetess of *Jihād*".

1.4 Aḥlām al-Naṣr and the Islamic State

It is said that Aḥlām al-Naṣr arrived in the territories of the Islamic State in 2014 aged 16. By the summer of 2015, she has published her first collection of poems "The Blaze of Truth" (*Uwār al-Ḥaqq*) and was being hailed as the "Poetess of the Islamic State."[26]

Those are the most common words that have been shaping the research conducted by scholars and journalists that have established Aḥlām al-Naṣr and the description of her role in the Islamic State to be the main subject of their analysis. Nevertheless, one of the most important things to point out when considering the relation between Aḥlām al-Naṣr and her influential role in this movement is that, although this girl has demonstrated to be very proficient at writing poetic verses, the position that she has gained should not be entirely related to her flawless writing skills' performances; as a matter of fact, the space and the consideration that Aḥlām has been able to get inside and outside the Caliphate have been dictated, on the one hand, by the beauty of her words, but on the other hand, the willingness of the other members of the Islamic State to give her this visibility, has definitely facilitated the escalation in the growth of her impact and relevance in IS' propaganda. In fact, one of the purposes for which they have paved the way to her exposure is probably related to the manipulation of her figure for the benefits of the organization, benefits that are mostly related to IS' female-focused efforts aimed at presenting appealing prospects for future women recruits. Among those, two strategies have been very effective: the first strategy is mainly focused on countering the sense of isolation and marginalisation which, according to IS, Muslim women in the West are bearing because of their religion and, it does so by picturing the Islamic State as a place where everybody is related to each other as members of a big family, where everybody support each other practicing 'true' Islam. The second one, instead, is more based on women's empowerment, individuality, and ability to perform a significant role within IS's society; hence, the presentation of al-Naṣr as the spokeswoman of the organization.

[25] Ivi, p. 263.

[26] Peter Welby, "Exposing the jihadi mouthpieces," *Arab News*, December 15, 2019, p. 3.

In support of this idea, there is one element that help highlighting the Islamic State's interest in advertising this girl and her works, and this element can be found in the preface to Aḥlām's *dīwān* itself. Here, two different men that are part of the Islamic State known by the names of Abū Mālik Shayba al-Ḥamīd and Muʿāwiya al-Qaḥṭān, have written two letters in which they introduce Aḥlām and her work to their '*umma*'.

> "I invite the virtuous sister to increase the offer, and she is family to us. As just I thank her for the time she spent for the party of God."[27]

In these lines, Abū Mālik Shayba al-Ḥamid, or "the fighter poet", as he is addressed in the front page of the *dīwān,* underlines the close relation of the people of the Islamic State to Aḥlām al-Naṣr, which is a 'sister' to them, a member of the 'family'. At the beginning of his letter, al-Ḥamid legitimize his writing by exploiting expedients that are frequently used in religious texts like: *bi'smi illāh* (in the name of God); *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* (Praise be to God). Moreover, on the heels of the religious imprint, the author starts to introduce Aḥlām al-Naṣr by claiming her as an example of hard work, praising her as the a "good servant of God", and therefore he writes:

> "One of God's blessing on his slave is let him follow Him, that he sticks to His truth, showing him the benefits of his hard work and of his offer, and we credit for this our virtuous sister: "Aḥlām al-Naṣr" from those who have been following Allah, we ask Him to stick her to His religion until she meets Him."[28]

At the end of his letter, al-Ḥamid thanks his 'sister' for the time she spent on this work of poetry, remarking her belonging to the 'family'.

Religious references are also the legitimization found by Muʿāwiya al-Qaḥṭān, author of the second introduction to al-Naṣr's work, but there is an evident difference between the first and the second letter, and it lies in the fact that whilst the former author talks about the poetess and about her *dīwān,* the second letter describes the field in which the work of Aḥlām al-Naṣr is targeted, and that is the propaganda.

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[27] My translation from Arabic to English. This is the introduction for Aḥlām al-Naṣr's *Dīwān* made by Abū Mālik Shayba al-Ḥamid. For the original text look at: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, "*Uwār al-Ḥaqq,"* in *Fursān al-balāgh li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, p. 9.

[28] Ibidem.

"For support and defence of her *umma* (using her poetry and her knowledge); illuminating and recording the history of this great *jihād, …*"[29]

al-Qaḥṭān underlines the value that her poetry has in recording the events that shape the life of the Islamic State. At the end of his letter, al-Qaḥṭān writes very few, though very intense words to introduce the *dīwān* and the poetess. Hence, he writes:

"We are honoured to present these humble lines (that are now) in front of me:
the first and meritorious collection of poetry
from the knowledgeable sister and poetess
the one whose kind heart is noteworthy:
(the poetess of the Islamic State)
"Aḥlām al-Naṣr"
and her work entitled:
Uwār al-Ḥaqq."[30]

1.5 The Poetic Activity

Two collections of poetry can be attributed to Aḥlām al-Naṣr, "The Blaze of Truth" *(Uwār al-Ḥaqq*) and "The Uproar of the Battle" (*Hadīr al-Ma'āmaʿ*) but, for a reason of space, this research will focus the attention only on the former one.

"The Blaze of Truth" is a collection of poetry published online in 2014 by an IS media outlet known by the name of *Fursān al-balāghi li-l-iʿlām*, which soon spread also on social media like Twitter and Facebook. It is composed of 107 poems, all written in Arabic but with a very diverse range of genres; in fact, in this *dīwān* it is possible to find poems that correspond to elegies for the *mujahidin*[31], laments for prisoners, victory odes and small poems of different topics always related to the Jihadi world. During her staying in the Caliphate, this young poetess has also dedicated herself in the writing of several poems that are not part of her *dīwān*;

[29] My translation from Arabic to English. This is the introduction for Aḥlām al-Naṣr's *Dīwān* made by Muʿāwiya al-Qaḥṭān. For the original text look at: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, "*Uwār al-Ḥaqq*," in *Fursān al-balāgh li-l-iʿlām,* 2014, p. 11.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Arabic term that in English means "fighters".

some of them have been written in honour of Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State; whilst she has also committed herself in the writing of articles aimed at defending IS' actions. For example, in one article, Aḥlām explains the reasons why the organization's decision to burn alive the Jordanian pilot Muʿādh al-Kasāsba was to be considered legitimate and inevitable.[32]

The attention that the Islamic State put on the poems written by al-Naṣr, as well as the additional feature of presenting a woman poet as their spokeswoman, highlight how this organization cares about the empowerment of Muslim women and let them be an active part of the society. In addition, Aḥlām al-Naṣr and her poetry are also used by IS to underline a relation between tradition and modernity; in fact, in their vision and aim, al-Naṣr embodies the figure of the poetess that writes poems in a very traditional way, following the typical structure of classical Arabic poetry, but at the same time she is also the representation of the modern poetess who is able and free to publish her thoughts and small poems on her blogs and websites. Hence, by analysing and focusing the attention on the figure that Aḥlām al-Naṣr embodies within the Islamic State, but also in a general perspective as an Arabic woman poet, not only is possible to discover some characteristics of the Islamic State but, it becomes also possible to highlight several aspects on which the organization itself is pushing on by publicising her figure in order to justify, legitimize and promote itself.

Conclusion

In modern times, the use of online platform like websites and social media have very much characterized and facilitated the propagation of Jihadi movements' propaganda. Since its appearance in the world's scenario, the Islamic State has made of online platforms its most fruitful mean to spread its message and to recruit people. Moreover, deciding to use these means of communication to disseminate poems written by a young Muslim girl has been a very remarkable choice made by the Islamic State. This choice has definitely helped the organization become successful among Muslim men and women around the world but also, the use of poetry has helped the movement in portraying itself as an exemplar model of authenticity and offering the militants a more traditional identity.

[32] Ibidem.

Chapter Two

A stereotyped identity: the Islamic State and Poetry

Despite the videos of beheadings and the use of pre-packaged narratives related to past events of the early Muslim community, which are tools mainly utilised for foreign consumption, the Islamic State has also established its propaganda as a strategic tool that "attempts to establish *jihadists* as people with whom the audience can relate."[33]

> "*Mujahidin* are regular people too, you know. We get married, we have families, we have lives, just like any other soldier in any other army."[34]

Those are the words of a man known by the name of Abu Muslim, who is originally from Canada and, while he is acting in a short film that has later been published on the Islamic State's online platforms, he tells these words that are aimed at witnessing and disclosing the normality, as well as the humanness of the *mujahidin* of the Islamic State.

Very frequently, in the analysis made in the studies concerning this organization, while much attention has been given to its most manifest aspect as an Islamist movement spreading terror through the deployment of brutal videos and many other forms of online propaganda, far less attention, I would say very little, has been given to the interest that this organization has been posing to poetry. Poetry, in this sense, represents one of the methods through which the Islamic State, as well as many other Islamic movements namely Hamas, Hizbullah and al-Qaida, have reached out to their followers across the Arab world.

In this chapter the focus will be on the identity that the Islamic State is trying to design using poetry. Therefore, after having introduced two of the main sources of IS online propaganda, *Dabiq* and poetry, the analysis will be focused on the historical background of Arabic poetry and its roots in the Arabic culture in third/seventh century Arabia. The reference to some of the most influencing studies on poetry will allow the research to show how, besides the religious narratives, the Islamic State is trying to result appealing to its public by disclosing a more cultural-based identity by referring to old ideals. The attention will hence be centred on the

[33] Samantha Mahood and Halim Rame, "Islamist narratives," The Journal of International Communication 23:11 (December 2016), p. 29.

[34] Ibidem.

Islamic State exploiting the historical and, as we will see, highly stereotyped relation that sees poetry as the primary and most representative artistic expression of the Arabs.

2.1 Dabiq vs Poetry

Within its propaganda work, the Islamic State has highly relied on internet based platforms like blogs and social media, where militants are able to 'bypass' the obstacles related to the physical distance with the individuals living outside the lands of the Caliphate. While discussing the symbols of online *jihād*, Philipp Holtmann states that "fundamentalists create their online-environments by using signs connected to three inter-related myths, which they present by way of propaganda;"[35] one of those myths is that "fundamentalists construct a *community myth* for the sake of *identification* and *mobilization."*[36] Online magazines like *Dabiq*, for instance, besides giving an account to the rooting of the Islamic State and giving information on the events that shake it, represents an important source for the recruiting drive of Westerners, who are required to perform the *hijra*[37] and be part of the global growth of the Caliphate. In its first issue, in fact, the magazine underlines the words told by al-Baghdadi in his first speech, where he said:

> "O Muslim everywhere…you have a state and Khilafah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers."[38]

The Islamic State in this sense was "billed as a state for the world's Muslims"[39] and, as Bunzel points out in the following part of his analysis, by looking at the first name of the organization 'The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria', "the Islamic element prevailed over the Iraqi

[35] Philipp Holtmann, "The Symbols of Online Jihad," in *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations*, ed. Rüdiger Lohlker (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2013), p. 19.

[36] Ibidem.

[37] Arabic term used to indicate the emigration. It refers to the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina.

[38] "The return of Khilafāh," *Dabiq*, Issue 1, June 2014, p. 7.

[39] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," *The Brookings Project* No. 19 (March 2015), p. 19.

(and Syrian) in the group's propaganda," and with such an assertation, he also highlights the fact that "territorial nationalism does not sit well with jihadi ideology."[40] The Islamic State, in fact, can be defined as a "quasi-state entity, that aspires to build a pan-Islamic State, a caliphate"[41] and, by deploying appealing narratives such as the ones based on Muslims' religious creed,[42] this organization is trying to create an identity that can result authentic to the eyes of Muslims all over the world, rather than one that has limited understanding just to the territories it has conquered. Nevertheless, in addition to the building up of an Islamic consciousness, and besides the use of a propaganda in English, the Islamic State and its militants have paid much attention on creating a more cultural-based strategy to legitimize its identity, and that is more concerned with the concept and the belonging to what can be called 'Arabness'. In this regard, the Islamic State has exploited a very rooted, but also stereotyped image of the 'true Arab', namely the Arab who is excellent in writing and entertaining people with poetry.

The poetry produced by the Islamic State can be considered as a 'window' into the ideology of the movement; it helps the organization explaining in a nicer way what does it mean to join the Islamic State and what does the life in its lands looks like. Moreover, even if the reality in which the Islamic State is working in is mainly focused on building an international community of Muslims, it has deliberately decided to use Arabic as the main language for its poetic production. By doing so, the movement is not only making its way to the hearts and minds of its future adepts in the Arab speaking countries, but it is also taking advantage of this 'classical' idea that sees poetry as 'THE' skill of the Arabs, which is a vision that finds its roots in a construction developed in the Abbasid period, back in the third/ninth century.

2.2 Stereotyping the Arabs

While one of the conventional image of the Arabs is that related to the very first information and studies made on this society, i.e. a man in the desert riding a camel, and a covered woman

[40] Ibidem.

[41] Fawaz A. Gerges, *Isis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 224.

[42] *Dabiq*, for instance, is named after a small city in Syria that, according to the Islamic prophecy, is the setting of the apocalyptic battle between Muslims and their enemies, the "crusaders", before the ultimate defeat of the Romans at Constantinople.

segregated in her own house, waiting for her man to come home, there is another frequent assumption that is made on the construction of what can be called 'Arabness' which is summarized in the sentence of the third/ninth century poet al-Ḥamdānī (320/932-357/968): "Poetry is the record of the Arabs" (*al-shiʾr dīwān al-ʿarab*). In this regard Wolfhart Heinrichs, in his study on classical Arabic literature, explains the rootedness of this conception by analysing not only the origins of each word that composes the sentence *al-shiʾr dīwān al-ʿarab*, but he also goes through statements that have been made by several scholars during the centuries, and that have been eventually considered as reliable sources. Starting by mentioning famous writers like al-Jāḥiẓ (160/776-255/868)[43] who considered poetry as a tool to "safeguard the prestige of the nation or, rather, vis-à-vis other tribes by preventing their achievements from falling into oblivion,"[44] Heinrichs continues by citing also al-Jāḥiẓ's contemporary, Ibn Qutaybah (213/828-276/889)[45] that, in his description of poetry in the early Arab society of the pre-Islamic and Umayyad period, explains the relationship between the Arabs and poetry by saying:

> "Poetry is the source of the Arabs' learning, the basis of their wisdom, the archive of their history, the repository of their battle lore. It is the wall built to protect the memories of their glories, the moat to safeguard their laurels."[46]

[43] Abū Uthmān ʿAmr Ibn Baḥr al-Fuqaymī al-Baṣrī (160-255/776-868) born in Baṣra, al-Jāḥiẓ was a famous Arab prose writer, author of works of *adab* and politico-religious polemics. For more information look at: "al- Djāḥiẓ," Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition Brill, accessed May 24, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-djahiz-SIM_1935?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=al+djahiz

[44] Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Prosimetrical Genres," in Prosimetrum, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 251.

[45] Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (213-76/828-89) born in Kūfa, descended from an Arabicized Iranian family from Khorāsān. He was one of the great scholars of the third/ninth century, being both a theologian and a writer of *adab*. For more information look at: "Ibn Ḳutayba," Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition Brill, accessed May 24, 2020, https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-kutayba-COM_0333?s.num=2&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ibn+qutayba

[46] Ibn Qutaybah, 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim, Sarah Bowen Savant, Peter Webb, and Jonas Montgomery, "Poetry," in *The Excellence of the Arabs* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 2.8.1.

Therefore, in his description on the merits of poetry, Ibn Qutaybah refers to it as not just an art by which the creativeness and the emotions of the poets can emerge; poetry is a source of knowledge, is an historical 'archive' where all the events that loom over the Arabs are written down and by which it becomes possible to pass down the memory, and the identity of this society. The society to which Ibn Qutaybah was addressing this merits, though, was that of the pre-Islamic and early Umayyad period, and by doing so, he was somehow informing his readers that "the heyday of the Arabs was past, and that they were worthy people whose greatest achievement was to carry Islam from Arabia to the world."[47] As Heinrichs points out, the approach taken by Ibn Qutaybah underlines the belonging of poetry as part of the Arabic/Islamic culture which has a much more encompassing function than just an informational value "as it does not contain historical reports, but also wisdom…and knowledge in general."[48] On the heels of the analysis given by Heinrichs, it is possible to underline how the third/ninth century, or the period of 'classical Muslim civilization', is the era in which a definition of Arab culture and tradition started taking shape, and it is in this context that the secular legacy of poetry in the Arab culture finds its roots. Over the centuries, a vast number of stories and book, both in the Arab and Western literature, have kept underlining a strong connection between the Arabs and the 'art of eloquence'. In the tenth or eleventh century, for example, also the Tunisian author ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Nahshalī (d. 403/1012-1013) underlines this bound between poetry and the Arabs by saying:

> "Poetry is the more eloquent of the two types of clear speech and the more efficacious of the two languages; it is the Arabs' transmitted code of good behaviour and the well-known archive (*dīwān*) of their knowledge."[49]

Joel Carmichael, then, underlines the origins of poetry in the Arabian desert by using words like: "Poetry, doubtless of primordial impulse of mankind, in the Arabian desert flowered as perhaps never before or since."[50] This art has frequently been labelled as the most important and characterizing badge of honour for Arabs and Arabic culture. Even in prose narrative, it is always possible to find poetry lines; in this regard, Heinrichs points out how in the tales about

[47] Ivi, p. xxii.

[48] Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Prosimetrical Genres," in *Prosimetrum*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 252.

[49] Ivi, p. 252-253.

[50] Joel Carmichael, *The Shaping of the Arabs* (New York: McMillan, 1967), p. 16.

the *ayyām al-ʿarab*[51] the stories, which are mainly written in prose, are intermingled with poetry.[52] This is to underline how the presence of poetry in Arabic literary composition was considered to have a paramount priority.

Later in the years, the importance of Arabic poetry has also frequently influenced Westerns scholars, like Alan Jones who, in his book on Arabic poetry, describes the role that this art covered during the so-called *Jāhiliyya* period, and he writes:

> "The poetry of a tribe was something that helped differentiate it from other tribes. It was a projection into words of the life of the tribe, its solidarity and its inspirations, its fears and its sorrows. In these and other areas poetry helped to emphasize a tribe's uniqueness and its virtues and to vaunt them against similar claims made by neighbouring rivals."[53]

In this context, the poet was recognized as the 'memory matron' of a tribe; the capacity of this person to create images through words, and manipulate the reality made the poet an important means to disclose information and messages. To stick to this important role, then, the poems had standardised themes and objectives, which can occur into four different poetic genres, namely panegyric (*madīḥ*), self-praise (*fakhr*), lampoon (*hijāʾ*) and elegiac poetry (*rithāʾ*). Therefore, the poets were either celebrating their kinsmen, attacking enemies, and whining those dead in battles.

Hence, by looking at the social value that poetry has covered in the third/ninth century and the legacy developed through the centuries in the Arab communities, this art is not conceived just as a 'mass-produced' or 'mass-consumed' form of entertainment, as some scholars of pop-culture would argue today;[54] poetry, in fact, is a tool used for witnessing events, to remember

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[51] "Days of the Arabs" is the name which in the Arabian legend is applied to those combats which the Arabian tribes fought amongst themselves in the pre-Islamic era; it represents an important part of the epic literature among the Arabs before Islam. For more information look at: "Ayyām al-ʿArab," Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition Brill, accessed May 24, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ayyam-al-arab-SIM_0926?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ayyam+al+arab

[52] Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Prosimetrical Genres," in *Prosimetrum*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), p. 254.

[53] Alan Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, (Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1992), p. 1.

[54] Look for example Street, J., Inthorn, S., Scott, M., 'From Entertainment to citizenship,' Chapter 2, pp. 8-23.

them and, hence, creating an historical archive from which all the Arabs, as well as the other people interested in their history, can get their historical features.

2.3 A cultural identity

On the heels of convincing themselves that their identity is extremely old, the Islamic State not only applies the rules of seventh-century Arabia for the Caliphate's administration, but it is also referring to the cultural claims that have shaped that specific period, like nothing has changed since then. As for instance, in reference to the description made by Ibn Qutaybah, in which he states that poetry is the 'repository' of all the events that have shaken the Arabs' history, Aḥlām al-Naṣr describes her *dīwān* by saying that:

"*Uwār al-Ḥaqq* is nothing but the clarification of the released truth from the rightful revelation, and the personification of the courage of those who have carried this truth on their shoulders and they are the *umma*, and the glory of Islam."[55]

With those words, al-Naṣr underlines the informative aim of her poetry, as well as its function of memorizing the events in which the *umma* and its militants have gone through in the realization of the Caliphate. Another important feature to which the common use of poetry can be associated in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period is the easiness of its memorization, also aimed by the recurrence of a series of standard themes and expressions. While introducing the work of this poetess to the *umma*, Abū Mālik Shayba al-Ḥamid highlights those same features by writing these words:

"This is the collection of poetry that comprises various genres of poetry, and it is pervaded by the beauty, the sweetness of the words, as well as the easiness of their use, and this is an effort of work to support one of the example among the many examples of hard working that this generous lady is doing to support her religion…"[56]

[55] My translation from Arabic to English: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Uwār al-Ḥaqq*, in *Fursān al-balāghī li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, p. 12.

[56] My translation from Arabic to English. This is the introduction for Aḥlām al-Naṣr's *Dīwān* made by Abū Mālik Shayba al-Ḥamid. For the original text look at: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, "*Uwār al-Ḥaqq,"* in *Fursān al-balāgh li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, p. 9.

The importance of "old times" by the Islamic State is also noticeable in some of the verses written by Aḥlām al-Naṣr where the first thing that the reader notices is the use of a language that although very scholastic, hence easy to read, it takes advantage of old poetic verses or cultural-related images that are very well known among the educated Arabic speakers and non. For instance, in several poems Aḥlām addresses the militant of the Islamic State with the word 'lions' (*asad*, pl. *usūd*), a simile frequently used in Arabic culture to refer to the strength and the ability of someone to seize control. While referring to some of the victories of the Islamic State, in fact, the young poetess writes those verses:

"Ask Mosul, city of Islam, about the lions,
How their fierce struggle
brought liberation…"[57]

The lions have very frequently been used not only in poetry, but also in Islamic art in general, as for instance a recurrent depiction in Islamic mosaics is the lion attacking the gazelle, as to indicate the supremacy of the animal over another.[58] Another reference made by the poetess is that of addressing the militants as knights (*faras*, pl. *afrās*), an expedient that is used in *jihādi* poetry, as one of the features of their poetry is that "it promises adventures and asserts that the codes of medieval heroism and chivalry are still relevant."[59] Portraying its militants riding horses, flying flags and fighting with the courage of lions allows the Islamic State to picture the bravery of its adept; the use of poetry, consequently, helps the movement to show the importance that its militants give to the cultural traditions, going even further, by portraying their figures and role as that of the 'true Arabs'. This relation between Arabs and poetry is, in fact, an expedient that has been used in Arabic culture to prove the greatness of the Arabs in this art, and it is now used by the Islamic State to legitimize its authenticity.

Moreover, although many Muslims are not Arabic speaking people, the importance of the Arabic language is well renowned among all the Muslim communities, as this is the language of the Quranic Revelation; it is a sacred language, the language of the *Qur'ān*, the language of

[57] Verses written by Aḥlām al-Naṣr as reported by Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker* no. 15 (June 2015).

[58] See for example the mosaic of Khirbat Al-Mafjar (Jordan) in Hishām's palace.

[59] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker* no. 15 (June 2015), p. 107.

God, transcendent, perfect, and inimitable, hence its high value for the establishment of both a religious and cultural cohesion. Arabic is the vehicle of Islam, and pre-Islamic poetry is the benchmark of the Arab poetic culture. In fact, in his research on the importance that the early Islamic community holds in jihadists' culture, Behnam Said highlights why in jihadist poets' works the language used is enriched with an archaic language, hence he writes:

> "With those times the *jihadist* poets try to tie in by using an archaic and ancient language… The poets not only want to tie in with glorious times but they also want to distance themselves from the average Arab society, which is another reason to use old-fashioned language."[60]

2.4. The 'Arabness'

The cultural legacy of poetry is used by the Islamic State to bring out the 'Arabness' of the movement. This 'Arabness', though, is not viewed by IS as an ideology, but is more considered as the 'Arabness' discussed by Ghannushi who sees it as an 'historical cultural reality'; in his opinion, this Arabness had created "an 'existential entity,' anchored in culture and politics, which served as a powerful vehicle for Islam."[61] The interpretation offered by Ghannushi is in accordance with what the Islamic State attempts to do by deploying poetry; whereas this movement find its root in Islamism, namely "a political ideology that bases its legitimacy on narratives and interpretations derived from the religion of Islam, specifically the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth)*, as well as early, classical and modern Muslim history, customs and traditions,"[62] and addresses its goals to Muslims around the world, the Arab framework behind the Islamic reality, which finds its main link in the "inextricable relationship between the Arab language and Islam", results ineluctable.

Nevertheless, there have been various interpretations of this constructed identity around 'Arabness' given by many specialists of Arabic literature in which they have showed how precarious is this vision. For instance, in her article *The Abbasid construction of the Jahiliyya*,

[60] Behnam Said, "Hymns (Nasheeds)," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, (2012), p. 875.

[61] Emmanuel Sivan, "Arab Nationalism," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 218.

[62] Haroro J. Ingram, "An Analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51:3 (June 2016), p. 15.

Rina Drory specifies how the whole construction about the pre-Islamic Arabs and poetry can be related to the "special status accorded to pre-Islamic past in the Abbasid cultural repertoire of self-images."[63] In her statement, Drory claims that the stories about the Jāhiliyya are all part of a 'project' developed in the Abbasid period in order to construct an 'Arab' ethnic identity; for this reason, "the pre-Islamic past becomes an icon of "Arab" ethnic identity. Pre-Islamic poetry… becomes a central prop for that icon, and consequently, a focus of literary attention and activity."[64] Therefore, what is important to note in this process is that, in this way, the Islamic State is trying to resurrect the notion of 'Arabness' from a construction that has been idealized in the Abbasid period ((132/750 – 656/1258), an image for which, so far, there aren't yet any clear reliable evidence that can prove its righteousness.

In his book *Imagining the Arabs*, Peter Webb also analyses the very nature of this Arab identity, considering all the stereotypes that have been constructed around this group of people during the centuries. Hence, in the fifth chapter of his book, he talks about the "Arabs as a People and Arabness as an Idea 750-900 CE" and, like Drory, he points out that the consolidation of *'arab* as a group (*umma*) occurred in the society of the third/ninth century to facilitate the discourses around the existence of an "Arab Community".[65] In the continuation of his analysis, he also highlights how this process started by underline the fact that "Since there was no unified 'Arab' community before Islam, there was no single 'Arab heritage' for third/ninth-century Muslims to remember."[66] Hence, in order to make up for this lack or a common history, "Muslim writers were compelled to construct their imagined pre-Islamic Arabs from a patchwork of competing memories and diverse agendas…"[67]

Conclusion

By claiming its authentic identity by using poetry in its communication strategy, the Islamic State's main aim is to build its legitimacy around the idea of being the driver for the

[63] Rina Drory, "The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya," *Studia Islamica*, No. 83 (1996), p. 34.

[64] Ibidem.

[65] Peter Webb, "Arabs as a People and Arabness as an Idea," in *Imagining the Arabs* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 240.

[66] Ivi, p. 256.

[67] Ibidem.

continuation of a long-standing and valuable tradition among the Arabs. The use of pre-packaged and famous assumptions on the importance of poetry among the Arabs, in addition to the exploitation of the language of poetry which emulates the one in which the Qur'ān was revealed, has permitted the movement to spread its ideas and the events happening inside its lands. Nevertheless, by examining the importance and the authenticity attributed to poetry by the Arabs, it has been possible to underline how the narratives and beliefs around this tradition have been contaminated by an old construction that has its origins in the Abbasid period.

By using all this information on the idea that being Arab means mastering Arabic poetry, this chapter has shown how the Islamic State has deployed this cultural tool to widen its propaganda and design an identity that goes beyond the religious legitimacy. This is mainly focused on the aim of propagating what, by now, is the idealized notion of the 'true Arab', just to attract more recruits among the Arabic speaking people. The exploitation of such a figure as that of the 'Poetess of the Islamic State' has allowed the movement to build an appealing framework which, in addition to underline the importance of poetry, it also puts the spotlight on the status and role of women in the Islamic State.

Chapter Three

The Women in the Islamic State

What the Islamic State has been trying to do by publicizing Aḥlām al-Naṣr, her role in the organization, as well as her *dīwān*, is basically based on trying to portray an idealized image of the woman in the Islamic State. Most of the features embodied by this girl are strategic expedients aimed at intensifying the feeling of tradition, identity and empowerment in the future women recruits, or *muhājirāt*.[68] Besides shadowing the misogynist nature that is frequently attributed to Islamists movements, publicizing Aḥlām al-Naṣr as the poetess of the Islamic State has also questioned the stigmatized idea of the poetess and her limited role in the Arabic society, ideas that have frequently characterized the studies on Arabic literature both from Arabic and Western sources.

This chapter will show how the deployment and the publicization of Aḥlām al-Naṣr as the poetess of the Islamic State has been strategically used by the Islamic State in women's recruitment. After a brief introduction on the traditional conceptualization of the female jihad and, in particular, how the Islamic State has shaped the role of the women in the successful development of the movement, the analysis will focus on Aḥlām al-Naṣr, the attention that the Islamic State has intentionally directed on her blog and online posts, as well as to her collection of poems. It will be shown that, in addition to emphasising the individual empowerment of Muslim women who want to perform the Hijra, the need to create a traditional and plausible identity for the women in the organization has encouraged the movement to take advantage of a stereotyped vision of the women in Arabic poetical tradition which, during the centuries, has frequently lead to a misrepresentation, and sometimes overvaluation, of Arabic women poets.

3.1 Female Jihād

Among the numerous objectives presented by the Islamic State, the importance of bringing women into the Caliphate has characterized much of the propaganda made by its militants.

[68] Arabic term used to identify 'female migrants'.

Indeed, the high number of female migrants joining the Islamic State has very much disrupted the conservative conception of gender relations, and roles, that have been frequently shaping theories on Islam and Islamist movements. While not much attention has been posed on this phenomenon by other Jihadi movements, women have always had a role in these organizations, having to perform many roles for the development of the *jihād* and its success.

For instance, in his book *dustūr al-Islām* ("The constitution of Islam"), al-Maududi (1903-1979)[69], highlights the fundamental role of the woman in *jihād*, as she represents an important resource for "the protection of the identity and the Islamic culture, from the lawful clothing to the excellent quality of the education for the kids…"[70] The vision proposed by al-Maududi has, hence, given a perspective of women that, as Katharina Von Knop argues while discussing the concept of female *jihād*, "they carry out a political act by supporting their male relatives, educating their children in the ideology and facilitating terrorist operations."[71]

However, the difference between the previous Islamist movements and the Islamic State is that the latter, has deliberately developed a sophisticated propaganda image to project to female recruits. As Saltman and Smith highlight in their article: "ISIS has increased its female-focused efforts, writing manifestos directly for women, directing sections of its online magazine publications *Dabiq* to the 'sisters of the Islamic State' and allowing women to have a voice within their recruitment strategy…"[72] In his famous speech entitled "Is the religion decreasing while I am alive?", the founder of the Islamic State, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi refers directly to the woman, asking her where she finds herself "in this greater *jihād*?" and "what did she

[69] Abū l-Aʿlā al-Maududi one of the leading interpreters of Islam in the twentieth century, alongside the Egyptian Islamic theorist Sayyd Quṭb (1906-1966). He was against the impact that the Western culture has had on Islam and, in 1941 he founded the *Gamāʿat al-Islāmī,* an Islamist organization fighting for the creation of an Islamic State. The idea expressed by al-Maududi, which has defined the following Islamic movements, is that Islam is an ideology and, as such, it constitutes a valid alternative to all the other ideologies produced in the modern world.

[70] My translation from Arabic to English. For the original text look at: Ahmad al-Azhari, "nisāʾ at-tanẓīm," *Iḍāʾāt,* April 09, 2019, https://www.ida2at.com/daesh-women-intellectual-transformations-succession-dream-return/?fbclid=IwAR3CtATQWVrNneWrQ0kwBeolS_UNp7E5zqsBSiHsKN0NZnmU573cuHcIl2U

[71] Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, (March 2007), p. 397.

[72] Erin M. Saltman and Melanie Smith, 'Till Martydom Do Us Part', *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2015), p. 18, accessed March 3, 2020, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf

provide for the Islamic *umma*?".[73] By referring directly to women and actively involving them in the development of the movement, IS has indeed been able to attract an unprecedent number of female recruits for an Islamist movement.

"The woman in the Islamic State" (*al-mar'a fī al-dawla al-Islāmīya*), for instance, is a document published on one of IS propaganda outlets, and it shows a list of the duties that women in the organization should carry out for the implementation of the rules in the Caliphate. According to this document, besides pursuing their role of children's educator and helpers for their husbands, the Islamic State has also established many official institutions for the administration of the State in which women have a primary role and, the 'al-Khansāʾ Brigades' is one of those. As a female morality police, this institution has the responsibility to monitor the religious and social behaviour of all the other women living under the Islamic State. Their role is based on the supervision of the collective facilities, behaviourism, and the education in religion; in case those tasks are not successfully fulfilled by all the women, these female soldiers have the duty of punishing them.

Always focusing on the analysis of IS propaganda machine towards women recruits, the eight issue of *Dabiq* presents a section called "To our Sisters" where it's possible to find a long letter entitled *The twin halves of the Muhājirīn*. This letter is written by a woman, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhājirah who, after having explained the history and the important meaning of the *hijra* for every Muslim, she focuses the attention on underlining the obligation that women, as men, have to perform *hijra*; and so, by referring to religious scriptures and taking advantage of their importance to Muslim people, she says:

> "This ruling is an obligation upon women just as it is upon men, for Allah (taʾālā), when excluding those incapable of performing hijrah, He excluded the incapable women just as He excluded the incapable men."[74]

After having underlined the religious duty to which Muslim women should stick to, Umm Sumayyah highlights the strength of the muhājirāt, or the 'sisters', praising their courage in going through many obstacles just to reach the lands of the Caliphate:

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[73] My translation from Arabic to English. For the original text look at: Ahmad al-Azhari, "nisāʾ at-tanẓīm," *Iḍā'āt*, April 09, 2019, https://www.ida2at.com/daesh-women-intellectual-transformations-succession-dream-return/?fbclid=IwAR3CtATQWVrNneWrQ0kwBeolS_UNp7E5zqsBSiHsKN0NZnmU573cuHcIl2U

[74] Umm Sumayyah al-Muhājirah, "The twin halves of the Muhājirīn," *Dabiq*, Issue 8, p. 33.

"How many stories have I heard which I would not have believed in if not for hearing them directly from the mouth of those sisters involved or seeing these sisters with my own eyes…"[75]

As we know, this Muslim woman who calls upon other female recruits to join the Islamic State through the organization's magazine is not an isolated case. In fact, the direct participation of women in the propaganda machine of the Islamic State has also played a prominent role on internet-based platform where "women can pose themselves as influencing communicators"[76] and, with the use of words, these women become a noteworthy source for recruitment. It is in this regard that Aḥlām al-Naṣr represents a valuable subject to analyse in order to understand not only the power of the words but also, and foremost, the presentation of a given example from which the other women can get inspiration.

3.2 Aḥlām al-Naṣr: 'sister' and 'role model'

Women are compelled to join the Islamic State because, beside spreading the message that women are valued "as mothers to the next generation and guardians of ISIS ideology,"[77] the movement is also utilising strategies that affects those women's identity and, consequently, their will to be part of something bigger. Aḥlām al-Naṣr is the symbol of this entire strategy.

As it has been said before, as soon as she arrived in Raqqa, al-Naṣr has quickly played the role of the court poet and official apologist for the Caliphate. On her twitter account, the poetess has published her journey to Syria, highlighting the difficulties she has gone through before arriving at destination, the territories of the Islamic State. There, she immediately started writing about the people living in these lands, praising the heavenly atmosphere and life that everybody enjoys while living there, and she did it by publishing on her Twitter account words like those following:

[75] Ibidem.

[76] Hind Fraihi, "The Future of Feminism by ISIS", *International Annals of Criminology* 56, (September 2018), p. 24.

[77] Ivi, p. 28.

"In the Caliphate, I saw women wearing the veil, everyone treating each other with virtue, and people closing up their shops at prayer times."[78]

As Thomas Pierret and Meriam Cheick highlight in their article, *I Am Very Happy Here*, Aḥlām's account of the migration to Syria portrays her as "a strongly individualist figure."[79] The Islamic State, in fact, is publicizing this figure that, in addition to cover an important role in the organization, shows that she has the 'power' to share and narrate her experience freely through online platforms which is, of course, a strategic way thought by the organization to disclose the message of women's empowerment in the lands of the Caliphate.

Always on the wave of strategy making, the way of portraying and publicizing Aḥlām al-Naṣr has allowed the Islamic State to create what Marina Shorer, in her analysis of recruiting and mobilization strategies, has identified as 'sister' and the 'role-model' strategies. Although we have already talked about the concept of 'sisterhood' in the Islamic State's propaganda, the analysis that Shorer gives about these expedients is very helpful for a deeper understanding of what role Aḥlām al-Naṣr plays in the propaganda machine. In her analysis, in fact, Shorer comments on the frequent use that the people in the Islamic State make of the words 'brother' or 'sister' and, in the case of women's recruitment, she underlines how important is the use of the word 'sister', as it not only shares a sense of familiarity, but it also helps putting trust on this 'sister' who, for the propaganda purpose, "helps to guide a less experienced or knowledgeable person while sharing her experience."[80]

While talking about her experience, al-Naṣr tackles very diverse experiences, hence topics, on which her propaganda is trying to push on. As a matter of fact, in her story, the poetess talks about the beauty of living among the *mujahidin* and she highlights how happy she was when she was given the chance to cook for them, writing:

[78] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 25.

[79] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015), p. 241.

[80] Marina Shorer, "Mobilization of Women to Terrorism," *International Annuals of Criminology* 56, (September 2018), p. 97.

"…everything had to be clean and wonderful. I kept repeating to myself: 'this food will be eaten by mujahidin, these plates will be used by mujahidin."[81]

By giving this information, Aḥlām al-Naṣr supports the importance of the domestic role, which is the role that, very frequently, has been associated as the only female duty in an Islamic community. Nevertheless, as Pierret and Cheick point out in their article, what is worth noting is that, by praising women's domestic tasks, al-Naṣr challenges patriarchal values not by pointing out women's actual role in society, but women's subjectivity: "she must be a good housewife not out of blind imitation of tradition, but because her own personal, religious and political, convictions instruct her to be so."[82]

Aḥlām's travel account is hence a tool used in the Islamic State's propaganda to give future female recruits a model; a model that works under two aspects of the life in the Islamic State: the behavioural one, that gives an example of how a woman is welcomed in the Islamic State, and the professional one, as her role as a poetess and ideologue in the Islamic State hasn't have any precedents in Jihadi history, and it makes women believe in what Marina Shorer calls 'role model', i.e. "a person followed by others due to her exceptional behaviour, or success in implementing a particularly special task."[83] In her role in working for IS propaganda and writing for the organization's recruitment purposes through online platforms, Aḥlām al-Naṣr has, hence, definitely avoided to become known to the world just as the wife of one of IS's most important ideologues. Aḥlām al-Naṣr is a sister, an orator, the spokesperson of a jihadi movement. She is the Poetess of the Islamic State.

3.3 The manipulated exceptionalism

Poetry has been a source of pride in Arabic culture during the centuries, and that's the reason why the Islamic State has paid a strategic attention to it for the definition of the State's cultural

[81] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture,* ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 39.

[82] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World,* no. 13 (2015), p. 262.

[83] Marina Shorer, "Mobilization of Women to Terrorism," *International Annuals of Criminology* 56, (September 2018), p. 94.

identity. Using Aḥlām al-Naṣr as the symbol of women's empowerment, and showing the outstanding role she gained inside the movement thanks to her exceptional writing skills, helped the movement gain more attention from Muslim women around the world. In addition to this independent figure, through her image al-Naṣr should also deliver a message of authenticity and tradition; therefore, always on the heels of the secular understanding of Arabic poetry, the authenticity of al-Naṣr's poetry is shown with her composition of *rithāʾ* poetry (elegy). Writing elegies is very common in Jihadi culture as this genre of poetry is significant to memorize important events. As a matter of fact, as Creswell and Haykel underline, the elegiac tradition pursued by the militants gives them a common calendar as "for the jihadis,… acts of martyrdom are the building blocks of communal history."[84] What is also important to note is that behind this specific genre there is also a stereotyped conception in the history of Arabic poetry for which elegies are mostly written by women.

One of the characteristics that have been attributed to Arab women's poetry over the centuries is, indeed, their dominance in the composition of elegies for fallen kinsmen, a type of poem that "has usually been in the form of the more informal monothematic *qiṭ'a*…rather than the long, formal, polythematic *qaṣīda* that is reserved mostly for the panegyric".[85] The standardized structure and the lack of different themes have been some of the reason why there has been a meagre attention from scholars to Arab women's poetry during the centuries and, in addition to this, the familiar notions of limited participation in the society, has only helped corroborating the vision of oppression and misogyny that have frequently provided an easy justification for Western scholars in portraying the image of women in the Arab/ Islamic society. What is worth noting though is that, on the back of these now standardized and given perspectives attributed over time to women in Arabic society, writing elegies in honour of their kinsmen has given different views in the analysis of Arabic women's personality. On one side, writing poems which aim is not only that of praising their men, but also to bring out the deep sorrow related to their loss, intensified the image of the Arabic women as "self-pitying, helpless, and appeal to males for succour."[86] On the other side, instead, whenever the few representatives of Arabic women writers, who have come to be very well known in the history

[84] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture,* ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 32.

[85] Tahera Qutbuddin, "Women Poets," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization,* ed. Josef W. Meri (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 865.

[86] Joseph T. Zaydan, "The Pioneering Generation," in *Arab Women Novelists* ed. Shahrough Akhavi (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 42.

of Arabic literature, are being cited and described in the works of some of the scholars that are talking about Arabic poetry, they never miss to be bound to the feminist cause, to the image of the 'rebel', hence the 'stand-out figure' within a mass of confined women.

Therefore, the trigger point in this decision made by IS of giving space to this young poetess, is given by the historical quasi-obscuration of Arabic women poets in the literary milieu, added to the association of an exceptional writing ability of those few Arabic poetess remembered in the centuries, and their strength in standing out in a predominantly male field. In fact, many Arabic and Western scholars during the centuries have propagated this conception of the exceptionalism of the few Arabic women poets on which, nowadays, the Islamic State is basing its ideological needs. Naming its brigades after the very popular Arab poetess al-Khansāʾ, for example, gives an idea on the models to which the Islamic State is looking at.

Conclusion

The use of poetry, due to its status as an ancient and very respected cultural tool among the Arabs, helps the Islamic State to gain credibility among its Arabic speaking followers and future recruits. The deployment of such a figure as the poetess of the Islamic State, instead, has given the movement the chance to result appealing to those female recruits who recognize in Aḥlām al-Naṣr an idol or, more specifically, a model to follow. Hence, the movement is compelling the hearts and minds of many women who, by looking at the poetess of the Islamic State, believe in a brighter, independent, and powerful future while living in the Caliphate.

Historically speaking, there has already been in the pages of Arabic literature books such a strong, independent, and praised figure as that of Aḥlām al-Naṣr, namely the per-Islamic poetess al-Khansāʾ. Hence, by taking advantage of the very little, and at times magnified vision of Arabic women poets in the history of Arabic poetry, the Islamic State strategically plays on the resemblances between those two figures to have a more legitimate and traditional identity.

Chapter Four

Aḥlām al-Naṣr vs al-Khansā'

The need to put women in the front line of their agenda is one of the distinctive features in the Islamic State's activity. As it has already been pointed out in the previous chapters, the use of such a figure as that embodied by Aḥlām al-Naṣr helps the organization spreading this very strong idea of women's empowerment. Through this lens, al-Naṣr represents a very young girl who, in addition to having got the chance to merry a *mujahidin* after a very small time she arrived in the lands of the Caliphate, she has also been able to gain this very significant role within the circle of people involved in the making of the propaganda for the Islamic State. Furthermore, her personal blog, which is entirely published on IS' online platforms, is a testimony of her stubborn and strong personality, as well as an example of the hard times everyone has to go through in their journey to the lands of the Islamic State. All those features of al-Naṣr's personality and work, acting within such a 'conservative' and 'radical' movement as that of the Islamic State, make this girl embody a role model for IS' future women recruit. The claim for authenticity and tradition, though, is always an important feature in IS' information disclosure and, by naming the women brigades after the female pre-Islamic poetess al-Khansāʾ, for instance, the people of the Islamic State are trying to suggest that this is an institution with deep roots in the past.[87] Considering their caliphate and everything that represents it as a pure resurrection of the institutions from the past is, in fact, one of the main pillars on which the Islamic State's project on its identity making is based on, and this is one of the reason why they are using figures from the past to justify their authenticity.

By taking into analysis the life of al-Khansāʾ and her poetic activity, this chapter will highlight the apparent reliance that the Islamic State has put on this pre-Islamic poet to justify the authenticity of al-Naṣr's role and poetry. This same approach has been taken also by scholars like Pierret, Cheikh, Creswell and Haykel who, in relation to al-Naṣr' personality and the poetry she produces, have frequently given hints on the possible connection between the poetess of the Islamic State and al-Khansā'; the analysis of the life of al-Khansāʾ and the poetic legacy she left, will lead this research in showing how IS and these scholas are misusing this analogy, as it is just the result of those preconceived ideas that, over the centuries, have been

[87] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*, no. 15 (June 2015), p. 108.

associated to female poetry and poets in the Arabic/Islamic context in which al-Khansāʾ has stood out in a predominantly male society by showing a strong personality, leaving also an important heritage in the composition of elegies.

4.1 Who is al-Khansāʾ?[88]

There are few classical sources in which is possible to find information on the life of the poetess Al-Khansā'. Among the Arabic sources which include her *dīwān*, there are 'The Book of Songs' (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*) written by al-Iṣfahānī,[89] in which is possible to find some fragments belonging to the poetess' *dīwān*, the 'Universal History' (*Kitāb al-ʿIbar*) by Ibn Khaldūn, [90] and Ibn Qutayba's 'Poetry and the Poets'(al-Shiʾr wa-l-shuʿarāʾ). In modern Western literature, instead, one of the most important work on al-Khansāʾ is the one written by Giuseppe Gabrieli in 1899.[91] While analysing the information about this poetess, it is possible to underline a frequent reference to the anecdotes on her life in which, both the exceptionalism of her figure in relation to her gender, the time she is living in (the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period), and her outstanding ability in poetry writing, find a dominant spot in these authors' description.

Relying on the information given by Gabrieli, al-Khansāʾ is born and raised in a purely tribal society in which, the man is busy fighting in wars, looting to seize the other tribes' riches and lands, while the woman is confined at home taking care of the household. Nevertheless, the life

[88] Born as Tumāḍir bint ʿAmr (ca 575 – 634/644), she was given the nickname (or *laqab*) of "al-Khansāʾ", which translated in English means "the snub-nosed" or "the gazelle".

[89] Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (284/897-356/967) was an Arab historian, litterateur, and poet. *Kitāb al-Aghānī* is his main book on which he worked according to his own testimony for fifty years. "Abu ʾl-Faradj al-Iṣbahānī", Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Google, accessed March 22, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/abu-l-faradj-al-isbahani-SIM_0181?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=abu+al-faradj

[90] Ibn Khaldūn (732/1332-784/1382) one of the strongest personalities of Arabo-Muslim culture in the period of its decline. He is generally regarded as a historian, sociologist, and philosopher. "Ibn Khaldūn," Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Google, accessed March 22, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-khaldun-COM_0330?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ibn+khaldun

[91] Giuseppe Gabrieli (1872-1942) was an Italian academic, orientalist, and librarian.

of al-Khansāʾ varies a lot from this common vision built around her time's way of living, as she had to go through two events that have very much impacted her life, and consequently her behaviour; those events are the deaths of her two brothers, Muʿāwiya and Ṣakhr. From this moment on, in fact, al-Khansāʾ falls into the abyss of pain from which she will never recover. Her days are marked by the memories of her dear brothers, their gestures, and voices. Memories that draw tears of sorrow, which she witnesses in her poems and, beside her grief, the love for her brothers, and the will to make their memory everlasting, are what keep al-Khansāʾ and her poetry alive.[92]

In her article on the analysis of how Arab women writers are very often portrayed in Western studies, Michelle Hartman points out how in many reports that are about al-Khansāʾ, the focal point is emphasizing her strong personality and, as a prove, she says that it is told that "she refused to marry a man who was courting her because she did not consider him her equal and that she divorced a husband who did not treat her well."[93] It is also known that, in the year 630, after the conquest of Mecca by the Prophet Muḥammad, al-Khansāʾ reaches Medina to declare her loyalty to the Prophet and his mission, by joining Islam; in those year, the poetess becomes very popular, and everyone would know her story and would appreciate her poetic skills.[94]

4.2 The Poetic Activity

al-Khansāʾ and her poetry have been a topic of discussion among classical scholars that have recognized her remarkable writing skills and, among those scholar we find Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī.[95] According to this scholar, al-Khansāʾ should not only be placed second in the chart of the best four poets who write elegies but, also, he places her in his chart of the one-hundred

[92] Giuseppe Gabrieli, *I tempi, la vita e il canzoniere* (Firenze: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), pp. 124-135.

[93] Michelle Hartman, Gender, Genre, and the (Missing) Gazelle, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 26.

[94] Giuseppe Gabrieli, *I tempi, la vita e il canzoniere* (Firenze: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), pp. 146-159.

[95] Ibn Sallām al-Jumaḥī (139/756 – 231, 232/845, 846) was a traditionist and philologist of the Baṣra school. "Ibn Sallām al-Djumaḥī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Google, accessed March 23, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-sallam-al-djumahi-SIM_3355?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=Ibn+Sall%C4%81m+al-Djuma%E1%B8%A5%C4%AB

excellent poets during the pre-Islamic and Islamic period in which, moreover, she is the only woman.[96] While analysing the history of classical Arabic poetry, in fact, the literary historian Abdullah al-Udhari points out that: "the standard history of classical Arabic poetry begins and end with a man…" [97] As a matter of fact, apart from the high turnout of poems written by Arab men, in Arabic literature there has been quite frequently almost a complete inattention to Arab women's poetry, either by Western scholars as well as by the Arabic ones. A very interesting and more accurate observation, though, has been made by Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfī (1910-1983), a twentieth century Egyptian scholar, author of a book in which he takes the chance to describe poetry and women during the Jāhiliyya period.[98] While analysing the history of women poets in that particular time of Arabs' history, al-Ḥūfī lists a series of reasons why, according to him, there has been very few attention on their works. Among those reasons, he points out that the collector of pre-Islamic poetry paid more attention on the 'unusual', the 'particular', and those are some characteristics which, in the collectors' opinion, did not feature women's poetry. Always by interpreting the little evidence left of Arabic women's poetry and in support to the previous point, the Egyptian scholar states that, women poetry was characterized by the interest in only one typology of *qaṣīda*, hence *rithā'* (elegy), characteristic that would make their poetry tedious. He also dedicates a section to the *rithā'* where he states that although elegies were also written by men, they would tend to generalize and to ramble on different topics losing the focus on praising and mourning the deceased; whereas in their elegies, women were able to show their sorrow, and their lamentations were always absorbed with the praise of the dead one, as well as their pain and frustration for the tragic loss.[99]

Hence, in respect to this women' s dominance in the elegiac poetry, the reports on the poetic activity of the poetess witnesses that, al-Khansā' devotes her poetic activity almost exclusively to the composition of elegies in honour of her two brothers. Moreover, as Francesco Gabrieli points out, in addition to use the basic images and *topoi* used in the elegies to commemorate a dead person, al-Khansā' enriched her poetry by using new expressions which "became fixed in the history of the genre after her," but he also remarks that: "she brought in these new stylistic

[96] Tahera Qutbuddin, "Women Poets," in *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, ed. Josef W. Meri (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 865.

[97] Abdullah al-Udhari, *Classical Poems by Arab Women* (London: Saqi Books, 1999), p. 13.

[98] Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfī, *al-mar'a fī al-shi'r al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1963).

[99] Ibidem.

and metrical embellishments which assured her a primacy in the elegiac genre which none could later dispute with her."[100]

4.3 First comparison: their persona

While talking about the al-Khansāʾ and Aḥlām al-Naṣr' persona, it is possible to highlight the presence of many similarities between the two; similarities that are frequently based on the blind acceptance of the words used by those scholars who wrote about them. The very first image that comes out when describing these two women is that of representing very strong individualist figures. In their analysis of al-Naṣr's travel account on her way to the Caliphate, Thomas Pierret and Mériam Cheikh believe that the individuality of this girl appears in the fact that "she forcefully asserts ownership of her life plan";[101] in the same way, Clarissa Burt, while giving information on the life of al-Khansā', she mentions that "the biographical anecdotes on her life describe a character of remarkable will, a strong personality, and a competitive spirit…"[102] One more time, the need to underline this aspect of their personalities is related to the conventional idea that has been built around the context that welcomes those women, and that is a patriarchal society, where women are thought to have just one duty, taking care of her husband and her children, and have no voice. On the contrary, anecdotes regarding al-Khansāʾ portray her as an exemplary Arab woman who takes decisions for herself and, although she is very attached to her family, she is still in power of her own life. One of the most famous facts on her life tells the story of al-Khansāʾ who refused to marry an Arab tribesman by taking a position on her father's decision. As the story tells, in fact, she openly talked to her father by telling him she wouldn't have never married such an old man.[103] Looking at the stories on Aḥlām al-Naṣr, instead, it is highlighted that the poetess challenges patriarchal authority simply

[100] "al-Khansāʾ", Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Google, accessed March 23, 2020, https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-khansa-SIM_4192?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=al+khansa

[101] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015), p. 241.

[102] Clarissa C. Burt, "al-Khansaʾ," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* vol. 311, ed. Thomson Gale (2005), p. 257.

[103] Ibidem.

by having the power to openly talk about her life and her experiences on her blog, as well as by covering such an important position in the Islamic State.

With a closer approach to the points on which these two women are considered exceptional, it is easy to understand that their description is dictated by the preconceived idea of the Orientalist stereotype that see the women as oppressed. As Michelle Hartman points out, the collusion of white, liberal feminist ideology, the radicalization of Arab women marked as Other, and the lingering legacies of Orientalism are the ones that have paid the way to the scholars to manipulate the image of the Arab woman in general.[104] Her analysis on the representation of al-Khansāʾ as a 'crossover artist', in fact, gives a very useful and detailed vision of how various Western scholars over the centuries have used al-Khansāʾ as the representative figure for Arab, Muslim women. In this regard, Hartman brings up a very explanatory example by analysing Fernea and Bezirgans' work, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, and pointing out how this work presents al-Khansāʾ as a particularly Islamic role model for Muslim women role, as well as using stories that "relate their ability as a poet and her personality as a feisty woman willing to speak her mind."[105] The same consideration is perfectly compatible with the strategy used by the Islamic State in its work of recruitment for women; in fact, in her article on Aḥlām al-Naṣr, Halla Diyab underlines how Aḥlām al-Naṣr is presented as a role model, as well as how she embodies the image of the woman in the Islamic State "who strongly challenge the traditionalist archetype of the unyielding, and muted, female terrorists…"[106]

In this lens, the reason for which these two figures have 'stood out' is mostly related to the will of the scholars and the Islamic State to underline their 'unconventional' attitude in the society, rather than their poetical skills. Therefore, looking at the way the Islamic State has been trying to recruit women, it is possible to see that they have taken advantage of the Orientalist's approach, playing the card of the women's empowerment as well as by switching the connotation of the 'Other' from the oppressed Arab/Muslim woman, and pin it on the Westerners and the limitation they are imposing on Muslim women to perform their religious duties.

[104] Michelle Hartman, "An Arab Woman Poet," *Tusla Studies in Women's Literature* 30, No. 1 (Spring 2011), p. 17.

[105] Ivi, p. 20

[106] Halla Diyab, "Ahlam al-Nasr," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 6, No. 6 (June 30, 2015).

4.4 Second comparison: their poetry

The use of such a figure as that embodied by Aḥlām al-Nasr has helped the movement building an immediate, yet stereotyped and misleading comparison between her and al-Khansāʾ who, in the heels of the scholars' portrayal, embodies the most representative example of a woman with an outstanding personality, as well as a role model for the compositions of poems in the history of Arabic poetry. In support of this consideration, the analysis of al-Naṣr and her role as the poetess of the Islamic State made by Pierret and Cheick highlights how, in fact, her status should be considered as "nothing revolutionary from the viewpoint of the Islamic tradition" which, as pointed out in the introduction to this paper, is a statement that they are ready to justify by highlighting the fact that "the blueprint here is the famous al-Khansāʾ, a contemporary of Prophet Muhammad and early convert to Islam known for her elegies of male relatives killed on the battlefield."[107] It is worth noting, though, that as a contemporary of the Prophet, al-Khansāʾ is usually represented as a pre-Islamic poetess rather than a Muslim one and, as evidence of that, there is an important feature in her poems which underlines her distance from Islam and its doctrine, and that is the denial of the concept of *ṣabr*, or forbearance. Her verses, in fact, are soaked through and through with her tears, pain, desperation and, more importantly, her call for vengeance.

> "Tell the one who is happy for Ṣakhr's death:
> -You and Death lie together in the same shirt. -
> My pain is relieved by the thought that who was happy for his death, soon will follow him:
> Oh, do not doubt."[108]

In Islam, instead, the manifestation of sorrow for the loss of a dear person is irreconcilable with the concept of *ṣabr*, as well as with the Quranic verse that quotes: "We belong to God, and to Him we return" (*ʾinnā li-llāhi wa ʾinnā ʾilayhi rājiʿaūn*). Moreover, in his book called "*Kitāb al-taʿāzī wa al-marāthī*," for instance, the third/ninth century scholar al-Mubarrad (210/826 – 285/898) talks about the causes of death discussing the religious exhortations, to

[107] Pierret and Cheikh, "I Am Very Happy Here," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, no. 13 (2015), p. 244.

[108] G.Gabrieli, *Tempi, Vita e Canzoniere* (Montana: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), p. 133.

the condolences and praise for the dead ones in the lens of Islam; hence, in the section dedicated to the condolences, he says:

> "the mourning is the comfort and the beauty of the forbearance towards the calamities, and the good recompense for the tragedy and the acceptance through God's justice and the complete submission to His commands in the promise of the great reward, and entrusts the patient people with the prayer and mercy."[109]

By looking at al-Naṣr's *dīwān*, then, it is possible to find a poem which is called "*ṣabr*" and, in contrast to the verses written by al-Khansāʾ, she writes:

> "If death hurts me and strikes me with its bitterness,
> I will seek shelter in the prayer, to be rescued from the heavy sorrow,
> hence clarify me the misfortune with mercy, and comfort my heart from grieving,
> So for me is nothing but a help to beware of praising the Almighty."[110]

Al-Khansāʾ poetic activity is mostly marked by poems belonging to her life before embracing Islam, hence the pre-Islamic era and, considering the use that the Islamic State does of the concept of '*Jāhiliyya*', namely a period of immorality and corruption, as well as a term used as an insult throughout its discourse, the reference to this poetess, and associating her to al-Naṣr, highlights a relevant gap in the organization's propaganda. In this lens, al-Khansāʾ's fame in the heritage of Arabic culture and poetry overcomes her non-Islamic background, hence IS focusses entirely on her authentic and traditional role as an Arab woman poet, therefore al-Naṣr 'authentic' role.

Going deeper in the analysis of their poetry, then, it is indeed possible to find many similarities in the elegies composed by al-Naṣr and al-Khansāʾ, as for instance the themes that they both decide to highlight which are: grief, praise and fight. As they both write elegies, their poems are explicitly aimed at describing their sorrow for the loss of someone close to them. What is important to note in the analysis of their elegies, though, is that whereas al-Khansāʾ

[109] My translation from Arabic to English. For the original text look at:
Al-Mubarrad, *Kitāb al-taʿāzī wa al-marāthī,* Dar al-Kotob al-ilmiyah, Beirut 1992, p. 10.

[110] My translation from Arabic to English: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Uwār al-Ḥaqq*, in *Fursān al-balāghī li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, p.90.

sticks to the personal sphere by writing for the loss of her two brothers, al-Naṣr describes the sorrow of a whole community, i.e. the members of the Islamic State.

> "Oh my eye, let your tears flow abundantly,
> Let them flow out, like the water flows out of the filled vases carried by the female camels on their shoulders when they are back from the wells."[111]

Although in these lines written by al-Khansāʾ it is possible to feel the deep sorrow she is going through, her poems have the characteristic of being very impersonal; as a matter of fact, as Terry DeYoung points out "she rarely attributes the emotions she describes directly to herself… but mediates them through attribution to other objects or living things to be found in her environment."[112] Hence, by using the image of the female camels that carry vases full of water, al-Khansāʾ is describing herself: the filled vases represent the grief that she bears every day; while the spilling water recalls the image of her tears which are the only way the woman can get rid of the pain for the loss of the brothers. With those verses, the pre-Islamic poetess embraces some of the feature which define the aim of the *rithā'*, that is being aware of the transience of the life and the sorrow for a person's death; the elegies are, in fact, dedicated to regret, grief and memory of someone who has just died. As al-Hūfī points out, in each line of al-Khansā''s poems it is possible to find the reason and the emotions that cause her either grief, sorrow, happiness or rage. [113] The same approach to the topic is shown by al-Mubarrad who, in his book, refers to the sincerity of the feelings expressed by the mourner, hence in the poem the author is able to establish a natural empathy with whoever is reading or listening to her words.

While reading the elegies written by Aḥlām al-Naṣr, instead, it is possible to glimpse the propagandistic nature of her verses; in fact, besides helping commemorate significant events in the movement's history, the elegies in honour of the dead soldiers, and the verses that incite to fight and to take revenge, have a significant impact on the reader that, eventually, gets easily persuaded by her words which, rather than a compassionate feeling, are predominantly filled with a sense of hate and rage. In this sense, her poems depart from the personal realm that

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[111] G.Gabrieli, *Tempi, Vita e Canzoniere* (Montana: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), p. 189. For the original txt look at: al-Khansāʾ, *dīwān II*, p. 25.

[112] Terry DeYoung, "Love, Death and the Ghost of al-Khansāʾ," in *Tradition, modernity and postmodernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. Kemal Abdel-Malek and Wael Hallaq (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), p. 56.

[113] Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥūfī, *al-mar'a fī al-shi'r al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1963), p. 217.

characterizes al-Khansā''s elegies, and they espouse a merely political nature. A good example is "Elegy for Asad Allāh al-Bīlāwī" (*Rithā' Asad Allāh al-Bīlāwī*):

"Tears have fallen abundantly from all of us suffering,
Alas, a victorious lion has emigrated, and he moved to Mosul (leader of Islam) with the spirit of the fighter and he has ascended the throne already, victorious.
And on the heights of Mosul the father has been killed
And his blood has covered a whip in red."[114]

The "abundant" tears and the sorrow that have pervaded the poems of al-Khansāʾ have a place also in al-Naṣr's verses but, in contrast to the pre-Islamic poetess, al-Naṣr associate these feelings to all the members of the Islamic State who are mourning the death of one of the leaders' movement. Although writing elegies in honour of leaders of groups was also very common in the pre-Islamic period, as those compositions were aimed at keeping the memory of the leader of a tribe alive, the majority of al-Khansā''s poems differ from al-Naṣr's ones as they were dedicate to her brothers which she didn't stop weeping until she died. The importance of highlighting this difference lies in the need to understand that, if for Aḥlām al-Naṣr writing elegies in honour of a leader is aimed at writing down his deeds and preserve his memory now that he is in God's hands, hence she writes:

"My Lord is happy for you for being blessed with the comfort of Paradise,
A place in which you will experience the happiness like you have never done before."[115]

For al-Khansāʾ, instead, the death of her brothers meant not only the loss of her beloved ones, but also the loss of the people who took care of her and protected her from a destiny that, in that time, could have also see her becoming a slave.

"You have left me among the children of a slave, among whom I am like a foreign tramp.

[114] My translation from Arabic to English: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Rithāʾ Asad Allāh al-Bīlāwī*, Al-Battar Media Foundation s.d. https://jihadology.net/2014/06/12/aishah-media-center-presents-a-new-poem-from-a%e1%b8%a5lam-al-na%e1%b9%a3r-eulogy-for-asad-allah-al-bilawi/

[115] Ibidem.

Where will I find a knight like you, to whom I seek help when a heavy burden oppresses me?"[116]

Nevertheless, there is a feature that is possible to highlight as something that the two poetesses have in common, and that is the language, which is renown to be very refined and full of metaphors that very frequently recall the animal's world. Just like al-Khansāʾ, al-Naṣr uses classical Arabic to write her poems but, there is a striking difference in the structure of the sentences proposed by al-Khansāʾ, and in choosing the words for which the poetess has become renowned for the unparalleled technical accomplishments. As a matter of fact, although the language used by Aḥlām al-Naṣr recalls a poetical style, as it is characterized by a selection of terms which create rhymes at the end of each sentence, and her technique is certainly remarkable (Creswell and Haykel, for example, underline her poetry competence by citing a poem based on the acronym "Daesh," in which she declares her commitment to IS),[117] there is a very concrete difference between al-Khansāʾ's refined, old and difficult language and the one used by al-Naṣr which can be classified as a scholastic level poetry. Therefore, more than trying to emulate and recall al-Khansāʾ's style, the decision took by the poetess of the Islamic State is related to the need to prove some kind of authenticity. In this regard, a useful approach that can be taken while reading her poetry, is underlined by the analysis made by Elisabeth Kendall on jihadist poetry and their use of classical Arabic, where she says:

"The language of poetry emulates the language in which the Quran was revealed; and much like the Quran, the poetic language with its musicality, rhymes and rhythms can speak to listeners on a subliminal level, even when… little more than the keywords and stock phrases and themes are actively understood."[118]

Hence, rather than showing her closeness to the pre-Islamic poetess, the decisions taken by Aḥlām al-Naṣr both stylistically and thematically are based on a propaganda strategy making which involve relying on the power that the poetic cultural heritage has on Arabic/Muslim people's hearts and minds. The highly use of imagery by al-Naṣr, for example, is a prove of

[116] G.Gabrieli, *Tempi, Vita e Canzoniere* (Montana: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), p. 130. For the original text look at: al-Khansāʾ, *dīwān I*, p. VI.

[117] Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel, "Poetry in Jihadi Culture." In *Jihadi Culture*, ed. Thomas Hegghammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 28.

[118] Elisabeth Kendall, "Poetry as a Weapon of Jihad," in *Twenty-First Century Jihad*, ed. Elisabeth Kendall and Ewan Stein (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 253.

this bigger intent attached to her poetry. In this regard, on every page of al-Naṣr's *dīwān* there is a logo that represents a black horse beside the black flag of the Islamic State; the image of the horse is, in fact, related to the traditional view that sees the horse as the symbol of the physical strength, virility, nobility and aggressiveness, characteristics that would be also attributed to its rider, or knight (*faras*). Likewise, in the verses written for the one who killed Ṣakhr, al-Khansāʾ says:

"No sleep should come in your eyes until you have thrown against them your horses of war,
That push back their foals longing for the fight."[119]

It is also in this lens that, for example, the image of the lion that al-Naṣr deliberately decide to use in the previous verses to refer to al-Bīlāwī, *Asad Allāh*,, is not something unusual; in fact, it's a very common image in the Arab world used to underline a person's courage. In one of her poems, also al-Khansāʾ uses this word with the intent of praising her brother Ṣakhr:

"Brave? - You are braver than the lion with its thick mane, in its den with its lion cubs."[120]

This expedient helps to underline how al-Naṣr's poems can be easily interpreted as somehow linked to the poems and the style of al-Khansāʾ, as she makes a very frequent use of images that are familiar in the pre-Islamic poetess' poetry. Another example is contained in al-Naṣr's *diīwān*, and it is a poem called "These are the liberated lions" (*Hadhī al-usūdu taḥrrarat*) where, beside praising those men imprisoned, she incites them in not give up on their mission and fight for their revenge.

"Those are the lions liberated from a miserable prison,
as they were accused of teaching the world lessons that will never vanish:
at all times, the lions with their families eagerly get closer for revenge,
don't ever surrender or bend!"[121]

[119] G.Gabrieli, *Tempi, Vita e Canzoniere* (Montana: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), p. 134. For the original text look at: al-Khansāʾ, *dīwān II,* p.118.

[120] Ivi, p. 197. For the original text look at: al-Khansāʾ, *dīwān II,* pp. 195.

[121] My translation from Arabic to English: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Uwār al-Ḥaqq*, in *Fursān al-balāghī li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, p. 57.

Another perception of al-Naṣr's choices, though, is given by always having in consideration that this girl and her poems should be always analysed as part of a bigger concept, namely the propaganda of the Islamic State and as such, it is always useful to rely on the whole image the Islamic State is trying to give, that is being authentic and connected to this iconic past in which the Prophet Muḥammad was living. Hence, the misrepresentation and the trap in which scholars like Haykel and Cheick fall while creating a sense of continuity in the history of Arabic women poets by connecting al-Khansāʾ and Aḥlām al-Naṣr.

As it is possible to notice in many verses written by al-Khansāʾ, the images related to the battlefield have a dominant position in her poetry; in the same way, the *jihād* and the death form the background to Aḥlām's compositions; "The elegy of the hero Maḥmūd Zaīdān" (*Rithā' al-baṭal Maḥmūd Zaīdān*) shows these features with verses like:

> "How many knights among them an unbeliever is able to get down
> just to go against the rules of Islam
> How many have been slaughtered in the battle with our enemy."[122]

In those verses, Aḥlām al-Naṣr proposes some images that directly project the reader in a past era, that of the tribes and of the knights; images that, once again, connect the poetess to the pre-Islamic period and to al-Khansāʾ. Nevertheless, before jumping to conclusions, it is always important to consider al-Naṣr role in a jihadi movement; hence, the analysis bring out by Creswell and Haykel in which they put in evidence that "the culture of jihad is a culture of romance. It promises adventure and asserts that the codes of medieval heroism and chivalry are still relevant."[123] In the continuation of their analysis, these two scholars also highlight how the efforts put by the militants in creating an old identity lead them to refer to themselves as the 'knights of jihad'; a strategy that bears its fruits as in fact, IS recruits think they are emigrating to a caliphate with more than a millennium of history.[124] What is important to consider, in this regard, is that in al-Naṣr's poetry there is a strong religious component that sweeps her away from the pre-Islamic period, as well as from al-Khansāʾ's poetry. "I want the *jihād*" (*Urīdu al-jihād*), for example, is a poem in which al-Naṣr not only sets out a clear

[122] Ivi, p. 115.

[123] Creswell and Haykel, "Battle Lines," *The New Yorker*, no. 15 (June 2015), p. 111.

[124] Ibidem.

difference with al-Khansāʾ s' poetical aim, but she also clearly states her jihadist ideology, as well as the real nature of her poetry, as she writes:

"I want the *jihād* to make a friend live
And to perpetuate wellness in each valley
I want the *jihād* to satisfy my lord
And anchor the law which came appositely."[125]

Conclusion

Women's empowerment, the claim for authenticity and having roots in the past are three of the most important pillars that the Islamic State has been trying to propagate in its work of propaganda. The figure and the role assigned to Aḥlām al-Naṣr have certainly contributed to underline the claim for women's empowerment and individualism, while the presence of such an institution as the "al-Khansā' brigades", with its direct reference to this famous pre-Islamic poetess, has very much helped the movement creating a sort of connection that has not only involved its claim of continuity with the early Islamic community, but it has also affected the evaluation of al-Naṣr's poetic activity in relation to its closeness to al-Khansā'. The Islamic State has adopted a very subtle strategy that, given the presence of the already stereotyped idea of women in Islam and their role in society, has affected scholarly and non-scholarly vision on the topic.

Going through a deeper analysis of those two figures it shows that, apart from being both women and authors of elegies, these two poetesses have very different approaches and different aims in their poetic activity. While al-Khansāʾ writes elegies to remember and praise their heroic brothers, the poems written by al-Naṣr evidently have a more political aim; her works stand apart from her personal life in order to give space to a purely political and religious rhetoric, hence the utility of those poems: propaganda tools, sources of knowledge of *jihād*, as well as the knowledge of what it is like to live in the Caliphate.

[125] My translation from Arabic to English: Aḥlām al-Naṣr, *Uwār al-Ḥaqq*, in *Fursān al-balāghī li-l-iʿlām*, 2014, pp. 40-41.

Conclusion

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes two situation that have lead people to stick to what he calls 'textual attitude', a process by which human beings have the tendency to understand the world on the basis of what books say. One of these situations is "the appearance of success", which Said articulates in a very remarkable way by saying:

> "There is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take subjects defined in advance by readers' experiences. A book on how to handle a fierce lion might then cause a series of books to be produced on such subjects as the fierceness of lions, the origins of fierceness, and so forth."[126]

The purpose of this paper was to examine the influence that secular stereotypes have had on the propaganda of the Islamic State and on some of the scholars who have been studying this *jihadi* movement. Given the wide range of elements deployed by the Islamic State in its propaganda, the attention was focused on a specific element which, although very relevant in the understanding of the movement's ideology and its goals, it did not receive the necessary attention; this element is the use of poetry. Specifically focused on Aḥlām al-Naṣr, a young girl who, since her appearance in the Islamic State, has gained a great success among the militants of the movement, as well as in the whole *jihadi* circle, thanks to her official role as "the Poetess of the Islamic State," hence her remarkable role in the propaganda machine of the movement. Through her figure, the Islamic State has been trying to release certain messages to be framed in a more appealing way to a certain public, namely the Arab speaking one and women.

Focusing on Aḥlām al-Naṣr within IS' propaganda, it has been possible to attribute to this girl a more detailed role for the purpose of the movement's appeal in general. Being the poetess of the Islamic State involves being: the spokesperson of the movement; a perpetrator of authenticity and tradition in the movement, in relation to the longstanding ideal that sees the Arabs as the masters of poetry; and a 'role model' in the eyes of the future women recruits of the Islamic State. In these lens, IS has been trying to frame its authenticity by deploying two aspects that, rather than the Islamic branch, are mostly concerned with the idea of what a true

[126] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 94.

Arab should be, and they are: the reference to poetry as the primary art of the Arabs, and the issue on gender roles.

Throughout the research, the analysis of the historical conception of the relation between poetry and the Arabs, as well as the role of women in the Arab society and in the poetic production, has shown that the Islamic State is basing their claim for authenticity and tradition on Arab stereotypes that are themselves kind of problematic, as they are either the results of very old constructions of an idealized Arab identity made from Arab scholars, which have never been proved to be 100% right, or idealized conceptions supported by Orientalists' writings which, in contrast, have now been used by the Islamic State to result more appealing and concessive at the eyes of its future recruits. In fact, if the Orientalists' portrayal of the Orient is that of a rarefied and distant land, a place that is, by definition, inhabited by 'the Other' and without any opportunity to redeem, the Islamic State has readjusted those images to its ideological needs; hence, it transformed this distant land in the place of refuge for the true believers, the land of redemption from which the Islamic State, which itself represents the incarnation of all those images and fantasies, will start its revolution against 'the Other,' namely the unbelievers.

The peak of this claiming for authenticity, then, is shown through the reference to the poetess al-Khansā' who, always in the heels of the ninth-century scholarly production, both Arabic and Western, has been labelled as the atypical, strong and most talented woman in the history of Arabic poetry. By underlining the strong personality of this poetess, and putting it in connection to al-Naṣr, the Islamic State has taken advantage of the issue on gender that sees Arab women as victims of the patriarchate, and deny it by connecting and comparing the lives of these two poetesses that have stood out for their strong personality and remarkable impact in the society. Nevertheless, the comparison made in this research in terms of their personality and their poetic activity has shown that these two poetesses have been forcefully associated by the militants of the Islamic State for their own sake of portraying themselves an authentic Arab movement; while the sides taken by the scholars who have been studying and claiming this connection are the result of the undiscussed acceptance of those long-standing stereotypes that, as it has been remarked at the beginning of this section, find their origin in certain theories that are related to what the scholar Edward Said has studied and called after the name of *Orientalism*.

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