To Our Sisters

On the Role of Religious Motivations as a Rationale for Western Muslim Women joining ISIS

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Introduction

Topic Introduction

29 June 2014 - Amidst the scrambles of the Syrian civil war, a group of Islamist rebels initially affiliated to al-Qaeda proclaimed *ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-sh-Sham* (الـدولـة الإسـلامـية فـي الـعراق والـشام, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) better known by its abbreviation of *Da'esh* or its Western equivalent ISIS. After the foundation of the caliphate, the Islamic State went on to conquer vast areas in both Syria and Iraq. Soon it became notorious for its "highly publicised beheadings, systematised sexual slavery, mass killings of religious minorities and other atrocities", all in the name of Islam.[1] Slowly but steadily, ISIS' actions came to have worldwide implications affecting not only the MENA-region, but also Western Europe and the United States. Military troops were sent out to Syria and Iraq, and combating ISIS was made a top priority on the Western political agenda.[2]

The intensity of the debate on the topic only increased after numerous attacks claimed by ISIS took place in Europe. Through this, ISIS transformed from a group of Islamist rebels involved in the Syrian civil war into the number one cause of the highest level of fear of terrorism since the attacks of 9/11. Not only did ISIS' actions further emphasise the dichotomy between 'East' and 'West' that has increased in importance after 9/11, they also sparked a division within the Muslim community itself. On the one hand, the majority of the '*umma* (أمـة, worldwide Muslim community) distances itself from the practices of ISIS. According to Graeme Wood of 'The Atlantic', nearly all Muslims reject the Islamic State. He also claims that "many mainstream Muslim organisations have gone so far as to say the Islamic State is, in fact, un-Islamic".[3] However, on the other hand, there are also those who sympathise with the organisation's doctrines. Some take this even one step further by openly expressing their support through joining the organisation in Syria. *Jihad* (جـهاد, struggle or effort) and the wish to live in accordance with *Shari'a* (شَـرِيـعَة, pathway or Islamic religious law) in an Islamic land are often given as an explanation for this.[4] This shows that, contrary to most

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[1] D. Byman, 'Understanding the Islamic State - A Review Essay', *International Security* 40:4 (2016) 127-165, 127.

[2] Ibidem 128.

[3] G. Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants', *The Atlantic*, March 2015. Accessed 3 March 2021 (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/).

[4] A. Navest, Martijn de Koning and Annelies Moors, 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria', *Anthropology Today* 32:2 (2016) 22-25, 24; The notion of *jihad* is very complex and will be discussed more extensively at a later stage. For now, it is enough to understand that in the context of ISIS, *jihad* should be understood as a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a collective religious duty. The multiple additional interpretations of the notion shall be explained over the course of this research.

Muslims seeing ISIS as un-Islamic, those who actually travelled to Syria and Iraq seem to have done so for religious and Islamic purposes. But is this actually the case? Or were there more motivations at play here?

Still, a lot of ISIS' nature and internal organisation remain shrouded in mystery. Even though many concrete examples of the actions taken by the movement can be given, a deeper analysis of the movement's background is often left unexplained in Western media. However, it is exactly this doctrinal nature of the organisation that is interesting in understanding what ISIS is actually all about and why it has caused so much controversy in both the West and the Middle East itself. With a better understanding of the foundation of ISIS will also come a better understanding of its appeal to Muslims from all over the world, including the West. What is the ideology that drives the supporters of *Da'esh*? How did ISIS manage to gain so much support and power in the region in the first place? And how did they manage to attract Muslims in the West to the idea of going to Syria in order to join ISIS? What is the role of the notions of *hijrah* (هجـــرة, migration) and *jihad* in this story?[5]

Right now, it is fairly easy to classify every Muslim who joined ISIS as a radical. It seems that joining ISIS has become the one and foremost definition or example of Islamic radicalisation. However, the motivations for this process remain a topic of discussion. Before being able to understand the concept of Islamic radicalisation in the context of ISIS, we must first look at the bigger picture of the notion of radicalisation as such. When it comes to causes of radicalisation in general, there is an ongoing debate between scholars on what exactly causes people to join extremist religious groups or movements. Not only do these motivations differ per region or religion, socio-historical context should be taken into account as well. For the sake of this research, the process of radicalisation of Muslims in the West will be taken as a central focal point. What were the push - and pull factors that caused a significant number of Western Muslims to join ISIS? What kind of process caused these Muslims to leave everything behind and immerse themselves in an often alien nation in *Dar al-Islam* (دار الإسـلام, House of Islam)? What drove them into the arms of ISIS?

Important here is to note that radicalisation in itself does not necessarily imply violent extremism or terrorism, notions that are both linked to ISIS and the radical Islamist ideology it

[5] The term *hijrah* refers to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622. It symbolises the way in which the Prophet explicitly distanced himself from his old life. In the context of ISIS, *hijrah* refers to Muslims migrating towards the caliphate in order to break with their old life and completely devout themselves to the cause of the Islamic State. The notion will be discussed more extensively at a later stage.

seems to represent.[6] According to Jacuch et al., we should rather see jihadisation as a possible last stage in the personal process of radicalisation Muslim extremists go through. Only in this stage do "individuals willingly accept their duties and commit to carrying out their assigned acts of terrorism, or martyrdom from their own perspective".[7] So again, what brought Muslims in the West to this stage of radicalisation, resulting in their joining ISIS? Were their motivations socio-economical or political? And to what extent did the Islamic nature of ISIS and their theological standpoint play a role in the attraction of Western Muslims?

The question of motivations for Western Muslims, or any Muslim, is very complicated and multi-faceted. In fact, there are as many motivations as there are Muslims who decided to join ISIS. However, given the fact that the organisation's religious ideology is so strong, it is interesting to analyse whether religious arguments also formed the basis of motivations to join ISIS. The Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* seem to be central phenomena in the discussion, albeit frequently grossly misunderstood and misplaced in the Western debate. What do the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* actually entail within Islamic theology? What is said about it in the Qur'an, what do the '*ulama* (عـــلماء, Islamic scholars) say about this and how can it in turn be linked to the case of Western Muslims joining ISIS?

In addition, is there a difference in motivation for men and women? Does religion play an equal part for both genders, or are other factors more important for either men or women? Whereas Western media often portray women joining ISIS as so-called '*jihadi* brides' blatantly following their husbands to Syria, recent research has also shown a different side to this story. In fact, women have actually over time become a critical part of ISIS' recruitment. The term used for these female ISIS recruits is *muhajirat* (مـهاجرات) and will be discussed more in-depth throughout this research. In addition to the prospect of a romantic relationship or the promise of marriage, the intention of joining a religious movement that appears meaningful plays an important role as well.[8] This idea is also supported by Shapiro and Maras, who claim that in the process of radicalisation to religious terrorism, women have demonstrated "agency and tenacity for pursuing, recruiting, supporting and

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[6] D. R. Mandel, 'Radicalisation: What does it mean?' in: Beatrice Jacuch et al. (ed.), *Home-grown Terrorism: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalisation Among Groups with an Immigrant Heritage in Europe*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2009, 102.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] D. Frosch et al., 'Latest Arrests of Women Underscore Jihadist Recruiting Efforts: Islamic State's appeal for American women can range from the prospect of romance to idea of joining a meaningful religious movement', *The Wall Street Journal Online* 22:35 (2015) 1-3, 1.

spreading extreme Islamist ideals".[9] The actual nature of the religious ideals that have seemingly motivated at least some Western women to join ISIS is an interesting phenomenon. Nonetheless, the participation and motivation of Western Muslim women remains largely unexplored when it comes to religious rationales for joining *Da'esh*.

Moreover, according to Roy, "it is very common to view jihadism as an extension of Salafism".[10] Salafism is a reform movement within Sunni Islam that aims to return to the traditions of the first three generations of Muslims known as the *Salafi*. The movement will be discussed more elaborately at a later stage. Linking this to ISIS, the ideology of the movement has often been described as indeed being based on *jihadi* Salafism, leading to a situation in which young radicals are all sincere believers whose system of reference is deeply Islamic.[11] But what form of jihadism are we talking about here? And does the idea that the Muslims joining ISIS are all deeply religious necessarily imply that their religious beliefs are also the main motivation for their radicalisation? To answer these questions, an analysis of religious motivations based on the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* will be one of the central foci of this research.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

In order to find answers to the questions proposed previously, this research will be conducted within the context of two important theoretical frameworks: a thorough explanation of the notion of radicalisation and an in-depth understanding of the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad*. In the literature review on radicalisation provided later on in this introduction, the state of the art of the academic debate concerning this topic will be discussed. Central to this discussion are the different causes for and motivations behind processes of radicalisation in general. Only if we understand the general concept of radicalisation will we be able to apply it to Islamic radicalisation, and even more specific to the case-study of ISIS. In the context of ISIS, *hijrah* and *jihad* are vital notions in understanding both the organisation as well as its appeal to Western Muslims. *Hijrah* and *jihad* will therefore be explained both from an outsider's perspective (secondary literature) as well as a believer's perspective, for example the Qur'an. In this framework, English translations of Qur'anic verses taken from *The Holy Qur'an* will be used as a primary source.[12] Through this, we can set out

[9] L. R. Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras, 'Women's Radicalisation to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42:1 (2019) 88-119, 88.

[10] O. Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2017) 41.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] A. Nooruddin (ed.), *The Holy Qur'an* (Rheinfelden 2010).

what the Qur'an itself actually says about *hijrah* and *jihad*. Only after we have established this can we start to make sense of how these notions were used in the recruitment process of ISIS.

Even though the remainder of the research will be mostly based on secondary literature, some primary sources will be used in other parts as well in order to increase the depth of the analysis. Structure-wise, this research will be built up from the general to the specific. By creating a general theoretical framework on (Islamic) radicalisation, and *hijrah* and *jihad* based on introductory passages and a literature review, the stage will be set for an in-depth analysis of the case-study of ISIS in the final chapters. This analysis will be based on secondary literature as well as primary sources from ISIS itself. In support of this analysis, ISIS' magazine *Dabiq* and real-life profiles of *muhajirat* will give an insight in possible religious motivations for joining ISIS while linking it to the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* as used by the organisation. By combining the Qur'an and ISIS' explanation of *hijrah* and *jihad*, we will come towards a better understanding of the role of religious motivations for Western Muslim women to join.

Academic Debate

Scholars have distinguished various possible causes of radicalisation. In order to understand the reasons for such a process, it is vital to first understand what the notion itself actually entails. Very often, and especially in relation to ISIS, radicalisation is equated with terrorism. Radical Islam is therefore seen as a big threat and it seems as if every terrorist attack is nowadays immediately labelled as an Islamic attack. However, reality requires more nuance. Even though "radicalisation, by most accounts, creates the motivational or cognitive preconditions ripe for terrorism", the process in itself contains several stages of which terrorism is only the final step along the scale.[13]

According to this model by behavioural scientist and professor of psychology at York University David R. Mandel, the four stages include pre-radicalisation, self-identification, indoctrination and 'jihadisation' respectively.[14] It is in the jihadisation stage that acts of terrorism are manifested and it is therefore also this stage of radicalisation that is relevant for this research. However, even though the model distinguishes different stages of radicalisation, it does not explain "the drivers that lead people into the radicalisation process in the first place".[15] So what then causes radicalisation? When looking at the academic debate, a myriad of answers can be found to the question of what causes radicalisation. As stated by Cincu, "there is no single cause or catalyst for

[13] D. R. Mandel, 'Radicalisation', 101.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Ibidem 102.

violent radicalisation, this being a multi-dimensional process influenced by a complex array of internal and external factors".[16] Still, there are some factors that are repeatedly analysed by various scholars. The most prominent ones include socio-economic, political and religious arguments.[17]

Socio-economic argument

The first possible cause of radicalisation in the West concerns the socio-economic position of Muslim minorities. When looking at radicalisation among Muslims in the West, the first factor that is striking concerns Muslims' background. According to associate professor on the psychosocial aspects of terrorism Anne Speckhard, "the European militant jihadi theatre has been especially active within the immigrants first to third generation Muslim populations".[18] This ties in with the first explanation for radicalisation, namely the socio-economic argument. Due to a lack of complete integration in their new countries, Muslim minorities often feel marginalised, vulnerable, frustrated and discriminated against.[19] Radical movements use this vulnerability in order to make said movement seem like an attractive alternative. This happens through the propagation of an ideology that speaks directly to individuals' vulnerabilities, herein connecting them to a much bigger and more powerful movement.[20]

The focus on socio-economic disadvantages as a cause of radicalisation is also supported by Sara Pavan. She highlights the "systematic disadvantage that Muslim groups face in European countries and worldwide" - a situation that she calls a socio-economic vacuum in which radicalisation often emerges.[21] This socio-economic disadvantage can range from a lower level of education to diminished chances of finding employment and proper housing. Since Islam often forms a strong part of these Muslims' identities, a possible alternative offered by a radical religious movement might seem appealing and attractive to vulnerable individuals.

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[16] A. E. Cincu, 'The Roots of Violent Radicalisation of Young Muslims in the United Kingdom: Implications on the Future of British Multiculturalism', *Research and Science Today* 1 (2016) 17-28, 20.

[17] In april 2021, Dutch professor and chair of History of International Relations and Global Governance at Utrecht University published a book called *Radicale verslossing: Wat terroristen geloven*. In this book, she gives a detailed account of motivations for terrorist attacks in the name of religion as explained by detained terrorists themselves. Unfortunately, this book was published too late to include in this research, but its existence is worth mentioning nonetheless.

[18] A. Speckhard, 'The Militant Jihad in Europe: Fighting Home-grown Terrorism' in: Beatrice Jacuch et al. (ed.), *Home-grown Terrorism: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalisation Among Groups with an Immigrant Heritage in Europe*, Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2009, 143.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] S. M. Murshed and Sara Pavan, 'Identity and Islamic Radicalisation in Western Europe', *Economics of Security Working Paper Series* 14 (2009) 1-33, 3.

Another scholar who supports the importance of the socio-economic argument is Adina-Elena Cincu. At the same time, she also recognises the idea that radicalisation is a multi-faceted process by stating that while "socio-economic factors matter to a certain extent in the process of violent radicalisation of some young British Muslims, violent radicalisation is a much more complex process".[22] Still, the fact that many young Muslims in the West are living in segregated areas defined by poverty and socio-economic separation is a given fact that cannot be ignored. In addition, young Western Muslims experience difficulties when it comes to education as well as problems in the realm of social class mobility. This results in frustrating barriers regarding their vulnerable socio-economic position, creating a fertile ground for "alternatives embodied by violent Islamist fundamentalist ideologies".[23]

In their article 'The Radicalisation Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism', Mohammad Hafez and Creighton Mullins also identify the economic factor as a cause of radicalisation. Even though they place socio-economic marginalisation under the umbrella-term of grievances, they do recognise that experience with socio-economic discrimination can potentially fuel an attraction to a radical alternative.[24] Another scholar who does not directly point to the socio-economic argument but also combines it with another explanation is Annemarie Loseman, who coins the idea of a threat to one's economic status as being part of perceived group threat. In her eyes, the latter is one of the three determinants of a radical belief system among young Western Muslims.[25]

Even though the idea of the socio-cultural argument is thus supported by several scholars, it is certainly not the only possible explanation for radicalisation. Socio-economic hardship often goes hand in hand with similar situations in the political domain. The political argument is therefore very prominent as well.

Political argument

It is important to bear in mind that radicalisation also extents to Muslim individuals with successful (professional) lives.[26] This shows that socio-economic factors are definitely not the sole cause of

[22] Cincu, 'The Roots of Violent Radicalisation', 17.

[23] Ibidem 21.

[24] M. Hafez and Creighto Mullins, 'The Radicalisation Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38:11 (2015) 958-975, 962.

[25] A. Loseman and Kees van den Bos, 'Determinants of Radicalisation of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat', *Journal of Social Issues* 69(3): 586-604, 591.

[26] Cincu, 'The Roots of Violent Radicalisation' 21.

radicalisation. Another important contributor is of a political nature. Comparable to the socio-economic disadvantages discussed previously, Muslim minorities in the West also experience disadvantages in the political realm. This factor is two-fold.

On the one hand, Pavan talks about horizontal political inequality, which she claims "serves to fuel the fire of radicalisation" in Europe.[27] This horizontal inequality implies that rather than being marginalised individually, Muslims are discriminated collectively as a group. This manifests itself mainly through the political agenda of right-wing parties, who preach "the dangers posed by Islam in general, and Muslim migrants in particular".[28] Not only does this narrative discriminate against Muslim migrants, young Muslims often also feel like "they have no voice or a legitimate outlet for political expression, protest or dissent".[29] The argument of the growing popularity of far-right parties is also supported by Mohammad Hafez and Creighton Mullins, who link this phenomenon to an increase in xenophobia and anti-foreigner sentiment in Europe. The combination of not feeling represented by one's government with that government actually openly attacking Islam as a problematic religion results in exclusion from mainstream politics, which in turn might lead to anger towards the state.[30] The prospect of an alternative offered by radical Islamic movements might therefore suddenly seem very appealing to those young Muslims who feel left out and excluded by their own system.

In addition, Western foreign policy towards the Middle East is of political importance as well. Anne Speckhard points out that when it comes to radical *jihadi* ideology, there is a basic tenet that justifies *jihad* against "Western powers that have supported and enabled ruthless dictators in Muslim countries to oppress Muslim peoples […] and have also themselves invaded and supported occupations of Muslim lands".[31] The main idea behind radicalisation linked to this argument is that an Islamist ideology forms the solution to free the occupied Middle East form the West. Again, in a situation in which Muslims feel politically marginalised by their Western country, such an alternative, in which their community plays a leading role, might seem attractive.

Lastly, Hafez and Mullins also recognise the political instability in the Middle East itself as a factor contributing to radicalisation in the West. They draw a direct link between radicalisation

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[27] Murshed, 'Identity and Islamic Radicalisation', 14.

[28] Ibidem 15.

[29] Cincu, 'The Roots of Violent Radicalisation', 22.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Speckhard, 'The Militant Jihad in Europe', 146.

'here' and radicalisation 'there' as a result of dysfunctional political systems.[32] All in all, an increase in political anti-Muslim vituperations in combination with violent foreign interventions and occupations in the Middle East can lead to dissatisfaction towards the Western political system, which in turn creates the opportunity for a radical alternative to fill the vacuum Western Muslims find themselves in.

Religious arguments

Lastly, there are also scholars who argue that rather than mostly influenced by external factors like economics and politics, the main cause of radicalisation lies within Islam as a religion. These scholars seek to explain the process of radicalisation as initiated through theological and religious motivations, for example specific interpretations and explanations of certain Qur'anic verses. In her article 'An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study', Michele Groppi argues that there is "no statistically significant support […] for theories proposing discrimination, economic disparity, outrage at Western foreign policy, oppression of Muslims […] as predictors".[33] Instead, the wished for endorsement of an Islamic ideology should be seen as the main factor in the process of radicalisation. The main goal of this ideology, or so she proposes, is "the establishment of an Islamic political order in the sense of a state whose governmental principles, institutions and legal system derive directly from the *Shari'a*".[34] This study also shows that of all variables analysed, radicalisation as a reaction to defence of Islam proved to be the most significant predictor. This can again be linked to the idea of *jihad* in order to protect oppressed Muslims as we have discussed previously.[35]

Larsen also argues that we need to take the role of religion in the process of radicalisation more seriously. He argues that through a specific and unusual interpretation of Islam, violence and the establishment of a caliphate are legitimised.[36] In this, religious motivations should be seen as the main argument for Western Muslims to radicalise. As a reaction to being marginalised, Western Muslims often cling to Islam, herein making it an important identity marker. An Islamic organisation, albeit radical, that fits their needs and with which they can identify themselves might

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[32] Hafez, 'The Radicalisation Puzzle', 959.

[33] M. Groppi, 'An Empirical Analysis of Causes of Islamist Radicalisation: Italian Case Study', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:1 (2017) 68-76, 68.

[34] Ibidem 69.

[35] Ibidem 73.

[36] J. F. Larsen, 'The role of religion in Islamist radicalisation processes', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13:3 (2020) 396-417, 397.

therefore make these Muslims feel welcome and understood. In such groups, we often see that specific interpretations of the Qur'an and Islam might result in radical thoughts on Western society or Islamist movements in the Middle East.[37] Moreover, the importance of the role of religion is anchored in emotions as "it is this feeling of being Muslim that radical Islamists act from".[38]

When discussing the religious argument, the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* cannot be overlooked. A more detailed and in-depth discussion of both notions can be found in Chapter I. For now, we must know that the ideology of jihadism is defined as a radical ideology that stresses the use of violence as a legitimate method of political and social change. This ideology is based on selective Salafi interpretations of Islamic sources.[39] The way this specific interpretation of the Islamic sources is manifested can well be linked to the process of radicalisation discussed previously. In other words, some scholars argue that Islam itself leaves room for specific interpretations of the sources that could lead to radicalisation and justification of joining groups like ISIS. Whether this is actually true will form the central question to the thesis.

Naturally, there are several other possible explanations or causes of radicalisation. As mentioned before, these explanations are likely as numerous as the cases of individual Muslims radicalising and joining ISIS. However, if we look at the bottom-line of what all Muslims joining ISIS have in common it is the fact that they are Muslim. This creates a basis for arguing that, despite the fact that there are undoubtedly several other motivations at play that differ per individual case, the common denominator of religion must play a role somehow. Having engaged the debate on these different explanations, this thesis aims to analyse the religious motivation from within through the usage of Qur'anic verses on *hijrah* and *jihad* as well as the way in which ISIS itself uses these notions in their propaganda and recruitment process. In this, the specific focus will be on *muhajirat* (مـهاجـرات, female ISIS recruits).

Research Question

In light of this context, this research aims to answer the following research question: To what extent did the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* play a role in the religious motivation of Western *muhajirat* joining ISIS between 2014 - 2019, and how? Given the fact that ISIS was at its highpoint

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[37] Ibidem 408.

[38] Ibidem 412.

[39] Omar Ashour, *A World Without Jihad? The Causes of De-Radicalisation of Armed Islamist Movements*, Montreal: McGill University Press, 2008, 17.

between 2014 - 2019, this time-span was chosen for this research. Even though a lot has been written about Western ISIS fighters and a possible link to Islamic theology, women were always less referenced in these analyses, especially when it comes to theological explanations related to the Qur'an. This research aims to fill that gap.

In order to draw a coherent and nuanced conclusion on this topic, it is vital to first fully understand the link between Islamic radicalisation and the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad*. Chapter I will therefore engage the literature on Islamic radicalisation in general. In this chapter, an introduction to *hijrah* and *jihad* will be provided as well. In addition, this chapter will draft a first link between these two Islamic notions and the process of radicalisation. Chapter II will contain an introduction to the case-study of ISIS. A concise context of the emergence of the organisation will be drafted in order to come towards a better understanding of what ISIS is and what ISIS wants. This understanding will be based on the organisation's history and background. Chapter III will thereafter look at ISIS' ideology based on both secondary literature as well as ISIS' magazine *Dabiq* as a primary source. In addition, this chapter will create a profile and typology of Western Muslim women who joined ISIS.

The fourth and final chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the link between radicalisation of Western Muslims and the religious notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* as seen from two perspectives. First of all, this chapter will look at how ISIS attempted to attract Western Muslim women through an emphasis on *hijrah* and *jihad* in their propaganda. Secondly, the response of the *muhajirat* will be analysed based on profiles and tweets. By analysing primary sources from both narratives in light of the theoretical frameworks of radicalisation and an understanding of *hijrah* and *jihad* as found in the Qur'an, this research will contribute to a better understanding of religious motivations that may have driven Western Muslim women into the arms of ISIS.

Chapter I: Setting the Stage

1.1 Islamic Radicalisation in a Nutshell

Nowadays, it seems as if the current debate on radicalisation blatantly equals the notion of radicalisation with Islam and terrorism. The three phenomena have seemingly become an intertwined triangle that can no longer be seen as separate from each other. However, the notion of radicalisation in itself does not necessarily imply a religious nature or even more specific an Islamic nature. The adoption of extreme ideas as part of an individual's radicalisation process may range from political to social or indeed religious ideologies. So when we are talking about religious radicalisation, what do we mean? And how does this manifest itself when it comes to Islamic radicalisation in specific?

When looking at the etymology of the word 'radicalisation', we notice that the Latin origin 'radix' stands for the root or fundamental. In other words: a radical person wishes to go back to the fundaments or the origin of the ideology that person believes in. In line with this is the idea that radicals are often prepared to use violence or violent measures in order to achieve their goal. A rejection of contemporary ideas and the current status quo is often part of this process as well. When it comes to Islamic radicalisation in specific, we see that there is a strong interplay between religion on the one hand and a political ideology on the other hand. This means that, in discussing Islamic radicalisation, the two motivations of political and religious causes as discussed in the introduction can not be seen separate from each other. As we will see in chapter II and chapter III, many Muslims who join a radical Islamic organisation are in one way or another dissatisfied with the political (and to some extent economic) situation they live in. In their piety, these Muslims attempt to go back to an era in which they were not a marginalised minority in society. The age of the Prophet and his Companions in Medina is taken as the leading example in this. In that sense, one could argue that the core value of Islamic radicalism lies in the wish to revive the society of the Prophet in Medina and all the religious traditions He valued.

Both historical and political context have played a vital role in the so-called 'Islamic resurgence' or the emergence of Islamic radicalism starting in the 1900's. Arabic linguist and research associate at the University of Oklahoma Devin E. Springer poses the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the colonial rule by the British and the French, and the establishment of Israel in 1948 as important catalysts in the rise of what we now see as Islamic radicalism.[40] All these historical events

[40] Devin. R. Springer, *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington DC 2009) 19.

are examples of situations in which the tables turned against Muslim communities, which left them an oppressed minority in the MENA-region. In addition to this, the 20th century showed a spur in Muslim migration to the West, where they again found themselves being the minority group.

Linking this to the core idea of Islamic radicalism that wishes to go back to the situation as it was in the era of the Prophet, we see that some radicalised Muslims start to use their religion as a political discourse in order to achieve what they desire: the restoration of the caliphate. The idea of the caliphate is one of the central aspects of Islamic fundamentalism, which Springer defines as "a unified system of temporal authority exercised by a successor to the Prophet Muhammad over the community of believers".[41] This definition perfectly explains the core of the Islamic radical movement. On the one hand, they want to revive the era of the Prophet by living under the authority of one of his successors. On the other hand, it also shows that they wish to live in a community in which they are the majority group rather than a marginalised minority in a society that is culturally and religiously alien to them. This division between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* (دار الحـــرب, House of War) will be discussed more extensively in later chapters.

In answering the question of how to realise the restoration of the caliphate the case of ISIS is especially relevant. As we will see in chapter II, ISIS managed to proclaim an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq in 2014. By doing so, they not only restored the caliphate in the name of the Prophet, but they also provided a utopian facade where Muslims could ostensibly live as a majority group under *Shari'a* law as it should be in their view once again. How this would play out in reality is subject to later chapters. However, worth mentioning at this point is the tools ISIS utilised as their foundation for restoring the caliphate. Terrorism is now often linked to this story too, which at the same time forms a nexus between global *jihad* and Islamic radicalism. It is precisely this notion of *jihad* that is of specific interest to understanding Islamic radicalism, ISIS and especially the religious appeal of the organisation to Western Muslim women.

1.2 Jihad and Hijrah as Found in the Sources

As we will see in the analysis of religious motivations of Western Muslim women, there are two important notions that can be found in both ISIS' ideological propaganda as well as accounts of Western Muslim women themselves. These notions are *jihad* and *hijrah*. What do these notions mean? What are their religious implications? In what way are these notions mentioned in the Qur'an? Both phenomena are complicated and interesting enough to deserve an entire research

[41] Ibidem 2.

solely devoted to them as such. However, a basic understanding of what *jihad* and *hijrah* mean for both Islamic religiosity as well as radical organisations like ISIS is needed for this research.

To start with, the notion of *jihad* has always been a controversial one. It is likely one of the most misconceived notions linked to Islam in contemporary global politics. Especially the Western media often frame *jihad* as a 'holy war' against non-Muslims or unbelievers in which violence and armed conversion are central to its doctrine. Even though this interpretation might be true for some parties and might even be applied in some cases, it is certainly not the only interpretation and not the conventional classical Islamic interpretation either. When trying to understand how the classical sources discuss *jihad*, we must go back to the Qur'an.[42]

The notion of *jihad* is mentioned 41 times in the Qur'an and 199 times in the Hadith, but the classical doctrine of the notion was laid down in the *fiqh* (فـــقه, Islamic jurisprudence or works on Islamic law).[43] The literal translation of the Arabic word *jihad* is 'striving with a praiseworthy aim'. Besides striving for the protection of D*ar al-Islam*, this striving also embodies internal struggles that every Muslim encounters on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, *jihad* is seen as a so-called *fard al-kifayah* (فـرض الـكفايـة, collective duty), which means that "it is an obligation for the community as a whole and that this obligation is fulfilled when a sufficient number of persons perform it".[44] In case of an enemy attacking Muslim territory, *jihad* might also become an individual obligation, but this is relatively rare.[45] It is for this reason that some *Sunni* scholars see *jihad* as the sixth pillar of Islam, which can be called for by the *imam* (إمام, religious leader).[46]

In classical Islamic law the term might also refer to "warfare with the aim of expansion and defence of Islamic territory", mostly directed against unbelievers.[47]. Because of this, Western media often translate *jihad* as 'holy war', even though this only covers part of what the notion entails. *Jihad* is mentioned more often in Medinan verses, which is the natural outcome of the context in which these verses were revealed, namely after the *hijrah* (Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 due to prosecution in his former city). In addition, it is noteworthy that the most standard collection of Hadith by Bukhari (810 - 870) refers to *jihad* as warfare all 199 times that it

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[42] D. Cook, 'Islamism and Jihadism: The Transformation of Classical Notions of *Jihad* into an Ideology of Terrorism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10:2 (2009) 177-187, 177.

[43] R. Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History* (Berlin 1980) 9.

[44] Ibidem 12.

[45] Ibidem 15.

[46] Ibidem.

[47] Ibidem 2016.

is mentioned.

However, one must remember that this physical *jihad* or warfare is only a small part of the bigger notion of *jihad* itself. According to Nural Hakim in his 'The Concept of Jihad in Islam', "there is no religious practice performed without the component of jihad".[48] This shows the centrality of the notion in the Islamic faith. Some even see *jihad* as compulsory and the only way to keep the fundamentals of religion intact. When linking this to ISIS' doctrine of a radical and fundamentalist Islamic state, it thus makes sense that *jihad* was adopted as the means to achieve this. In striving to live as devoutly as possible in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet under *Shari'a* law in a territory ruled by Muslims, actual warfare against the unbelievers might be necessary to realise this aspiration. Through this, we see that ISIS actually engages with both meanings of *jihad*: the inner religious duty as well as the armed 'holy war'.

Nonetheless, it is the armed struggle that manifests itself most prominently. An important division that should be made here is that of defensive versus offensive *jihad*. Whereas defensive *jihad* only allows armed battles in situations where the '*umma* is threatened by enemies, offensive *jihad* calls for Muslims to take up arms themselves in order to protect and even expand *Dar al-Islam*. It is especially the latter form that is relevant in the context of ISIS. When linking this to how *jihad* is actually described in the Qur'an, one *surah* (سورة, Qur'anic chapter) stands out in explaining how Islamic radicals justify their version of *jihad* theologically. Q 2:190 (سورة البقرة, Surah al-Baqarah) states the following: "And fight in the cause of Allah those who fight and persecute you, but commit no aggression. Surely, Allah does not love the aggressors".[49] This is actually the first verse of the Qur'an that explicitly talks about war. A follow-up on this *aya* (آية , Qur'anic verse) can be found in the same *surah*, as Q 2:218 says that "Verily, as to those who believe and those who emigrated and struggled hard in the cause of Allah, it is they who do (rightly) hope for Allah's mercy. And Allah is Great Protector, Ever Merciful".[50] This *aya* clearly focusses more on the internal striving as *jihad* is here translated as 'struggle'. In addition, this *aya* also shows the religious importance of migration or *hijrah*, which will be discussed shortly. Lastly, Q 2:244 reads as follows: "And fight in the cause of Allah, and know that Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing".[51] Again, we see a very explicit mentioning in the Qur'an itself that urges Muslims to fight against the unbelievers in the cause of Allah. As mentioned before, the Qur'an mentions *jihad*

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[48] N. Hakim, 'The Concept of Jihad in Islam', *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21:9 (2016) 35-42, 36.

[49] A. Nooruddin (ed.), *The Holy Qur'an* (Rheinfelden 2010) 30 (Q 2:190).

[50] Ibidem 35 (Q 2:218).

[51] Ibidem 41 (Q 2:244).

41 times and in different ways. However, in the context of a radical organisation like ISIS, it is most interesting to look at those verses that explicitly refer to *jihad* in relation to armed warfare and active fighting against the unbelievers. It is especially this aspect of *jihad* that ISIS adopted in its ideology of re-establishing the caliphate.

The second relevant religious notion that deserves an explanation is that of *hijrah*. In essence, *hijrah* refers to the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) in 622. The whole rationale behind this was the fact that the Prophet and his followers were persecuted for their religious beliefs in Mecca. The date of this event also marks the starting point of the Muslim calendar, which shows its extreme importance.[52] The original *muhajirun* (المهاجرون, those who emigrated with Muhammad to Medina) are specifically praised in Q 9:20 (سورة التوبة, Surah al-Taubah) which reads that "Those who believe and emigrate (for the sake of God) and strive hard for the cause of Allah with their possessions and their persons, have the highest rank with Allah and it is these who are the triumphant".[53] Not only does this *aya* show how highly regarded the endeavour of *hijrah* is religiously, it also shows its direct link to *jihad* since both those who migrate for the sake of God and those who strive for His cause await the same fate in the Hereafter. The link between performing *hijrah* and the Hereafter is mentioned again in Q 16:41 (سورة النَّحْل, Surah al-Nahl): "We will certainly provide a goodly abode in this world for those who emigrated (from their homes) in the cause of Allah after they were dealt with unjustly. And truly the reward (that they shall have) in the Hereafter is greater still […]".[54]

Translating the classical interpretation of *hijrah* as found in the Qur'an to the contemporary situation of (Western) Muslims joining ISIS, we see that the notion plays an important role. This importance is twofold. First of all, migration from *Dar al-Harb* to *Dar al-Islam*, as Western *muhajirun* and *muhajirat* do, has been obligatory since the time of the Prophet until the *Yawm al-Qiyamah* (يوم القيامة, Day of Judgement). Secondly, oppression from disbelievers as is supposedly happening in the West forms a hindrance to the pure practice of Islam. This leads to the hypothesis that combining these two ideas with the Qur'anic verses that promise praise from Allah upon performing *hijrah* helps in explaining the theological appeal of joining an organisation like ISIS, especially for Muslims living in the West.

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[52] 'Hijrah', *Britannica Academic*, https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/levels/collegiate/article/Hijrah/39809, accessed April 2021.

[53] Nooruddin (ed.), *The Holy Qur'an* 198 (Q 9:20).

[54] Ibidem 288 (Q 16:41).

All in all, different Qur'anic verses devoted to the notions of *jihad* and *hijrah* have shown the important link between the two. Not only are they often mentioned together, they are also complementary to one another. Whereas the endeavour of *hijrah* urges Muslims living in *Dar al-Harb* to migrate to *Dar al-Islam* in the name of Allah and to follow the example of the Prophet, *jihad* refers to an (inner) strive to fight against the unbelievers. Based on Qur'anic verses dealing with *jihad* in the context of war, radical organisations like ISIS are able to justify their acts theologically. Since both *hijrah* and *jihad* are attributed great religious importance in the Qur'an, and hereby looking at what they mean and entail, we should see them as vital notions in understanding the religious motivations of Western *muhajirat*.

1.3 Does Radicalisation Imply Jihad?

What becomes apparent when analysing the notion of Islamic radicalisation is that it is consistently equated with terrorism. However, the gap between a radicalised person and the actual willingness to commit terrorist attacks or the willingness to die for the radical cause is still a big one. There is therefore a big nuance that should be made here. Not every religious person radicalises, and not every radicalised person is prone to violence or *jihad* in the sense of an armed struggle. In understanding this we should again look at the 'sliding scale' of radicalisation by D. R. Mandel as discussed in the introduction. Developing radical thoughts is one of the first steps in this process, whereas the actual shift towards violence and *jihad* is only the final destination of the journey that is surely not reached by everyone. This idea is also supported by the founder and executive director of Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism Noor Dahri, who states that "it is interesting to note that radicalisation does not always lead to violence in the initial stages".[55] In fact, most of the radicalised people might actually have some very fundamental and Islamist thoughts, but never put any of these thoughts into practice.

However, for the sake of this research, it is more interesting to look at those people who do turn their radical thoughts into violent acts. How is it possible that of a group of people with the same thoughts, some turn to violence and others do not? And more specific in the case of Western Muslims and ISIS, how come that some people keep their beliefs to themselves and others leave everything behind to join the *jihad* in Syria? Comparable to radicalisation in general, there are several factors that can contribute to this difference. Such factors may range from external factors, like political or socio-economic circumstances people find themselves in, to social factors including

[55] N. Dahri, *Global Jihad, Islamic Radicalisation and Counter Strategy* (Delhi 2019) no page number available.

peer pressure and processes of identification as well as individual factors like worldview or religious interpretations.[56] In addition, Dahri states that "radicalisation tends to turn violent when an individual's or group's sacred values have been violated or threatened".[57] In other words, a direct threat to one's community might turn radical thoughts into radical actions. When applying this theory to the situation in Western Europe and linking this to the case of ISIS, we see that this 'threat' might range from a marginalised position in society to actual laws prohibiting Islamic dress like the 2021 *hijab*-ban in France. Examples like these could well be perceived as direct threats to or direct violations of sacred values of the Western Muslim community. Based on the ideas of Dahri, this could therefore be a catalyst in the process of radicalisation tipping the scale in favour of the next step of actual violence.

Still, however, this does not explain why some Muslims from the same society did join ISIS' *jihad* while others did not. In trying to understand this we should go back to the internal factor of religious interpretations as described by Dutch professor of terrorism and counterterrorism Edwin Bakker and Islamologist Peter Grol in their book *Nederlandse jihadisten: van naïve idealisten tot geharde terroristen*.[58] Is it possible that certain interpretations of Islam could lead to an attraction to *jihad* and religiously inspired violence? Could it also be that a different reading of the same text would lead to a different outcome? As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the notion of *jihad* can be interpreted as a violent and armed struggle based on the Qur'an. Even though the notion is mentioned multiple times in different contexts, there are some verses that leave room for a rather violent interpretation that awards Muslims for their active battle against unbelievers. Based on these verses, Islamic fundamentalists whose goal it is to live in complete accordance with the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, would be able to justify an armed *jihad* theologically based on a certain interpretation of particular *surahs* of the Scripture. Whereas living up to these interpretations might be challenging in a Western context, organisations like ISIS, who not only openly practice the act of *jihad* but also do this within *Dar al-Islam*, can serve as a viable alternative where Muslims can express their fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an through action.

Now that we have been briefly introduced to the notions of Islamic radicalisation and the classical Islamic understanding of the notions of *jihad* and *hijrah*, it is time to apply this theory to the case-study of ISIS itself. What actually is ISIS' approach towards *jihad*? In what context did

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[56] E. Bakker and Peter Grol, *Nederlandse jihadisten: van naïeve idealisten tot geharde terroristen* (Amsterdam 2017) 59.

[57] Dahri, *Global Jihad*, no page number available.

[58] E. Bakker and Peter Grol, *Nederlandse jihadisten*.

ISIS emerge? And how did the organisation manage to gain so much support?

Chapter II: Understanding the Emergence of ISIS

2.1 A New Player in the Radical Arena

In little less than a decade, ISIS has become a phenomenon everyone has heard of and everyone has an association with. In the West, it often connotes fear and feelings of disapproval mixed with misunderstanding and a lot of questions. However, for some the utopian idea of an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq creates an image of salvation and ultimate harmony with God and *Shari'a* law. Who these people are and what it is they believe in will be discussed in the next chapter. For now, it is vital to understand how ISIS managed to come into existence. How did ISIS emerge and what is the historical and political context we should place this emergence in? Which factors contributed to forming the radical movement?

From an outsider's perspective, it is very easy to dismiss ISIS and its members as a savage and monstrous organisation. Its religious fanaticism is often labeled un-Islamic and its *Salafi-jihadist* members are solely seen as killers. However, such an approach overlooks the circumstances that to a significant number of Sunni Muslims the movement's romantic idea of building an Islamic state was appealing precisely because of its Islamic character. Even though many might not have supported the violence that was utilised to achieve this goal, the ideology behind *Da'esh* and the vision of an Islamic state in itself functioned as a utopia for many Sunni Muslims who became affiliated with the movement.[59]

Naturally, a movement like ISIS never emerges out of a void. Geo-political, economic and theological circumstances have all played a crucial role in shaping ISIS into the movement that it ended up becoming. Since discussing all the factors relevant to the emergence of ISIS is too complex and therefore goes beyond the scope of this thesis, three important factors will be analysed here: the split from al-Qaeda, the Arab Spring uprisings of the early 2010's, and the Syrian civil war. How have these separate issues created fertile soil for ISIS to flourish? In other words, how did *Da'esh* come about?

2.2 Islamic Radicalism Prior to ISIS: The Importance of al-Qaeda

Since the shift in the world order caused by 9/11, it seems as if Islamic radicalism has always been a relevant issue high on the political agenda. The way in which Islamic radicalism is now framed in both the media as well as politics might even make people forget that this is a relatively new

[59] F. A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton 2017) xv.

phenomenon that has only gained momentum since the late 20th century. In the 'short' period of Islamic radicalism, ISIS has already secured itself from a place in the history books. According to Dr. Anne Speckhard, Director of the International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), "ISIS is one of the largest and the most lethal terrorist groups to date".[60] Not only did ISIS mange to function with a proto-state in the shape of a caliphate for over four years, it also managed to attract over 30.000 foreign fighters from all over the world. At its zenith, ISIS managed to conquer vast amounts of land in both Iraq and Syria, leading up to even 60% of the latter's territory.[61] Additionally, ISIS surely did not solely operate in the MENA-region. With attacks in cities ranging from Brussels to Nice, Paris and Jakarta, it is fair to say that ISIS expanded its tentacles across the entire globe.

However, as mentioned before, we must not forget that ISIS did not emerge out of a void. On the contrary, the early days of the movement show very tight links to another notorious Islamist organisation, namely al-Qaeda. Collectively labelled as the terrorist master-mind behind the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City, al-Qaeda was one of the first radical Islamic movements to openly ambush the West. With president George W. Bush (1946 -) declaring his famous 'war on terror', al-Qaeda became the talk of the town in global politics. In the years that followed, the organisation changed and developed. One of the developments that is relevant for the later emergence of ISIS, is the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after the US-led invasion of 2003. According to Gerges in his book *ISIS: A History*, ISIS should be seen as an extension of this movement.[62] Initially, al-Qaeda in Iraq was lead by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966 - 2006, born Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh). His legacy would end up playing a crucial role in the foundation of ISIS little over a decade later. In addition, ISIS' most notorious leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971 - 2019, born Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim 'Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai) was once a member of AQI as well.[63] One of the ways in which a later link between al-Qaeda and ISIS can be seen in the context of ideology is discussed by associate professor in international relations and specialist in Middle Eastern political Islam Christina Hellmich. In her article 'Creating the Ideology of Al Qaeda: From Hypocrites to Salafi-Jihadists she states that "Al Qaeda is the vanguard of the global Salafi jihad, a world-wide religious revivalist movement with the goal of re-establishing past

[60] A. Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, 'ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time - Analysis of 200 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners', *Journal of Strategic Security* 13:1 (2020) 82-127, 82.

[61] Ibidem.

[62] Gerges, *ISIS*, 8.

[63] Ibidem 21.

Muslim glory in a great Islamist state".[64] In addition, she links al-Qaeda to *Salafi* jihadism and explains al-Qaeda's ideology as wanting to restore authentic Islam whilst advocating a strategy of violent *jihad*.[65] In a nutshell, al-Qaeda's ideology originated from a puritanic variant of Islam known as Wahhabism. This notion will be discussed again in chapter three, where the link between al-Qaeda's ideology and ISIS' ideology will become more clear as well. What is important to mention here is that initially al-Qaeda emerged in the context of the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan in the 1980's. Form then on, al-Qaeda developed into a global organisation targeting the West and the United States in specific. All the while, however, the emphasis on *jihad* remained intact and central. The focus on the notion of *jihad* also emergences when delving into the ideology of ISIS, which helps in understanding the link between the two organisations. One of the big differences between the two organisations, however, concerns their threat profiles. While al-Qaeda's primary enemy remains the United States, ISIS focusses more an 'apostate' regimes in the Arab world itself. This results in a dichotomy between the 'near enemy' (ISIS) and the 'far enemy' (al-Qaeda) as important factors in both organisation's ideologies.[66] Nonetheless, there are also many similarities between the ideology of al-Qaeda and ISIS. As mentioned before, the latter should be seen as an extension of the former.

So how then can we link the emergence of ISIS to the existing movement of al-Qaeda? In March 2015, US president Barack Obama (1961 -) traced the origins of ISIS back to the US invasion of Iraq, which was in part the outcome of the al-Qaeda attack of 2001.[67] In this context, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, being the leader of AQI during the US invasion, became the new face of the global jihadist movement. Subsequently, he quickly "became a key figure in the development of a new wave of jihadists like ISIS" too.[68] Already in the 1990's, al-Zarqawi found himself in Islamist circles including the Afghan *mujahideen* (مـــجاهـــديـــن , those who engage in *jihad*) and Jordanian-Palestinian *Salafi*-jihadist groups. Important to bear in mind is that al-Zarqawi himself can not be directly linked to ISIS, but, as Gerges mentioned, rather he "was instrumental in building a base for al-Qaeda in Iraq and laying the foundation for the subsequent emergence of ISIS" upon his death in

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[64] C. Hellmich, 'Creating the Ideology of Al Qaeda: From Hypocrites to Salafi-Jihadists', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008) 111-124, 112.

[65] Ibidem 115.

[66] D. L. Byman, 'Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets', *Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the House Committee on Homeland Security*, 29 April 2015. Accessed June 2021 (https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/).

[67] Gerges, *ISIS*, 73.

[68] Ibidem 74.

2006.[69]

After al-Zarqawi's death, the developments surrounding al-Qaeda in Iraq continued, resulting in internal conflict and new branches of the organisation. Four months after al-Zarqawi's death, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was founded. Their main aim was to turn the western areas of Iraq into a Sunni caliphate. Through this, the ISI was meant to govern both territory and people.[70] After the initial leader Abu 'Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over his position. For the sake of this research, we must now jump forward in time. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi released a statement in which he announced the merge of Jahbat al-Nusra, a Syrian rebel group that emerged in the context of the civil war, and ISI. The new organisation was to be called the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS).[71] Initially, ISIS' territorial progress was quite modest. It was not until later in 2014 that they began to obtain huge territorial gains in Syria as well as in Iraq.[72] With the fall of Mosul, ISIS declared itself a caliphate on 29 June 2014.

2.3 Turmoil in the Middle East

ISIS' initial lineage to al-Qaeda in Iraq is certainly not the only important factor at play when it comes to the emergence of the organisation. The political, economic and societal climate of the MENA-region at the time of its emergence surely play an equally if not more important role. According to Gerges, "ISIS is a symptom of broken politics in the Middle East".[73] The big event we should look at for this factor is the Arab Spring that started in Tunisia in 2011, after which it slowly spread throughout the entire region. Even though the effects of these uprisings were different for every country involved, and an analysis of the individual cases goes beyond the scope of this research, the general tendency the demonstrations and uprisings brought about is important for the emergence of ISIS nonetheless.

The significance of the Arab Spring is also highlighted by Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle. In their book *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East*, the idea that "the emergence of ISIS comes at a time when the Middle East has been engulfed in political turmoil, perhaps best characterised by the Arab Spring protests that erupted in Tunisia in

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[69] Ibidem 79.

[70] B. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven 2016) 89.

[71] Gerges, *ISIS*, 38.

[72] Fishman, *The Master Plan*, 183.

[73] Gerges, *ISIS*, 7.

late 2010 […]" forms one of the central arguments in explaining the origins of the organisation.[74] But how does political turmoil lead to the emergence of a terrorist organisation? For a terrorist organisation to flourish, it requires support from within society. This, in turn, requires a specific set of circumstances under which this support can grow. As we have seen previously in the academic debate on causes of radicalisation, there are several factors that can contribute to this. Whereas the causes discussed in the introduction mostly focus on radicalisation in the West, some of these factors can be applied and linked to the situation in Syria and the bigger MENA-region as well.

The argument of political turmoil as a factor contributing to the rise of ISIS shows contingency to the political and socio-economical causes of radicalisation. With the spread of the Arab Spring, several countries in the Middle East fell into political chaos as a result of toppled regimes and severe public demonstrations. Moreover, the Arab Spring in itself was a result of dissatisfaction among society mostly caused by both the political as well as the economic situation in the region. People were struggling for their basic needs, like a stable income, food, shelter and political freedom. One of the spearheads of the Arab Spring uprisings was therefore to end dictatorship and bring self-government to people across the Middle East. However, in hindsight, the aftermath of the demonstrations did not play out in this way at all. In his book *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy*, Harvard professor Noah Feldman argues that the Arab Spring by no means accomplished the outcome initially envisioned. In a sense, for some countries, like Syria, the situation only deteriorated as a result of it. He even argues that "the phenomenon of the Islamic State belongs to the tragedy of the Arab Spring".[75] Amidst the ever-increasing chaos caused by all the turmoil in the region, people struggled to maintain faith in their government and their country. It is exactly in situations like these that organisations like ISIS manage to draw support from people struggling on a daily-basis by offering a novel alternative.[76] The fact that ISIS actually managed to become as successful as it did can also be explained through the notion that ISIS possessed a well-developed vision of the society they intended to create. This was something that most other Arab Spring protesters gravely lacked.[77]

The idea that not only the emergence of ISIS, but its success too can be explained through the lens of the Arab Spring is extensively discussed by Gerges. He states that not only "the cause of

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[74] S. Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (London 2017) 4.

[75] N. Feldman, *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy* (Princeton 2020) 103.

[76] Mabon, *The Origins of ISIS*, 4.

[77] Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, 122.

the group's development and rise is located in the severe social and political conditions in Arab societies as well as in regional and global rivalries", but in addition "ISIS could not have consolidated the gains it made with the Syrian war without the derailment of the Arab Spring uprisings and the consequent spreading fires in neighbouring Arab countries".[78] In line with this, it is therefore also understandable that ISIS did not emerge immediately in 2011. Whereas the Arab Spring first brought hope to many people as it took some time to spread throughout the region, it took a while for the disappointing results of the endeavour to play out on the ground. It was amidst these cases of desperation that ISIS seized its moment and took the stage by presenting a religious alternative to the mess the region found itself in.

ISIS could thus not have flourished without the breakdown of state institutions in the Arab world.[79] Chaos and the lack of prospects drove a significant number of people into the arms of the organisation. One last factor that can certainly not be overlooked here, and arguably formed the unmissable backbone in this whole story, is the power vacuum created by the Syrian civil war.

2.4 The Political Vacuum of the Syrian Civil War

As we have seen with the example of the Arab Spring, turmoil and chaos create fertile ground for radical organisations like ISIS to flourish. A vital factor of chaos that certainly contributed to this is the civil war in Syria. Whereas explaining the entire timeline and rationale behind this conflict goes beyond the scope of this research, it is nonetheless important to touch upon it in the context of ISIS. In his extensive research on the Syrian civil war titled *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, Dutch scholar and former ambassador to Egypt and Iraq Nikolaos van Dam introduces ISIS as a powerful group and player in the context of the conflict. He claims that, due to the nature of the organisation, ISIS "attracted many foreign jihadists" since it was "supposed to be for all Muslims without geographic limitation".[80] He continues to state that, even though ISIS originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq, "the Syrian war made it easier for IS […] to penetrate the country".[81] Since there was so much going on within Syria itself, it became increasingly difficult to divide the territories into clear military frontlines. It was under these circumstances that ISIS managed to establish an increasing power, eventually controlling various aspects of daily life, including the religious police and the education at schools in areas under ISIS control.

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[78] Gerges, *ISIS*, 7; 8.

[79] Ibidem 202.

[80] N. van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London 2017) 66.

[81] Ibidem 67.

The argument of the Syrian civil war is also supported by Gerges, who states that "the breakdown of state institutions in Syria and the country's descent into all-out war after 2011" were certainly key factors in the resurgence of ISIS.[82] Whereas the demonstrations and revolts in Syria were initially not all that different from those happening in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya at that time, the aftermath of these events would prove to be completely unalike. With the eruption of the civil war, Islamist groups in especially the rural areas took advantage of the tumult. Based on the revolts and demonstrations, it is fair to argue that the system was no longer functioning properly for the majority of the Syrian population. In the political vacuum that emerged once different groups started to fight each other in a sectarian war, ISIS appeared as not only an alternative to the failing political system, but also as an organisation that would protect the Sunni identity of the marginalised lower and middle classes. Gerges highlights this once again by stating that "the breakdown of state institutions in Syria and the country's descent into a full-blown war is a significant factor in the revitalisation of ISIS".[83]

With the eruption of the civil war, Syria's sovereignty as a nation as well as the authority of its political system were severely challenged. Situations like these create opportunities for seemingly utopian and promising alternatives to gain momentum before their true intentions are revealed. As Mabon argues in his book *The Origins of ISIS: The collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East*, the uncertainty that reigned upon the collapse of Syria into a civil war as the result of mismanagement of both internal politics as well as socio-economic conditions created the perfect vacuum for opportunists like ISIS to fill.[84]

All in all, when it comes to the emergence of ISIS there are three main factors that should be taken into consideration. Important to remember here is that these factors are intertwined and interdependent, meaning that the combination of them resulted in the emergence of ISIS. Yes, the dissatisfaction towards the al-Assad regime in Syria that eventually led to revolts and demonstrations paved the way for the eruption of the Syrian civil war which in turn created a vacuum that ISIS could fill. And yes, turmoil throughout the entire region as a result of the Arab Spring demonstrations led to deteriorating socio-economic circumstances to which ISIS offered a viable alternative. However, since ISIS can originally be traced back to al-Qaeda in Iraq (and not Syria), it probably would have managed to find other ways to rise to power if the al-Assad regime

[82] Gerges, *ISIS*, 15.

[83] Gerges, *ISIS*, 8.

[84] Mabon, *The Origins of ISIS*, 27.

and the Syrian status quo had remained as they were.[85] All this is to say that, as there is not one single reason or motivation for people to join organisations like ISIS, there is not one single starting point or event that causes such organisations to emerge. Important is the contingency between several factors, that together lead to the inevitable rise and appeal of ISIS worldwide.

[85] van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 67.

Chapter III: A Typology of ISIS Sympathisers

3.1 Ideology Explained

Now that we have established three vital factors in the emergence of ISIS, namely its lineage to al-Qaeda in Iraq, the turmoil created by the uprisings of the Arab Spring, and the political vacuum as a result of the Syrian civil war, the next step in understanding religious motivations of Western Muslims for joining ISIS is establishing a framework of ideology and creating a typology of ISIS sympathisers. What is it that ISIS wants and preaches? How do they want to achieve this? What do they base their ideas on? In other words, what is the ideology behind *Da'esh*?

Ever since ISIS became a global hot topic, the issue of whether ISIS is either extremely Islamist or not Islamic at all has been a recurrent debate. While that is a discussion of a different nature, it is important not to completely overlook it when talking about ISIS' ideology, which in turn is important in understanding why Western Muslims join the organisation and what their motivations are behind all of this. When it comes to understanding the Islamic nature of ISIS, it is important to first look at what it actually is they want and preach. In addition to the vast body of secondary literature that has been written on this topic, much of ISIS' intentions can also be extracted from primary sources from the organisation itself. One of the most useful primary sources in this context is the magazine called *Dabiq* (دابـــق, after the Syrian city). *Dabiq* was published in Arabic, English, French and German.[86] Brandon Colas describes the magazine as a "slick" and "glossy" magazine that was not only an "aesthetic masterpiece", but also served its purpose of recruiting new members globally.[87] The role of *Dabiq* in relation to recruitment and (female) sympathisers will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter, but here we will first look at the background of the magazine. The first issue of *Dabiq* was published in July 2014, shortly after ISIS had proclaimed a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and it offered the instructive title of 'The Return of Khilāfah'. With *khilafah* being the Arabic word for caliphate, this title says everything about ISIS' initial ideological intentions, namely the establishment of an Islamic caliphate based on *Shari'a* law in Syria and Iraq.

The first article of the issue is devoted to the proclamation of the Islamic State, which is exactly the crux of what ISIS desires and preaches. The magazine claims that, with the

[86] For this research, use was made of the English editions.

[87] B. Colas, 'What Does *Dabiq* Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organisational Fractures within *Dabiq* Magazine', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40:3 (2017) 173-190, 174.

proclamation of the caliphate, "a new era has arrived of might and dignity for the Muslims".[88] In addition, this article reveals some other interesting aspects of ISIS' ideology as well. The aim of the endeavour is to establish a "new era" in which "the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master […] with his head raised high and his dignity preserved".[89] In order to achieve this the "idol of nationalism" and the "idol of democracy" with its "deviant nature" should be trampled.[90] These arguments already show an important dichotomy in the worldview of ISIS, namely that between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*. In line with this, ISIS makes it one of its spearheads to recruit as many Muslims living in *Dar al-Harb* as possible in order for them to migrate to *Dar al-Islam*, where they can live a modest and pious life in accordance with *Shari'a* law. Both the concepts of *jihad* and *hijrah* as discussed in chapter I play a central role in this. The evident link between *hijrah* and the division of the world in two camps is also prominently present in the first issue of *Dabiq*. The Amir al-Mu'minin (أَمِـير ٱلْـمُؤْمِـنِين, the so-called 'Commander of the Believers' or 'Leader of the Faithful') urges all Muslims to rush to the Islamic State that is "a state for all Muslims" since *hijrah* to the land of Islam is obligatory now that the caliphate has been established.[91] According to ISIS, Muslims should by no means be living in *Dar al-Harb*, since it is full of crusaders, *kuffar* (كـــفّار, infidels or unbelievers) and Jews, "all being led by America and Russia".[92] This explicitly hostile approach towards the West is therefore also an integral part of ISIS' ideology. This aspect of the ideology can in turn be linked to ISIS' predecessor al-Qaeda as discussed in chapter II, since al-Qaeda also shows great hostility towards the West and the United States in particular.

In the same issue of *Dabiq* it is once again stated that "the goal of establishing the Khilāfah has always been one that occupied the hearts of the mujahideen since the revival of jihad this century".[93] Again, we see an emphasis on the wish to create a caliphate for all Muslims and again we see a link with *jihadi* sentiments. In his book *The ISIS self narrative: Ideology, framing and discourse*, Masood Ashraf Raja also places great emphasis on the Islamic cosmology of end times when explaining the organisation's ideology. Based on the Hadith, Muslims believe that one of the greatest battles between Muslims and the crusaders will take place near the Syrian town of Dabiq once the end time is here. This also shows that the title of the organisation's magazine was by no

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[88] 'The Return of Khilāfah', *Dabiq* 1 (Ramadan 1435) 8.

[89] Ibidem.

[90] Ibidem.

[91] Ibidem 10.

[92] Ibidem.

[93] Ibidem 34.

means chosen randomly, but was intended to call upon a religious sentiment deeply embedded in Islamic theology and the sacred texts.[94] By establishing a caliphate in the near vicinity of where the end time events will occur, ISIS creates a symbolic framework under which the ultimate battles between good and evil will take place under Muslim rule and in *Dar al-Islam*.

When it comes to the actual execution of the caliphate on the ground, "IS ideology draws heavily on Saudi Wahhabism" and Salafism.[95] The Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement describes Salafism as

> *A branch of Islam whose adherents believe in a pure interpretation of the Koran and Islamic law. Salafists are orthodox Muslims who consider the Islam practised by Muhammad and his companions as the only true version of the religion. Salafist Islam is used as a base ideology for several major terrorist organisations including al-Qaeda network that was led by Osama Bin Laden until his death in 2011.*[96]

Salafis see the first generations of Muslims as those who righteously practiced Islam and should therefore be followed as an example in their teachings. Wahhabism in turn is specifically linked to Saudi Arabia and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703 - 1792). There is a strong link between Salafism and Wahhabism, but there is also a big difference between the two. Wahhabism, on the one hand, is based on a pact between a worldly power (Muhammad bin Saud, 1687 - 1765) and a religious power (Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab). It aims to practice the true and pure Islam through a constitution based on the Qur'an and the *Shari'a*. *Jihadi* Salafism, on the other hand, aspires to establish an Islamic state through violence.[97] It is for this reason that we should link ISIS to the latter. A central work in the rationalisation and justification of what ISIS wants and does is *The Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr al-Naji (d. 2008) published in Arabic in 2004.[98] With the inherent link to al-Qaeda in Iraq as described in chapter II, ISIS' ideology of *Salafi*-jihadism might seem identical to that of al-Qaeda at first glance. However, this is not the case since the two organisations differ in their interpretation of *aqidah* (عـقيدة, creed), *manhaj* (مـنهج, methodology) and

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[94] M. A. Raja, *The ISIS self narrative: Ideology, framing, and discourse* (Routlegde 2019) 32.

[95] van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 67.

[96] 'Salafism', *Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement*, 2015. Accessed June 2021 (https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/10.1093/acref/9780191758256.001.0001/acref-9780191758256-e-2724).

[97] M. Gharaibeh, 'Shared foundation - different methods', *Deutsche Welle* 2014. Accessed May 2021 (https://en.qantara.de/content/wahhabism-and-salafism-shared-foundation-different-methods).

[98] Raja, *The ISIS self narrative*, 80.

takfir (تـــكـفـيـر, excommunication) significantly.[99] In addition, as discussed in chapter II, the organisations also focus on a different enemy. Whereas al-Qaeda mostly targets the 'far enemy', ISIS focusses more on the 'near enemy' and apostate governments in the region itself. This also explains why, according to ISIS, Islam must be cleansed from within. They also see an inexorable bond between state and religion, due to which all decisions, both religious and governmental, should be based on strict interpretations of *Shari'a* law. Here we see a direct link with Wahhabism as discussed above. An interesting notion is that, even though the idea of a 'state' is a modern one, in order for their envisioned caliphate to succeed, ISIS is heavily dependent on the occupation and conquest of territory in which they can in turn exert their *Shari'a* rule. As ISIS thus "required territory to preserve its legitimacy as a caliphate", the call for Muslims to perform *hijrah* is a legitimate and logical request.[100]

All in all, ISIS' main aim was to establish an Islamic State or caliphate that was not only a utopian symbol, but included actual territories as well. In these territories, the rule would be based on a strict *Salafi jihadi* interpretation of *Shari'a* law. Additionally, an 'us versus them' narrative against the West becomes apparent in the prominent dichotomy between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*. ISIS therefore strictly urges Muslims worldwide to perform *hijrah* in order to live peacefully in *Dar al-Islam*, herein supporting the cause for the so-called 'Return to the *Khilafah*'. The *Wahabi Salafi* ideology remains an underlying red thread in the whole story. Raja even states that "to become and ISIS member or an ISIS sympathiser the path will always and invariably lead through a conversion to or being born in the Wahhabi Salafi ideology".[101] When it comes to those radicals who have actually joined ISIS, we should be aware that they all fall into the category of *jihadi Salafis*: those who see a violent *jihad* as an individual duty and a justifiable means to establish an Islamic state.[102] So who exactly are these ISIS sympathisers? How should we categorise them?

3.2 Fierce Ideologists versus Obedient Followers

The general profile of Western ISIS recruits is that of "a young, second or third generation immigrant living in a Western country".[103] According to the British National Bureau of Economic

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[99] K. Jasko et al., *ISIS: Its History, Ideology, and Psychology* (University of Maryland 2018) 12.

[100] Ibidem 15.

[101] Raja, *The ISIS self narrative*, 108.

[102] E. Bakker and Peter Grols, *Nederlandse jihadisten*, 26.

[103] G. Ulas, 'Female Radicalisation: Why do Women join ISIS?', *The London School of Economics and Political Science,* 15 August 2019. Accessed April 2020 (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/08/15/female-radicalisation-why-do-women-join-isis/).

Research (NBER) approximately 30.000 fighters from at least 85 countries had joined ISIS by December 2015.[104] Still, the majority of these people come from the Middle East or the Arab world, but we should not underestimate the bulk of ISIS recruits that came from Western nations, including European countries as well as the United States, Canada and Australia. When purely looking at Western Muslims who travelled to Syria and linking this to the possible motivations for radicalisation as discussed earlier, an interesting situation occurs. Whereas one possible explanation explored was that of poor economic conditions (the economic motivation), analyses by the NBER have proven that "poor economic conditions do not drive participation in ISIS".[105] This is supported by the fact that Western Muslims who joined all departed from highly economically developed countries with relatively low income inequalities. Instead, the NBER attempts to explain the phenomenon through socio-political and religious motivations. As far as the religious aspect is concerned, the size of a country's Muslim population seems to be of importance.

Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that it remains hard to determine the exact number of Western Muslims who joined ISIS. Many of them simply disappeared or were never heard from again after leaving their home country, which makes it extremely complicated to conduct a complete overview of ISIS recruits. However, there is still enough data to establish a typology of Western sympathisers. In trying to understand the nature of the group that left for Syria, the media have played a very important role in framing these Muslims. When it comes to discussing this topic in the news, articles and news items are usually accompanied by pictures of heavily veiled women and bearded men. These two images seem to symbolise the extremely radical and orthodox Muslims that many people believe are the ones who joined ISIS. But is this actually the case? When we look at actual real life stories, do we not come to a different conclusion?

Three years after the establishment of the caliphate, Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol published a book on Dutch *jihadis* and their processes of radicalisation. In this book, called *Nederlandse jihadisten: van naïeve idealisten tot geharde terroristen*, they analyse the personal cases of six Dutch *jihadi* males and (in less detail) several female *jihadis*. This book is very useful in constructing a typology of ISIS sympathisers, since it shows the real-life stories of individual cases and all the factors that have led up to their joining the Syrian *jihad*. One of the central questions of their book is therefore how and why someone becomes a *jihadi*. Where this book solely looks at Dutch *jihadis*, similar researches have been conducted in other Western European countries, of

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[104] L. Picker, 'Where are ISIS's Foreign Fighters Coming From?', *The Digest*, 6 June 2016. Accessed April 2020 (https://www.nber.org/digest/jun16/where-are-isiss-foreign-fighters-coming).

[105] Ibidem.

which Great Britain, Germany and France are the most prominently represented examples. Based on extensive social media analyses of British *jihadis*, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation of London's King's College (ICSR) has distinguished between four clear categories among Western *jihadis*.[106]

The first category they discuss is that of the so-called 'suicide *jihadis*', who opt for the shortest route to paradise by becoming a martyr as soon as they arrive in Syria. Even though martyrdom is mentioned in the classical Islamic sources, contemporary Muslim *jihad* literature strongly links it to warfare. The Arabic word for martyrs is *shuhada* (شهداء, those who are willing to die for their religion). According to American historian David Cook, *jihad* literature in accordance with the classical sources accept "that martyrs are distinguished from other Muslims and have an elevated place in heaven, and receive special rewards".[107] In the context of ISIS, martyrdom manifests itself mostly through suicide attacks. The second type of *jihadis* is that of the 'adventure seekers'. They are usually attracted by the thrill and excitement of *jihad*, which also explains the relatively high number of drug dealers and criminals among this category. The third type is called 'idealists' or 'humanitarian *jihadis*'. This category might require a more extensive explanation. From a Western perspective, it could be hard to see a humanitarian component in something as controversial as *jihad*. However, the initial motivation of the idealists could indeed be classified as humanitarian. Their motivation lies in the way women and children were treated in the context of the Syrian civil war. Their anger towards the world for turning a blind eye to such extreme circumstances fuels their desire to participate in the *jihad* in order to improve the situation in Syria. Nonetheless, people of this category often shift to the fourth and last category of 'unyielding *jihadis*' upon their arrival in the Islamic State.[108]

This typology can be useful in understanding why Western Muslims joined ISIS. Norwegian scholar Tore Bjørgo adds another dimension to this typology. First of all, he distinguishes the category of 'ideological activists'. This category is usually made up of charismatic figures with a strong opinion who take on a leading role in the Syrian endeavour. They also form vital links in *jihadi* networks. Important to note here is that it is only a small minority of the Western recruits that fits into this category. In fact, more people can be classified as 'hangers and followers'. To these people, ideology is usually not the main motivation for joining an organisation like ISIS. Instead, the idea of belonging to a group and feeling part of a shared community of like-minded people is of

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[106] E. Bakker and Peter Grols, *Nederlandse jihadisten*, 62.

[107] D. Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge 2012) 148.

[108] Ibidem.

much greater importance to them. Bad socio-economic positions play an important role in this as well. An interesting note-worthy sub-group within this category is that of converts. Western converts can sometimes end up feeling lost, lonely and misunderstood upon their conversion to Islam. The appeal of an organisation in which they do feel understood and treated as an equal might therefore play an important role in their specific process of radicalisation. The last category Bjørgo touches upon is that of 'socially frustrated youth'. Just like the category of 'adventure seekers' discussed above, this category includes many criminals and marginalised figures. Given their backgrounds, these people are often prone to violence, which makes them an interesting target of recruitment for *jihadi* organisations.[109]

Even though these categories or types of Western *jihadis* are extremely useful in gaining a better understanding of the nature of this particular group, they are by no means all-encompassing but should rather be seen as a simplified model. Since we are still talking about human individuals, it is very likely for a specific person to not fit into one of the categories explained previously. In addition, these categories are very male-centred. Since the process of radicalisation and joining ISIS is often very different for women than it is for men, a typology of *jihadis* can never be complete without looking into this as well.

3.3 To Our Sisters I

The women of ISIS, or *muhajirat*, remain a niche part of academia. This could be easily explained through the significantly smaller amount of women who joined the organisation. Of the 30.000 foreign ISIS fighters, only 550 are estimated to be female. In addition, the role of women within the organisation is often marginalised and portrayed as being of less impact than men's. Whereas this might be true for some parts, the importance of ISIS' women should most definitely not be overlooked. The vital position of women within ISIS is also supported by the American scholar Amanda N. Spencer, who states that "women are leading contributors to ISIS' strength and capabilities […] Women's responsibilities include: suitability as a wife to ISIS soldiers, birthing the next generation of jihad, advancing ISIS' global reach through online recruiting and maintaining order within ISIS' network of women".[110] Creating a typology for female *jihadis* similar to the one for men as discussed above is therefore of great importance towards a better understanding of why these women joined ISIS in the first place.

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[109] Ibidem 66.

[110] A. N. Spencer, 'The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State', *Journal of Strategic Security* 3:9 (2016) 74-98, 74.

Based on extensive accounts of Western Muslim women who joined ISIS, I have drafted a typology of these women.[111] Even though some of these categories might overlap with the ones proposed by the ICSR and Bjørgo, some new categories will be introduced as well. Like the typology of male *jihadis*, the typology explained below is by no means complete or all-encompassing, but should again rather be seen as a simplified model towards a better understanding of the nature of Western *muhajirat*. First of all, there is the category of 'Islamic idealists'. This category is comparable to that of the 'ideological activists', and thus includes women who deeply believe in the ideological nature of ISIS and therefore decided to join the organisation. For this category, religious motivations and the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* are central phenomena. This also includes the freedom to "live without the restrictions of Western laws".[112] Women in this category were very well aware of what was going on in Syria and they consciously chose for a life in the Islamic State. This idea is also supported by Annelies Moors and Martijn de Koning, who conducted extensive research on women and ISIS. In their article 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria' they state that some of the female *jihadis* "willingly submitted to IS regulations, as they had opted for a life under IS rule, which they equated with living under the Shari'a".[113] These women thus deliberately chose to live up to their Islamic ideals by participating in *jihad* and living under *Shari'a* law. In doing so, they also fulfilled their religious duty to perform *hijrah*.[114] What is striking about this category is that these women frequently travelled to Syria individually. Only upon their arrival did they marry local or foreign ISIS recruits in order to fulfil their duty as wives and bearers of the next generation of fighters. In addition, these women also often enjoy positions as propagandists and online recruiters for ISIS, which is made all the more easy through social media.[115]

Secondly, there is the category of 'obedient wives'. This type of female *jihadis* refers to those Muslim women who do not necessarily have the desire to travel to Syria themselves, but who are not left a choice since they are married to a Muslim man who does wish to join ISIS. They are often attributed very little agency, since all they seemingly do is obediently follow their husband,

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[111] The accounts used in this research come from E. Bakker and Peter Grol, *Nederlands jihadisten: van naïeve idealisten tot geharde terroristen* (Amsterdam 2017), and A. Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS* (London 2019).

[112] G. Ulas, 'Female Radicalisation', accessed April 2020.

[113] M. de Koning and Annelies Moors, 'Chatting about Marriage with Female Migrants to Syria', *Anthropology Today* 32:2 (2016) 22-25, 23.

[114] Ibidem 22.

[115] Ibidem.

hereby becoming an unwilling victim. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that to many *muhajirat*, marriage remains a highly recommended practice.[116] The high religious value of an Islamic marriage is therefore a very important factor in the understanding of this category, since it explains why Muslim women followed their husbands to Syria in the first place. A good example of this type of female *jihadis* as described in Azadeh Moaveni's *Guesthouse for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS* is the case of the German Emma / Dunya. Her profile shows the story of how a girl is forced to emigrate to Syria by her husband since he sees it as "everyone's religious duty […] to leave the Land of Disbelief and migrate there".[117] The relevance of this quote is twofold. First of all, it perfectly symbolises the category of obedient Muslim women who had no choice but to follow their husband to the Islamic State. Since it was the man's religious duty to move to Syria in order to partake in *jihad* and perform *hijrah*, Emma / Dunya had no choice but to be an obedient wife and follow him there. Secondly, the importance of both the notion of *hijrah* as well as the notion of the Land of Disbelief are important here as well. As we have seen before in the discussion of *Dabiq's* first issue and what it says about the religious duty of *hijrah* and the dichotomy between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb*, we can conclude that Emma / Dunya's husband's train of thought perfectly fits the ideology propagated by ISIS through their magazine.

The third and last category that should be discussed here is that of 'naive *jihadi* brides'. This category, which is most prominently visible in Western media, refers to often young girls who migrate to Syria to marry *jihadi* fighters. They are "often presented as naive, overtly romantic, and drawn to the heavily Orientalised images of heroic fighters".[118] Like the 'obedient wives', the 'naive *jihadi* brides' are often seen as victims of men who lure them to Syria under false pretences. Whereas these girls are given the prospect of finding a good Islamic marriage and living as piously as possible, in reality they are often recruited to join a *jihad* that they initially had no desire for. What is interesting about this category is that the victims are often young girls who are not necessarily raised in a radical or extremely religious family. In addition, a lack of male authority seems to be a common denominator for this category as well. A good example of this category as discussed in *Guesthouse for Young Widows* is that of Rahma and Ghoufran, two sisters from Tunisia.[119] They grew up in a big family in which their father was absent and their mother was

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[116] Ibidem 23.

[117] Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young* Widows, 83.

[118] M. de Koning and Annelies Moors, 'Chatting about Marriage', 22.

[119] Even though these two girls might not be Western *muhajirat*, their story perfectly illustrates the example of the category discussed ('naive *jihadi* brides') and was therefore chosen in order to better understand the theory and typology discussed in this paragraph.

working multiple jobs in order to pay the bills. Religion did not play a central role in their family life. Led by curiosity, the girls got increasingly caught up in the local mosque, where they come into contact with the *Salafi* ideology for the first time. They start criticising their other family members, pointing out that particular things they do are *haram* and "not shari'i".[120] In the end, both girls end up going to Syria, where they get married to an ISIS fighter. What is interesting about this category as well, is that the examples are often not individual cases as much as sisters or friends who experience the process of traveling to Syria together. The importance of social media in this whole story should not be underestimated either, since various online platforms these young girls have access to romanticise *jihadi* marriages. Such fairytale depictions of life in the caliphate have drawn numerous naive girls to ISIS.[121]

Based on this typology, it can be argued that underlying religious motivations play an important role in the process of Muslim women joining ISIS, albeit to a different extent. Whereas for the 'Islamic idealists' religion forms the crux of their recruitment, this might seemingly not be the case as strongly for the 'obedient wives' and the 'naive *jihadi* brides'. However, when taking a closer look we see that for the 'obedient wives' Islam is central in a sense that, based on their Islamic marriage and the religious importance of this institution, they have no choice but to join their husbands on their *hijrah* to Syria. In addition, examples of 'naive *jihadi* brides' have shown us that the attraction of the Salafi doctrine as an alternative to often irreligious families with a lack of male authority have provided with numerous cases of young Muslim girls joining ISIS in order to marry a fighter upon their arrival in Syria. Lastly, the importance of women in general from the perspective of ISIS itself is substantial too. Proof of this can be found in the recurring *Dabiq* rubric called 'To Our Sisters', which is specifically aimed at *muhajirat* and which will be discussed more extensively in the next chapter.

So how does this tie in all together? How can we link the different types of female *jihadis* to religious motivations and ISIS' ideology on *hijrah* and *jihad*?

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[120] Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, 69.

[121] Spencer, 'The Hidden Face of Terrorism', 74.

Chapter IV: Towards an Understanding of *Hijrah* and *Jihad*, Radicalisation and Western *Muhajirat*

To what extent is there a clear link between Qur'anic verses on *hijrah* and *jihad*, the way ISIS propagates these notions in their primary sources and the response to this by Western *muhajirat*? What is the narrative of ISIS when it comes to attracting Muslim women to their cause? Do they approach this differently than their recruitment of Western men? What does *Dabiq* say about Muslim women and *jihad*? But most of all: how have Western *muhajirat* responded to all this? Can we come to a supported statement that religious motivations were the main rationale behind their radicalisation or were there other, more important factors at play?

To be able to answer all these questions, there are a few factors that we should keep in mind. First of all, we should remember different possible causes of radicalisation, of which a certain religious interpretation of the Qur'an is only one example. Secondly, we should remember the classical meaning of the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad*. This also goes hand in hand with the way ISIS interprets these notions and conveys this interpretation to their possible recruits through propaganda like *Dabiq*. Thirdly, we must not forget about the typology of *muhajirat* and the different contexts in which these different types decided to join the *jihad* in Syria. Lastly, accounts of what these women have said about their experiences in hindsight are useful as well.

As we can see, there are still several important elements that we have to take into account in trying to understand the link between *hijrah* and *jihad*, radicalisation and Western *muhajirat*. It is by no means a one-sided story, and should therefore also not be analysed as such. For a complete understanding, a twofold approach is necessary. First of all, we must gain a complete insight in the discourse used by ISIS in their recruitment specifically aimed at women. Secondly, it is vital to look at the way women responded to this and which notions, topics or arguments played the decisive part in their Syrian endeavours.

4.1 To Our Sisters II

As discussed previously, ISIS' propoganda magazine is a very useful primary source in trying to grasp the bottom-line of their ideology as well as their tools in trying to convince people to join their cause. Even though it might seem like this process of recruitment mostly revolves around finding male fighters, the fact that several issues of *Dabiq* have a specific article devoted solely to women, shows how important they are for the organisation as a whole as well. Since the magazine

was directly created and issued from within the organisation, it is a valuable starting point towards an understanding of *hijrah* and *jihad*, radicalisation and Western *muhajirat* from the perspective of ISIS itself. Why was the recruitment of women important for ISIS? What was the envisioned role for women within the organisation and how does this become apparent in *Dabiq*?

First of all, women are vital in securing the continuation of the next generation of *jihadi* fighters in Syria. Simply put: without women, there would be no children and without children there would not be a new generation to continue the caliphate as God's cause. The institution of marriage is central in this as well. The fact that the rate of widows in the caliphate is relatively low serves as proof for this, since it shows that even though many women lose their husbands in battles, they are highly encouraged to remarry as quickly as possible in order to secure the continuation of the next generation.[122] This particular role of women as wives and mothers can be linked to category two and three of the typology drafter in chapter III, namely the 'obedient wives' and the 'naive *jihadi* brides'. Many women either followed their husbands or boyfriends to Syria, or were convinced by the prospect of a romantic and heroic marriage to a *mujahid* upon their arrival in the caliphate.[123] The important status of wives to *jihad* fighters can also be directly found in ISIS' propoganda. In the special rubric 'To Our Sisters', *Dabiq* issue number 7 deals with this topic. Here, we can find the following statement: "May Allah protect all the wives of the shuhadā' and mujāhidīn and keep them firm upon the truth until they meet their Lord ('azza wa jalla)".[124] The article continues with an interview of a *jihadi* bride, who urges other Muslim women to "be bases of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons".[125] The overall tendency of the article is to show other Muslim women what the situation in the caliphate is like based on the experience of a *muhajirah*.

From *Dabiq* itself, we also get an impression of the importance of *hijrah* and *jihad*. In addition to ISIS wanting to attract women so that they can be 'obedient wives' or 'naive *jihadi* brides' to the male fighters, we also see an emphasis on the religious importance of the endeavour to individual Muslim women. In *Dabiq* issue number 3, we can read that "there is no life without jihad and there is no jihad without hijrah".[126] The importance of *hijrah* is further elaborated on in the 'To

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[122] Speckhard and Ellenberg, 'ISIS in Their Own Words', 89.

[123] Ibidem 97.

[124] 'From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone', *Dabiq 7* (Rabi' al-Akhir 1436) 50; The term *shuhadā* refers to martyrs and the term *mujāhidīn* refers to Islamic guerrilla fighters who engage in violent *jihad*.

[125] Ibidem 51.

[126] 'A Call to Hijrah', *Dabiq 3* (Shawwal 1435) 31.

Our Sisters' column of *Dabiq* issue number 7. Here we can find specific questions on how Umm Basīr, the woman who is interviewed for this issue, experienced her *hijrah* from France. She states that her *hijrah* was easy and that "living in a land where the law of Allah ('azza wa jalla) is implemented is something great. I feel at ease now that I have carried out this obligation".[127] We see that through this interview, ISIS aims to propagate the idea of performing *hijrah* and the salvation and peace it will bring to other women. From *Dabiq* issue number 8 it becomes apparent that ISIS itself calls the Muslim women who joined ISIS *muhajirat* too. The elevated religious status of being a *muhajirah* is highlighted through the idea that Allah "revealed an āyah about the muhājirāt and preserved it in the clear-cut revelation until the establishment of the Hour".[128] This column, again, focusses on the importance of *hijrah* as Allah's cause. This issues combines the obligation of *hijrah* with the support of male fighters and the duty of *jihad* as well.[129] This issue directly speaks to women in a sense that it glorifies the status of *muhajirat* by claiming that "if speaking about the muhājirīn is amazing, then speaking about their twin halves the muhājirāt is even more amazing!".[130] Such propaganda is a perfect example of how ISIS directly spoke to Muslim women and how ISIS tried to convince them to join their organisation based on a religious narrative. The religious notion of *hijrah* is central in creating a romanticised image of *Da'esh* in order to attract women to the cause. In this issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS also provides women with security in case their husband dies on the battle field.

What is interesting in linking *Dabiq* to religious motivations for women to join ISIS is that the 'To Our Sisters' column heavily draws on Qur'anic verses and extracts from the Hadith. A good example of this is *Dabiq* issue 9, in which the article aimed at women is completely made up from examples of the Prophet and *ayat* from the Qur'an.[131] This is significant, because it justifies everything ISIS directs at women religiously. This in turn is of utmost importance in convincing women to join the caliphate based on a religious motivation. *Dabiq* issue number 10 also offers religious advice to the wives of secular-oriented men.[132] The gist of this advice is that good Muslim girls should not marry a *kāfir*, but should instead marry a devout *jihadi* soldier in the caliphate. Again, this advice is heavily supported by the Qur'an and the Hadith.

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[127] 'From Hypocrisy to Apostasy', *Dabiq* 7, 50.

[128] 'Shari'a Alone Will Rule Africa', *Dabiq 8* (Jumada al-Akhirah 1436) 32.

[129] Ibidem.

[130] Ibidem 33.

[131] 'They Plot and Allah Plots', *Dabiq 9* (Sha'ban 1436) 44.

[132] 'The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men', *Dabiq 10* (Ramadan 1436) 43.

So far we have analysed two ways in which ISIS attempted to appeal to women directly through *Dabiq*: by glorifying their status as wives to *jihadi* fighters and by an extensive emphasis on the religious duty of *hijrah*. *Dabiq* issue number 11 adds a third layer to this, namely that of '*jihad* without fighting'. This issue pays great attention to the idea that, based on the Qur'an, "there is an absence of an obligation of jihad and war upon the Muslim women".[133] However, according to *Dabiq*, this does not mean that women should not take part in *jihad* in any way. Drawing from Qur'anic chapters like *Surah an-Nisa* (سورة النساء) and *Surah al-Baqara* (سورة البقرة), *Dabiq* issue 11 urges Muslims women to join ISIS and support the *jihad* indirectly though their husbands with good behaviour and knowledge as their weapon.[134] Women are compared to lionesses, vital in the preparation of the "lion cubs of the Khilāfah".[135] This implies the strong position of women and an important role for them in the caliphate, which can contribute to its attractiveness among Muslim women in the West. Again, we see an example of security and advice in *Dabiq* issue number 12. Here, the article solely focusses on how widows should mourn their husband in case of death on the battlefield. Examples from the Qur'an and the Hadith are again used to solidify the story and convince women based on a religious argument despite the chance of them losing their spouse.[136]

What is particularly interesting in trying to extract religious motivations from ISIS' propaganda is the shift in emphasis between earlier and later issues of *Dabiq*. Whereas the first issues are more focussed on the religious duty of actually performing *hijrah* and joining ISIS, we see that the later issues pay more attention to how women should live and what their role is once they have actually arrived in Syria. All in all, the religious duties of being an obedient wife, making *hijrah* and (indirectly) supporting *jihad* are all central themes that are extensively discussed in several *Dabiq* issues directly aimed at women. Since all these articles are thoroughly based on Qur'anic verses and the Hadith, their religious authority is significant. For Muslim women in the West, such stories and articles urging them to perform their religious duties serve as the perfect propaganda tool in attracting them to ISIS.

4.2 The Response of the Muhajirat

Now that we know how ISIS framed their recruitment of women through a religious lens, the next step is to look at how Western Muslim women responded to all this and to what extent religious

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[133] 'From the Battle of al-Ahzāb to the War of Coalitions', *Dabiq 11* (Dhul-Qa'dah 1436) 40.

[134] Ibidem 45.

[135] Ibidem.

[136] 'The Rāfidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjāl, *Dabiq 13* (Rabi' al-Akhir 1437) 24.

motivations for joining ISIS actually played a role from their perspective. To start with, very telling for the motivation of the *muhajirat* is the origin of the name of the group. The term *muhajirat* is not a Western construct, but instead a collective name that these women have given to themselves. The Arabic root of the term is derived from the Islamic notion of *hijrah* (ه-ج-ر, h-j-r), which already shows the undeniable link between the Western Muslim women and one of the main motivations for their journey to Syria. Not only do we see an explicit relation to the religious notion of *hijrah* as discussed in chapter I, we also see that this name signifies a clear break from their former Western life. By calling themselves a *muharijah*, the women imply a migration from *Dar al-Harb* to *Dar al-Islam* in which the whole idea of migration for the cause of Allah is central to the process. This centrality of *hijrah*, both in itself as well as linked to the concept of *jihad* and overal religious motivations in general becomes apparent from several accounts on the topic, primary as well as secondary.

To start with, a myriad of academics have reached the conclusion that religious ideology is the main motivation for most *muhajirat*, or at least they claim that this is so.[137] Research based on interviews, detailed accounts of real-life stories and thorough analyses of social media accounts have all come to support this conclusion. Some even argue that it is particularly women who are "driven by religious ideology that adopts an expressly gendered frame".[138] The reason behind this strong emphasis on ideology can be explained through the fact that it is even more difficult for Muslim women to leave their families and their lives in the West than it is for men, which requires a very strong will and a very solid ideological conviction. In this, women are often primarily pulled by a religious commitment and a very strong sense of community, or '*umma*. The idea of being able to share this commitment and live under *Shari'a* law in the midst of the '*umma* rather than on the sideline of it in the West serves as an attractive pull-factor.

In addition, *muhajirat* are also drawn by the fundamentalist interpretation of *hijrah* as a religious obligation. In this process, ideological salience can be classified as the primary motivator since "religious motivation is cited most often by the women themselves as the most important driver".[139] If we look at the detailed story-accounts of female ISIS recruits in Moaveni's *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, we see that, despite the fact that all these stories take place in a different context and with different backgrounds, the red thread that runs through the entire book is the importance of

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[137] A. Perešin and Alberto Cervone, 'The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38:7 (2015) 495-509, 495.

[138] M. Loken and Anna Zelenz, 'Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh', *European Journal of International Security* 3:1 (2017) 45-68, 45.

[139] A. Perešin, 'Fatal Attraction: Western Muslimas and ISIS', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:3 (2015), 21-38, 23.

religion as the basis for all the stories.[140] Whether this importance manifests itself through young girls voluntarily joining a *Salafi* study-group in their local mosque or through young single women looking for a good Muslim husband, religious virtue and an underlying religious tendency are present in all of the accounts. The wish to live in a society adhering to *Shari'a* law is also mentioned repeatedly.

The combination of religion as a pull-factor in combination with societal push-factors is also supported by political scientists at Washington University Meredith Loken and Anna Zelenz. In their article 'Explaining extremism: Western women in Da'esh' they state that "[…] we see evidence that these muhajirat, like male foreign fighters, were primarily pulled into Da'esh by religious commitment and pushed by alienation and violence in their home societies".[141] In this, women are drawn by the fundamentalist interpretation of *hijrah* as a religious obligation. This narrative is also often used by women recruiting other women online. Most young Western *muhajirat* radicalised individually and through the internet. Several prominent IS women, who fall into the category of 'Islamic idealists' as discussed in chapter III, made online propaganda through tweets and other social media platforms one of the key ventures of their recruitment endeavours. The most famous example of this is Umm Layth, a woman from Schotland who joined *Da'esh* in its early stages and ended up fulfilling an important role in the recruitment of other Western Muslim girls. In her narrative, we again see an emphasis on the notion of *hijrah* as she states that "staying in the West means a comfortable life, but the reward for making hijrah to Da'esh will be much greater in the afterlife".[142] This is a perfect example of how religious motivations and classical Islamic notions from the Qur'an can play a decisive role in the process of joining ISIS as seen from the perspective of a Muslim woman. We also see a tendency among Muslim women shaming other Western Muslims who have decided not to make *hijrah*. An example of this can be found in a Tumblr post by Umm Abbas, who states that "if you neglect Hijrah & would rather be oppressed in Darul KUFR [the non-Muslim world] due to land preferences, then you are held for whatever the Kuffar do to you […]".[143] Again, we see the importance of *hijrah* to this *muhajirah* as she clearly sees it as her Islamic duty and condemns those women who choose not to take part.

Directly connected to this is another religious factor, namely that of modesty. Living under *Shari'a* law and reclamation of modesty is a key concern for many *muhajirat*. The fact that their

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[140] Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young Widows*.

[141] Perešin and Cervone, 'The Western *Muhajirat*', 57.

[142] Ibidem 60.

[143] Ibidem 64.

modesty is increasingly threatened in the West, for example through the *burqa*-ban in the Netherlands and similar laws in other Western European countries, fuels the religious motivation to migrate to a territory where this modesty would not be compromised. In other words, *muhajirat* concerned with this aspect believe that it is not possible to fully live in accordance with *Shari'a* outside of an Islamic caliphate. Again, this is a religious motivation to go and again this shows how *hijrah* is perceived as central to Islamic practice and required by Islamic teachings. ISIS offered an alternative and authentic space for pure Islamic practice, which made it appealing from a religious perspective.

Having established that for many *muhajirat* the notion of *hijrah* is central to their religious motivations for joining ISIS and the Syrian caliphate, we must now look at the way in which this is all connected to the notion of *jihad*. If we again look at the social media accounts of female ISIS recruits like Umm Layth and Umm Abbas, we see that they directly connect *hijrah* to violent *jihad*. According to Loken and Zelenz, "their social media activity dually emphasises the need to remove one's self from the society of non-believers and their desire to violently attack this world", which shows a perfect combination of both notions at play.[144] Linking this to the typology of *muhajirat* as drafter in chapter III, we see that the recruitment through social media is especially important for 'Islamic idealists' and 'naive *jihadi* brides'. In this relation, it is essentially the former who recruit the latter through playing on their religious conscience and offering an Islamic alternative to the Western society these 'naive *jihadi* brides' no longer feel comfortable in. Multiple examples of this can again be found in *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, among others in the story of Sharmeena, Kadiza, Amira and Shamima. These young girls from London were also lured to Syria through tweets by Umm Layth and other 'Islamic idealists' already living in the caliphate. Relevant messages included "Hijrah: check. Just do it" and ornate scripts like a wedding invitation stating "In the land of Jihad, I met you O my dear Mujahid".[145]

Another important figure who proved to be a vital chain in the recruitment of Muslim girls is the Yemeni-American *imam* Anwar al-Awlaki (1971 - 2011). Al-Awlaki was an Islamic preacher affiliated to al-Qaeda who become known through his online sermons and propaganda videos on YouTube. This made his ideology and ideas very accessible to Muslims all around the world. Even though he lacked extensive formal religious training, his easygoing style and the accessible content of his online lectures made him very popular within the Western Islamic world. The internet really was a key tool in al-Awlaki's ability to spread his message and it is also through the internet that he

[144] Ibidem.

[145] Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, 151-152.

managed to influence the ideas of Western *muhajirat* even after his death.[146] Despite being a man himself and despite not being directly linked to ISIS, his visions played a decisive role in the radicalisation process of many Western Muslim girls. The crux of his narrative revolves around the fact that *hijrah* is one of the 44 ways to support *jihad*. Again, we see an inextricable link between the different notions. Based on this, it is fair to conclude that authoritative figures like *imam* al-Awklani, but also figures like Umm Layth who have been with ISIS from the beginning, played an important role in conveying the ideology of *Da'esh* as well as in the process of the recruitment of new female members. Several social media posts by Umm Layth also include her personal story, in which she detailedly explains why she made *hijrah* and joined the *jihad* in the first place. For many young 'naive *jihadi* brides' in the West, including for example Sharmeena from *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, these stories are extremely recognisable and something with which they can completely identify.[147] In the process of feeling out of place in your own society, combined with the search for (religious) alternatives, the utopian stories of devout Muslim women who fight for the cause of Allah in a far-away and alien land create a romantic vision of a cause these young *muhajirat* might want to join. Their religion in itself might not have caused the first steps towards their process of radicalisation, but the religious duties of *hijrah* and *jihad* in combination with the appeal of living 'freely' under *Shari'a* law definitely formed the final push.

4.3 Different Approaches, Similar Outcomes

In hindsight, it always remains difficult to be completely positive about possible religious motivations for joining an organisation like ISIS. Whereas sources from the early periods of the caliphate focus on the religious aspect as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, sources from a little later in the process state otherwise. As of 2021, ISIS has lost most of its territory and its influence has greatly receded. Because of this, many *muhajirat* who were initially full of enthusiasm and passion in joining God's cause now wish to return to their home-countries in the West. Not only has this led to a lot of controversy, it has also caused great legal questions on whether these women should be tried for terrorism or whether they are even allowed to return in the first place. Often, *muhajirat* no longer feel safe in Syria now that ISIS has failed to accomplish what it had set out to do. They try to play the 'sympathy card' in order to save their own skin.

Taking The Netherlands as an example, we have seen several stories that have led to court

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[146] 'Anwar al-Awlaki', *Britannica Academic*. Accessed June 2021 (https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/levels/collegiate/article/Anwar-al-Awlaki/603821).

[147] Moaveni, *Guesthouse for Young Widows*, 110.

cases. The most famous one is the case of Laura H., a young Dutch girl from Zoetermeer who moved to Syria in the early years of the caliphate. During her trial, she claimed that she was uninformed as to what her migration to Syria actually entailed. Instead, she puts total blame on her husband stating that she blindly followed him without knowing that ISIS was their destination.[148] Rather than religion being the motivation for her to join, she stated that her husband arranged everything, making her an 'obedient wive' rather than an 'Islamic ideologist'. When looking at court cases covering similar stories, we see similar things happening. Even though some of the women openly supported the cause of ISIS in the earlier phases, which can be found in text messages or e-mails, none of them openly admit to being an 'Islamic idealist' when it comes to the court cases upon their returns. Based on this, when looking at religious motivations for joining ISIS we should therefore not really look at testimonies of these women upon their return to the West, but rather at sources from the initial phase of their *hijrah*.

When looking at these earlier sources, we repeatedly find that at the base of their motivations lies unease with the West and adherence to the *jihadist* ideology, combined with romantic and sometimes naive aspirations to join a 'holy struggle' and to become part of an entity of ideal perfection.[149] When comparing the sources of ISIS to sources we have from the women's narratives, we see a lot of similarities in motivation. For both, the Islamic notion of *hijrah* is extremely important which is then in turn inextricably linked to *jihad*. In their magazine *Dabiq* ISIS manages to support their recruitment by verses of the Qur'an, which solidifies the religious argument. For the *muhajirat*, we have seen that other factors can be at play as well. In all cases discussed, socio-economic, political or personal issues play a role. However, comparable to ISIS propaganda, religious elements can always be found at the heart of the stories. Whether it be the 'Islamic idealists' convinced of their religious duties of *hijrah* and *jihad*, or the 'obedient wives' following their husband based on their Islamic marriage contract, or the 'naive *jihadi* brides' envisioning a romantic marriage to a *mujahid* upon their arrival in the caliphate, all these examples carry a religious component. This makes the religious motivation an unmissable link in understanding *hijrah* and *jihad*, radicalisation and Western *muhajirat*.

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[148] Zaaknummer 10/960288-16, *Rechtbank Rotterdam*, 13 November 2017. Accessed May 2021 (https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/inziendocument?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2017:8858).

[149] Perešin and Cervone, 'The Western Muhajirat', 506.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to fill the gap on religious motivations of Western Muslim women in the context of joining the *jihad* of ISIS in Syria between 2014 - 2019. In line with this, the following research question was proposed: To what extent did the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* play a role in the religious motivation of Western *muhajirat* joining ISIS between 2014 - 2019, and how? Based on a theoretical framework on radicalisation, in combination with a theological description of the notions of *hijrah* and *jihad*, and an in-depth analysis of both ISIS' narrative as well as that of the *muhajirat*, we can argue that we should indeed speak of a significant extent of religious motivations in the Syrian endeavour of Western Muslim women. Both primary and secondary sources have proven to be important in understanding these religious motivations and the way all of this is justified theologically based on the Qur'an and the Hadith. However, we do have to keep in mind that this story is not black-and-white, and that there are always nuances to be made. Religious motivations are definitely important for *muhajirat*, but they should always be placed within a bigger context.

In order to have come to this conclusion, this research was divided into four chapters. To start with, we have seen the academic debate on radicalisation in general in the introduction. Several scholars have proposed several possible causes for radicalisation, in which the process in itself should be seen as a sliding scale where '*jihad*' is only the last step along the way. The most important explanations for radicalisation discussed include socio-economic arguments, political factors and the religious rationale. Since the common denominator among Western Muslims who joined ISIS is the fact that they are all Muslim, a further analysis of the religious motivation formed the central focus of this research. In addition, when it comes to analyses of Western Muslims and ISIS, the focus always seems to lie primarily on the male Muslims. In order to fill the academic gap, this research instead focussed on Muslim women and their religious motivations.

Chapter I provided an introduction to Islamic radicalisation. Important aspects of Islamic radicalisation that are relevant for the case-study of ISIS are the wish to go back to the fundaments of Islam through the example of the time of the Prophet. The dichotomy that divides the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* is important in this as well. Moreover, this chapter delved into the Islamic notions of *hijrah* and *jihad* and the way that these notions are discussed in the Qur'an. The meaning of *jihad* can be two-fold, namely that of an internal struggle that every Muslim deals with on a daily basis, or an armed struggle against enemies and non-believers. Several Qur'anic chapters,

for example *Surah al-Baqara*, have shown us that the Qur'an itself leaves room to interpret *jihad* as 'holy war' or armed struggle. Such interpretations are extremely important for the ideology of ISIS and the way that the organisation justified its actions based on the Qur'an. The notion of *hijrah*, on the other hand, refers to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622. The contemporary usage of this term can be linked to the idea that Muslims should migrate from *Dar al-Harb* to *Dar al-Islam* in order to be able to live in accordance with *Shari'a* law. Since both *hijrah* and *jihad* are seen as an Islamic duty, both ended up being central notions to the religious motivations of Western *muhajirat*. Lastly, chapter I looked into the question of whether radicalisation always leads to *jihad*. The answer to this question is no, but when placing the story of ISIS in the context of Islamic fundamentalism and the Qur'anic verses discussed previously, we can come to a better understanding as to why and how ISIS was able to justify their *jihad* theologically.

The second chapter aimed to create an overview of three different factors that played a decisive role in the emergence of ISIS in the first place. Radical organisations like ISIS never emerge out of a void. The three most important factors that contributed to its emergence are the initial lineage to al-Qaeda, the turmoil in the Middle East caused by the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and the power vacuum left as a result of the Syrian civil war. The contingent combination of these three factors ultimately created fertile soil for ISIS to flourish. Chapter III gave more insight in ISIS' ideology as well as the different categories of both male and female ISIS supporters. ISIS' ideology draws heavily on *jihadi* Salafism, which becomes apparent in their propaganda magazine *Dabiq*. Several articles from several issues of this magazine have also given us more information on what it actually was that ISIS aspired to achieve: a revival of the caliphate as seen in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Over time, ISIS managed to gain a lot of support for their cause, in which the supporters can be linked to different categories. For the *muhajirat*, these categories are as follows: 'Islamic idealists', 'obedient wives' and 'naive *jihadi* brides'. Even though Islam plays a different role for these different categories, it plays a role for all of them nonetheless. This in turn supports the idea that for many *muhajirat*, religious arguments were the dominant motivation for joining ISIS.

The fourth and final chapter combined all the previously drafted frameworks, typologies and descriptions in an analysis of both ISIS propaganda as well as accounts of Western *muhajirat*. First, an analysis was made of how ISIS framed its propaganda towards recruiting women to join their cause. In this, *Dabiq* was used as the primary source to base this analysis on. Since several issues of the magazine devote a special column 'to our sisters', this is a very useful source in understanding the religious discourse of ISIS towards female recruits. Three important elements were central in

this: the idea of fulfilling the Islamic duty of being a wife to a *jihadi* fighter, the religious importance of performing *hijrah*, and the obligation to join the *jihad* against unbelievers. All these religious notions were highly supported by various extracts from Qur'anic verses. This served as the perfect propaganda tool to attract Western Muslim women based on a religious justification. The response of the *muhajirat*, in turn, revolves around the same notions. In both primary as well as secondary accounts we can find various examples of proof that for many women the religious motivation was the most important factor in their process of radicalisation. Especially the notion of *hijrah* was central to this, and to a lesser extend the notion of *jihad* as well. We also see that religious motivations were significant for all three types of *muhajirat*, albeit in a different manner. In hindsight, however, we hardly see any cases of *muhajirat* admitting to these initial religious causes. It is therefore much more useful to look at sources from the beginning stages of radicalisation rather than later court cases now that the *muhajirat* are trying to return to the West.

All in all, we have seen that religious motivations were of great importance in the radicalisation processes of Western *muhajirat* that resulted in them joining ISIS in the period 2014 - 2019. However, we must keep in mind that there is always more than one factor at play. Upon their *hijrah*, many *muhajirat* felt misunderstood and lonely in the Western country they were living in. Islam often played a significant part in trying to fill that void. Several examples of this can be seen in both *Nederlandse jihadisten* by Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, and *Guesthouse for Young Widows* by Azadeh Moaveni. Such situations have led to circumstances in which the religious attraction to *Shari'a*, *hijrah* and *jihad* formed the final push towards ISIS. So yes, religion was always a very important if not deciding factor in these processes of radicalisation. However, it should not be seen as the only factor but instead should be placed in a bigger context of other processes too. Religion was surely required, but by no means enough. It should be seen as a pull-factor, that could never have taken place on such a great scale had it not been for other push-factors enhancing the process.

The long-term implications of the importance of religious motivations in processes of radicalisation is something only the future will be able to tell. For now we should remember the complexity of cases like ISIS and be aware of the multifaceted understanding of both religion and radicalisation. For different approaches on a topic might lead to similar outcomes, but similar approaches might as well lead to different outcomes too.

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