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# FEMINISATION OF RADICAL ISLAM

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## ABSTRACT

### FEMINIZACJA RADYKALNEGO ISLAMU

Women are considered a modernising factor in Islam. For decades the active and vocal Muslim feminists represented a progressive and liberating force challenging the traditional understanding of women in Islam and spearheading the efforts aimed at widening the spaces where females could exercise their full potential. Radical Islam, to the contrary, was believed to be and thus portrayed, as inherently masculine and necessarily patriarchal enterprise, somewhat oppressive when it came to women or at least defending the traditional *status quo* with regards to gender relations and roles. This paper provides an analysis of an emerging trend whereby Muslim women are not only active in the modernising circles but, quite the opposite, become vocal proponents of radical political Islam. Hence, instead of being the much hoped for progressive force, they constitute an avant-garde of the opposite: radical agenda advocating and actively supporting the agenda of political Islam; also in the sphere of political violence. This paper examines how feminisation of radical Islam progressed over time and shows how what hitherto represented a solely masculine privilege and domain, now also belongs to women. Where at first women were not present, with time they became pliable instrument in political struggle, only to gain their own independent voice, agency and a power to act autonomously.

**KEYWORDS:** women, politics, islam, political violence

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** kobiety, polityka, islam, przemoc polityczna

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## Introduction

Women are considered a modernising factor in Islam. For decades the active and vocal Muslim feminists represented a progressive and liberating

force challenging the traditional understanding of women in Islam and spearheading the efforts aimed at widening the spaces where females could exercise their full potential. This was true in academia, societal sector as well as politics<sup>1</sup> also thanks to the influence of Western female converts.<sup>2</sup> Radical Islam, to the contrary, was believed to be and thus portrayed, as inherently masculine and necessarily patriarchal enterprise, somewhat oppressive when it came to women or at least defending the traditional *status quo* with regards to gender relations and roles.<sup>3</sup> The advent of contemporary radical Islam changed this situation and this paper offers an explorative analysis this phenomenon.

While women in Islam are very often perceived and discussed solely through the lenses of marriage and family matters, many issues discussed within this narrow perimeter have much more potent ramifications. In this context, after providing a brief overview of the approaches to discussing Women and Islam, the paper examines the issue of “sartorial politics” showing how a seemingly religious and cultural symbol can in fact be an example of a wider political agenda. This phenomenon indicates a need to understand the new trend whereby women, instead of being the much hoped for progressive force, constitute an avant-garde of the opposite: radical agenda advocating and actively supporting the agenda of political Islam.

In the pages that follow, it will be argued that the scope and degree of female engagement in political Islam increased, both in terms of depth and breadth of their activities. This opened up new spaces where women can engage themselves and perform new roles, at least new with regard to the scope of the activities and the manner in which they were propagated. Simultaneously, while initially women were mute executioners of instructions dictated by men, soon enough they took the initiative and became

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- 1 The following authors elaborate on the issue of feminist influences and interpretations of Islam: Barlas, A., 2002. “Believing Women” in Islam – Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an. Austin: University of Texas Press; Wadud, A., 2006. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld; Syed, M.A., 2004. *The position of women in Islam: a progressive view*. New York: State University of New York Press.
  - 2 Van Nieuwkerk, K., 2006. *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
  - 3 Shehadeh, L.R., 2003. *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

active voices speaking on behalf of women, talking to other ‘sisters’ and, more importantly, ‘brothers’ in the *ummah*<sup>4</sup>, and providing guidance and encouragement as vocal proponents of radical Islam.

This analysis sheds new light on the shift in women’s role from passive supporters to active agents of radical, political Islam, and argues that contemporary radical Muslim women are much more outspoken and visible than they were in the past, also prior to committing acts of political violence. Voice of those women is as important as their actions, while violence on the narrative and performative level is not a product of politics but conversely – a means applied to produce or at least reaffirm political agenda. These phenomena indicate that the strand of a progressive, feminine Islam is impugned by feminisation of radical Islam which poses a serious challenge to the gender based discourses, and requires responses from scholars, politicians and opinion leaders.

## Women and Islam

Undoubtedly, when it comes to debates and discussions, the issue of women in Islam is what Jocelin Cesari<sup>5</sup> appropriated as “a yardstick for the various interpretations.” In her understanding, the more radical the interpretation is, the more anti-feminist stance it espouses. Thus, Cesari calls for a ‘gender jihad’<sup>6</sup> in order to change the attitudes towards women’s status and role in Islam. Oliver Roy<sup>7</sup> noticed that regardless of the context, discussions on the subject of women and women-related issues in Islam are expressed in terms directly rooted in modern Western concepts to this extent that even the anti-feminist discourse uses the language of feminism.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Roy observes, *sharia* law is presented as a guardian of women’s right, which according to radical Islamists constitutes an alternative to feminism “a perspective rather different from that of

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4 Community of believers.

5 Cesari, J., 2004. *When Islam and Democracy Meet. Muslims in Europe and in the United States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 169.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Roy, O., 2004. *Globalised Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 33.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

the classical *fiqh*<sup>9</sup> literature.” This in itself is a paradox for Roy who asserts that “most of the debate on the backwardness of Muslim societies concerns the issue of women.”<sup>10</sup> A broader perspective has been adopted by Johannes Jansen.<sup>11</sup> He offers four approaches to Islamic discourse on women: progressive, with a conformist modern reinterpretation of Islam; conservative whereby reading of the Koran marginalises the issue of women; selective, distinguishing between religious dogmas and cultural habits, and the fundamental one arguing that men are superior to women regardless of what is the prevailing modern view in this matter.

Trifković<sup>12</sup> to the contrary believes that “the status of women in Islam is comparable to that of the human rights in Cuba: theoretically exalted if one subscribes to the theory, yet utterly deplorable in practice, and impolite to discuss frankly in the enlightened Western circles”. To support his claims Trifković examines both the Koran and Hadith as well as the daily life in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where the Islamic law, *sharia*, is formally accepted as the country constitution and the source of legislation that relegates women to such an inferior position that they are even forbidden to drive cars. In a sense, Trifković concludes,<sup>13</sup> in Islam the subservient status of a woman in relation to man borders on heresy since a mortal man is “elevated to an almost divine plane when the destiny of his wife is at stake”.

Indeed, the status of women under *sharia* leaves no doubts as to her inferior position. In addition to the enforced rules of modesty and chastity, *sharia* places women under the legal guardianship of their male relatives. While a man is allowed up to four wives, a woman can have only one husband (and only a Muslim). When it comes to divorce, a man can do it easily, a woman must have permission and faces several obstacles. A daughter inherits only half of the son’s inheritance and in court a male witness equals two female witnesses.<sup>14</sup> Of course, one needs to

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9 Islamic jurisprudence, the science of applying Islamic law (*sharia*).

10 Roy, O., 2004. *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

11 Jansen, J.J.G., 2005. *Podwójna natura fundamentalizmu islamskiego*. Cracow: LIBRON s.c., p. 172.

12 Trifković, S., 2002. *The Sword of the Prophet. Islam: History, theology, impact on the world*. Boston: Regina Orthodox Press Inc., p. 154.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

14 For more detailed works on this topic please see: Mernissi, F., 1991. *Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Right in Islam*. New York: Basic;

take into consideration both diversity of the Muslim world as well as the divergence between *sharia* and local customary law. In many places tribal customary law held sway with only limited obeisance to *sharia* and sometimes it prevailed even in spite of being in direct contradiction to the *sharia* principles. In fact, Nielsen<sup>15</sup> observes that contrary to the widespread stereotype of the traditional rural regions, the fullest effect of *sharia* tended to be felt in the urban areas, especially in the Western settings. A number of authors<sup>16</sup> agree that the problems faced by Muslim women are numerous and complex. The list includes arranged marriages with a spouse from a village of origin as well as child marriages, increasing endogamy, polygamy, clitorrectomy (female genital mutilation), emphasis of chastity, modesty, and seclusion of women (including separation of sexes), honour killings (i.e. the murder of women and girls for the sake of family's reputation).

Some authors<sup>17</sup> perceive and discuss the issue of women in Islam solely through the lenses of marriage and family issues. Echoing the academic debates, media narratives and political discourse also tend to focus on girls and young women caught between the culture of their origin (an Islamic one) and the culture they grow up with (the Western culture). For this reason, the status of women, and women's rights in Islam are debated within a narrow perimeter even if they touch upon an issue with much more potent ramifications. A perfect example of such theme is the problem of veiling. *Hijab*, the Muslim scarf, is not only a religious duty or a cultural norm but can also be an ideological stance. In other words, in some cases *hijab* not a fashion statement but a political statement, and thus should be considered as such.

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Roald, A.-S., 2001. *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*. New York: Routledge; Jawad, H.A., 1998. *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, and Spectorosky, S.A., 2009. *Women in Classical Islamic Law: A Survey of the Sources*. Leiden: Brill.

- 15 Nielsen, J., 2004. *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 109.
- 16 Among them: Trifković, S., 2002. *The Sword of the Prophet. Islam: History, theology, impact on the world*. Boston: Regina Orthodox Press Inc; Sookhdeo, P., 2007. *Faith, Power and Territory. A Handbook of British Islam*. McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing; Spencer, R., 2007. *Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't*, Washington, D.C: Regnery Publishing, and Idriss, M.M. and Abbas, T. (eds), 2011. *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam*. Oxon; Routledge.
- 17 Nielsen, J., 2004. *op. cit.*

## Veiling: Political Fashion

Patrick Sookhdeo<sup>18</sup> juxtaposes the interpretations which consider the scarf (or *hijab*) an instrument of male control with those indicating the liberating dimension of veiling whereby it is seen not as a discriminatory symbol of oppression, but rather as a choice made by enlightened Muslim women. The latter understanding renders the veil not only a deliberate marker of very specific identity but also a manifestation of politically motivated programme. As Emma Tarlo observes<sup>19</sup> this strand of “sartorial politics” whereby a dress is wielded as a “self-conscious assertion of difference and distance from ‘the West’, a shield against the corrupting forces of ‘integration’ and a tool on the path towards the establishment of the Islamic State” needs to be placed in the wider political agenda of radical Islam.

There are three issues one needs to take into consideration when analysing the problems with Muslim veils: Firstly, the problems with interpreting the Koran and the Hadith against certain ideological background. Sookhdeo<sup>20</sup> gives an example: The Koran urges women to cover themselves and dress modestly. But what does the Arabic word ‘*jujub*’ mean – bosom only or head, face, neck, and bosom? It can be observed that the more radical the women’s stance, the more she tends to cover herself, including her face and hands. This can be particularly problematic in public offices and schools especially when a woman remains merely a pawn in a political game orchestrated by somebody else. The attempts to politicise the issue of Islamic attire is clearly visible in the case brought by Shabina Begum on 2 March 2005.

Shabina Begum (at that time, aged 16) a UK citizen of Bangladeshi origin was a pupil at Denbigh High School in Luton; educational establishment with a diverse pupil community. In accordance with the multicultural approach, apart from uniforms incorporating trousers or skirts, female pupils at Denbigh High School are also offered a uniform based on the traditional Pakistani garb called *shalwar kameez*. This was decided upon via consultations with the local community. For two years, Shabina

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18 Sookhdeo, P., 2007. *Faith, Power and Territory. A Handbook of British Islam*. McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, p. 69.

19 Tarlo, E., 2005. “Reconsidering Stereotypes: Anthropological Reflections on the *Jilbab*”, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 21, no. 6 (December 2005), p. 13.

20 Sookhdeo, P., 2007. *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

attended the school without complaint, but in September 2002, accompanied by her brother, Shuweb Rahman, and another young male (both connected with Hizb ut-Tahrir<sup>21</sup>), she demanded to be allowed to wear the long coat-like garment known as the *jilbab* arguing that *shalwar kameez* is not compliant with the requirements of modesty and Islamic dress prescribed by *sharia* law. Shabina refused to attend the school for three years and issued a claim for judicial review on the grounds that the school had interfered with her Human Rights to manifest her religion (Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights) and her right to education.

In France the first ‘headscarf affair’ entered the political scene already in 1989. In the town of Creil (Parisian suburb) three girls from a secondary school insisted on wearing a headscarf contradicting the new school rule imposing strict *laïcité* of the French public space. The rule was firmly rooted in the French republican tradition of state’s neutrality which the veils violated because they constituted religious manifestation.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the refusal to attend the school without a headscarf not only posed a challenge to the republican secularist identity of the French state but also invested a heavy symbolic meaning into the veil itself. The ensuing 2003–2004 headscarf controversy in France only exacerbated these issues further delineating how wearing the veil is not an end in itself but merely a means to promote a specific political agenda. While on the surface the debates focused on feminist approaches and legal dimensions of the issue (with purported human rights violations), the whole affair circulated around *raison d’état* and politics.

Democracy is a sum of certain rules organising state’s sovereignty, including legal regulations which normally strive to be neutral and are governed by rationality. In principle, democratic procedures are aimed at alleviating internal political conflicts and by this token politics can be understood as a set of actions aimed at solving societal problems. Nevertheless, the procedures, laws and regulations alone are unable to transform the collective that uses and applies them into a real, albeit imagined,

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21 Hizb ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party), a movement with a political goal of establishing caliphate by non-violent means advocating simultaneously that there can be no compromise with any non-Islamic government. It eschews application of sharia as its top most priority and has a bottom-up approach.

22 Van Ooijen, H., 2012. *Religious Symbols in Public Functions. A Comparative Analysis of Dutch, English and French Justifications for Limiting the Freedom of Public Officials to display Religious Symbols*. Antwerp: Intersentia, pp. 188–200.

community (nation, civil society, etc.). This community must be further defined as a group of people ready to face challenges together, work together for the common good, and together make decisions in the framework of existing procedures. Before such decision is made, a debate resulting in choosing the optimal solution must have taken place. But this is precisely where a problem occurs because it becomes clear that the political order regulating the collective must be infused with the essence of the non-political or, according to Charles Taylor<sup>23</sup>, pre-political framework.

The question of group identity is a problem inherent to liberal democratic societies. They are built on the foundation of a free individual and their unquestionable right to possess identity that is not restrained or imposed by external factors as well as the right to express this identity – also in a public life. Then, if the political system gives an opportunity to express all the possible versions of identity, their number and validity are equally questionable since it proves impossible to choose one as universally binding. This inherent tension between what is extra-political (cultural, religious, ideational factors) and intra-political (laws, regulations and democratic procedures) renders the veiling issue purely political because it touches upon the shape and direction of the political community. Universal character of politically-based problem of veiling (as opposed to a culturally – or legally-based dilemma) is also visible in the fact that although France was the first European state to adopt the general prohibition of wearing face veils in public, it has not remained the only one.<sup>24</sup>

The second consideration is directly rooted in this phenomenon: some Muslim women, especially from the younger generations, adopt the stricter interpretation of modesty in order to demonstrate their anti-secular or anti-Western world view. In this vein Sookhdeo<sup>25</sup> diagnoses that “wearing the veil is in many cases more a political statement than an act of piety” enabling radical organisations to implement their agenda to Islamise host societies. These use veils as a means to challenge the neutrality of public space and emphasize the presence of Islam because of its visibility (this is particularly the case with *niqab*<sup>26</sup> and *burka*<sup>27</sup>).

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, C., 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Van Ooijen, H., 2012. *Op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Sookhdeo, P., 2007. *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Opaque veil covering at least the lower half of the face. It usually covers the whole face leaving a slit for the eyes.

<sup>27</sup> Afghan outer garment covering the whole body and face with a mesh grille over the eyes.

In this context one should invoke the iconic image of Muriel Degauque, the first white female suicide bomber. Muriel Degauque was born and brought up as Catholic in the small factory town of Monceau-sur-Sambre in Belgium. In the late 1990s, Degauque met an Algerian man who introduced her to Islam, to which she converted. Shortly after becoming Muslim, she met Issam Goris, who was seven years her junior, the son of a Belgian man and a Moroccan woman, and known to Belgian police as a radical Islamist. They got married in 2000 and moved to Morocco where Degauque learnt Arabic and studied the Koran. The couple returned to Belgium two years later; by then Degauque was no longer Muriel but Myriam and new religion became the axis of her whole life replacing everything that was there before. Migration to a foreign country followed by a social and cultural rupture only intensified the importance of Islam. Degauque was wearing not only a headscarf but a chador, i.e. a full length robe worn by Muslim women in North Africa. Eventually, she wore a burka with gloves so no one could recognise her, not only the regular Belgians who did not suspect a white Belgian, but even her friends who had known her for a long time. Degauque removed herself from all kinds of non-Islamic influence and with the exception of her parents, she socialised only with Muslims. This was exacerbated by the fact that not only did she conform to the strictest interpretations of *sharia*, but also required other people, including non-Muslims, to follow them. Mr And Mrs Degauque did not even know that their daughter left the country when in August 2005 Muriel called for the last time from Syria informing her parents she would be gone for more than a year. On 9 November 2005, at the age of 38, Degauque committed a suicide attack against American forces in Baquba, Iraq driving past a U.S. patrol and wounding one soldier, in what is believed to be the first European woman convert suicide mission.

While this trend of converging progress in radicalisation and increased veiling was true during the Al Qaeda period, it continued also when the Islamic State took over as the iconic organisation of radical Islam. Furthermore, this trend is present not only in Europe, but also in other regions of the world. One of the many examples can be Australian, Amira Karroum, who started wearing traditional Muslim dress only shortly before she went to Syria where she was killed in jihad warfare.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Cuneo, C., 2014. Family and friends gather at Sydney mosque to remember slain Muslim woman Amira Karroum and her husband Yusuf Ali. *News.com.au*, January

Thirdly, if we approach the question of *hijab* as a personal decision based on the right to wear it, we also need to remember about those individuals who want to secure their right not to veil. Many Muslim women tend to use the scarf as a way to protect themselves from gangs of young men in poor neighbourhood.<sup>29</sup> In many places in Europe prepubescent girls are covered scarves even though there is no need for it even under the strictest interpretation of *sharia*. What are the consequences for a girl who would choose not to wear *hijab* and distance herself from the community? Used this way scarf (or its lack) ceases to fulfil a religious function and becomes again an identity signifier and a veiled a political statement. Rights of those women who choose not to veil should also be taken into consideration. What about the rights of other people not wish to cover themselves in accordance with certain 'modesty rules'? They also may be faced with coercion or violence, like it happened recently in a French park where a girl sunbathing in bikini was beaten by a group of five offended Muslim females.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, radical writers and activists regularly reduce women's choice to that between the bikini and the *burka*<sup>31</sup> with the West presented as the epitome of all depravity and in a clear opposition to Islam.

## From Passive Objects to Active Agents

While traditional status of women in Islam low due to the combination of patriarchal structure of the society, cultural heritage, and the legal Islamic norms, a new trend is emerging whereby women are not only active in the modernising circles but, quite the opposite, become vocal proponents of radical interpretations of Islam. Thus, instead of being the much hoped for progressive force, they constitute an avant-garde of the opposite: radical agenda advocating and actively supporting the agenda

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14, 2014, <http://www.news.com.au/national/family-and-friends-gather-at-sydney-mosque-to-remember-slain-muslim-woman-amira-karroum-and-her-husband-yusuf-ali/story-e6frfkp9-1226801003387> (Accessed: June 16, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Roy, O., 2004. *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Duportail, J., 2015. Agression d'une jeune fille en maillot de bain à Reims : pas de mobile religieux, 25 July, 2015, Le Figaro, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/07/25/01016-20150725ARTFIG00105-une-jeune-fille-lynchee-pour-avoir-bronze-en-maillot-de-bain-dans-un-parc-a-reims.php> (Accessed: July 25, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Cesari, J., 2004. *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

of political Islam. Feminisation of radical Islam took some time, but it progressed and what hitherto represented a solely male domain, now belongs also to women. Where at first women were not present, with time they became pliable instruments, only to gain their own independent agency and a power to act autonomously.

Early Muslim literature discussing jihad and warfare is clearly male-centred. War and jihad belong to man, and females can only fulfil subservient roles. A succinct description of the role of women in war can be found in a book called “Hedaya”<sup>32</sup> written by the scholar Burhan al-Din al-Marghinani (1135–1197):

It is lawful for aged women to accompany an army, for the performance of such business as suits them, such as dressing victuals, administering water, and preparing medicines for the sick and wounded; but with respect to young women, it is better that they stay at home, as this may prevent perplexity or disturbance. The women, however, must not engage in fight, as this argues weakness in the Musulmans [Muslims]; women therefore must not take any personal concern in battle unless in a case of absolute necessity: and it is not laudable to carry young women along with the army, either for the purpose of carnal gratification, or service: if, however, the necessity be very urgent, female slaves may be taken, but not wives.

With the advent of contemporary terrorism, operational value of female fighters has been recognised by terrorist organisations all over the world. From Tamil Tigers female suicide bombers, to Chechen black widows, from Palestinian women becoming *jihadis*, to Nigerian women caught or suspected of *zina*<sup>33</sup> promised to redeem family’s honour by killing infidels<sup>34</sup> the trend to employ a less likely perpetrator, i.e. women was palpable<sup>35</sup> and is still on the rise.

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32 Quoted after Sookhdeo, P., 2007a. *Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of Militant Islam*. McLean, VA: Isaac Publishing, p. 74.

33 The Islamic legal term for sexual immorality of various kinds.

34 [-], 2014. Woman suicide bomber attacks Nigerian market. *Agence France Presse*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/woman-suicide-bomber-attacks-nigerian-market/story-e6frg6so-1227125106140> (Accessed: 17.11.2014).

35 Bloom, M. (2007). Female Suicide Bombers: a Global Trend, *Daedalus*, 136:1, pp. 29–47.

Two changes in this tendency are interesting. Firstly, what was initially a pragmatic consideration (and not uniquely Islamic) soon gained credibility also among Muslim scholars and thinkers. Ideology followed practice, not vice versa, and appropriate theological explanations, legal basis as well as political justifications were developed. For instance, in 2004 Sheikh Sayyid Tantawi, Grand Imam of al-Azhar University, following the new phenomenon of Palestinian women perpetrating suicide bombings, was quoted in Arabic media as confirming that Palestinian suicide bombings were acts of martyrdom, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator. What is interesting, he also condoned female suicide bombers taking off their *hijab* or wearing a wider covering veil to hide their bombs in order to ensure success of their operations.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, in Chechnya women recruited as suicide bombers were often selected from among those who have lost husbands and brothers to the Russians. The willingness to join the fight was politically motivated, as for those bereaved women, suicide attack is the only practical way in which they could retaliate.<sup>37</sup> The Black Widow constituted a powerful image, but image only. Chechen women did not speak, they only acted on behalf of a greater cause. Discussed above Muriel Degauque, was deadly yet silent instrument of jihad. She did not leave any written or spoken testimony; we do not have at our disposal any manifesto or video where she would explain her motifs or ambitions. It seems that her life and deeds were insignificant, only her dying mattered as if Degauque was articulated anew in her death. Her death made her visible. Only her death made a difference. Similarly, the first Palestinian suicide bomber, Wafa Idris was a 'nobody' before becoming an instrument of *jihad* and a vessel for Palestinian liberation. Not only did she have educational programmes as well as summer camps named after her, but also was celebrated in song on Palestinian Authority TV<sup>38</sup> and remains a source of inspiration for other Palestinians.

With the beginning of military operations in Iraq and Syria, the Islamist forces started to gain momentum and soon reached a new level, both politically and in terms of conducting a holy war. Again, we could observe widening of the space where women could engage themselves and perform

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<sup>36</sup> Sookhdeo, P., 2007a. *Op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

new roles, at least new with regard to the scope of the activities and the manner in which they were propagated. In the first stage, this new form of engagement was *jihad al-nikah*, permitting extramarital sexual relations with multiple partners provided that these partners are warriors of Allah. Contrarily to the rules laid out in the “Hedaya”, *jihad al-nikah* is considered by some hard-line Sunni Muslim Salafists as a legitimate form of holy war.<sup>39</sup> There were special fatwas issued to justify and promulgate this practice. One of such fatwas was attributed to Saudi sheikh Muhammad al-’Arifi<sup>40</sup>, who had called on practicing Muslim women to travel to Syria and offer their sexual services to the *jihadis* fighting there. Tunisian authorities confirmed that women from different countries: Tunisia, Chechnya, Egypt, Iraq, France, and Germany had travelled to Syria for “sex *jihad*”.<sup>41</sup>

Perešin<sup>42</sup> observes that a growing number of Muslim women (Muslimas) are joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and estimates their number at over 500 or, alternatively, 10 percent of the number of all ISIS’ Western foreign fighters. Women are moving to Islamic State in order to marry a *jihadi*<sup>43</sup>, to raise children or to support building a perfect Islamic society.<sup>44</sup> Many women underline that the chance to take part in the state-building process is very important for them.<sup>45</sup> More and

39 [-], 2013. Tunisian women ‘waging sex jihad in Syria. *Agence France Presse*, September 20, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tunisian-women-waging-sex-jihad-in-syria-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nid=54822> (Accessed: 20.09.2013).

40 Ibrahim, R., 2013. The ‘Sex Jhad’. *Raymondibrahim.com*, June 23, 2013, <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/from-the-arab-world/the-sex-jihad/> (Accessed: 23.06.2013).

41 [-], 2013a. Few Tunisian women waging sex jihad: official. *Agence France Presse*, October 7, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Oct-07/233764-few-tunisian-women-waging-sex-jihad-official.ashx#axzz2h3cy8XEE> (Accessed: 07.10.2013).

42 Perešin, A., 2005. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

43 Thornhill, T. and Camber, R., 2014. The British female terror groupies queuing up to marry jihad fighters in Syria. *The Daily Mail*, February 17, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2561247/Jihad-hold-How-British-terror-groupies-heading-Syria-wed-fighters.html> (Accessed: 17.02.2014).

44 Christie, S., 2014. Terrorist toddler: Terrifying tweet shows Jihadi son posing with a rifle. *Daily Star*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/390054/Twitter-account-shows-Jihadi-son-posing-with-a-rifle> (Accessed: 21.07.2015).

45 Johnston, C., 2015. Missing UK family of 12 ‘feel safe after joining Isis. *The Guardian*, July 4, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/04/missing-uk-mannan-family-feel-safe-after-joining-isis-statement> (Accessed: 14.07.2015).

more often women are also given new roles in the community. Mother and wife is no longer a default career option. Females can now become recruiters like Umm Layth, but also gather intelligence or infiltrate 'hard to reach' enemy territories.<sup>46</sup>

Recent research on women who join the radical Islamic groups (most notably ISIS) and get involved in their propaganda and activities, which include "brutal violence, torture, executions and mistreatments of prisoners, hostages and civilians, including women and children"<sup>47</sup> in the first place demonstrates the shift in women's role from passive supporters to active agents of radical, political Islam, and secondly proves that radical Muslimas are much more outspoken and visible prior to committing acts of political violence. Voice of those women is as important as their actions. Both through traditional media channels as well as on various social media outlets, images of chatty, young females actively and directly supporting the Islamic State are prevalent. Radical Muslimas offer narratives about their individual experiences from daily activities (housework, playing with children), to practical tips and guidance (how to pack before moving to Syria), to motivational reflections and propaganda. Women share and express their happiness of living in the Caliphate where they have possibilities of exercising different roles and developing numerous competencies from housewives and mothers, to supporters (programmers, social media activists who spread the propaganda), to facilitators of the struggle or even prospective fighters who learn how to administer first aid and use weapons.

Voices of radical Muslim women are heard not only with respect to those who are associated with the Islamic State, but also other organisations representing radical Islam. This is reflected in life as well as the personal writings of Samantha Lewthwaite, the White Widow, person involved in the terrorist attack in a Nairobi shopping mall, which killed more than 70 people.<sup>48</sup> In addition to a love poem dedicated to Osama

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<sup>46</sup> [-], 2014. Girl Talk: Calling Western Women to Syria, *Insite Blog*, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/4406-girl-talk-calling-western-women-to-syria> (Accessed: 14.07.2015).

<sup>47</sup> Perešin, A., 2005. *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, R., 2013. The White Widow's 'Jihadi children'. *The Daily Mail*, 4 October, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2444552/White-Widow-Samantha-Lewthwaite-raising-Jihadi-children-murder-Islams-enemies.html> (Accessed 04.10.2013).

Bin Laden<sup>49</sup>, the recovered materials include a memoir consisting of nine pages; a taproot of something that was meant to be a six-chapters-long manual for other Muslims aspiring to become a *Mujahid*.<sup>50</sup>

“It was my husband’s talk to the kids and then reading the Women’s Role in Jihad that made it clear it was time to put pen to paper and share with others what I was blessed with.”<sup>51</sup> In her diary written with an aim of inciting others to wage a holy war against the infidels the political motivations, albeit clothed in religious language, are visible in nearly every line. Lewthwaite explained that “I have for many years now wanted to write something that would benefit my brothers and sisters, a message of hope and encouragement and light in an era when many are still in darkness.” This message of encouragement was aimed at documenting “the reality of what it means to be a *Mujahid*, living as a *ghuraba*<sup>52</sup> and what it was that guided many of these amazing men and woman to put forth all they have for Allah (swt<sup>53</sup>).”

The manuscript contains the list of six chapters and some of the interview questions. The manual starts with questions regarding rejection, e.g. in Chapter 1 (‘Guidence to Jihad/Islam’) Lewthwaite asks “What have you sacrificed in living this life?” and “What has changed most about your character? Compared to before you were a *Mujahid*?” Slowly it moves on to the issues of exclusion and difficulties in identity maintenance. In Chapter 3 it intends to discuss “Life as a Stranger” while in Chapter 5 Lewthwaite plans to describe “Your reasons for fighting and leaving all you love behind”. She also lists other questions, such as: “Explain in detail what it means to be a stranger amongst your own family, friends”, “Why do you believe jihad is the way forward?” and “How is the reality of leaving your mothers, wives and children behind?” Lewthwaite also planned to write a chapter on “a woman’s perspective – advice and stories from the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the *muhadeen*”.

49 [-], 2013. White Widow Samatha Lewthwaite’s love poem to Osama Bin Laden found on computer during police raid. *Mirror Online*, 22 October, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/white-widow-samatha-lewthwaites-love-2479295#ix-zz2jmBq6vkz> (Accessed: 22.10.2013).

50 Mujahid is someone who struggles for the sake of Allah and Islam.

51 All quotes preserve the original spelling and punctuation of Samantha Lewthwaite’s diary.

52 ‘Al *ghuraba*’ is an Arabic term which means ‘the strangers.’

53 SWT stands for the Arabic words “Subhanahu Wa Ta’ala,” or “Glory to Him, the Exalted.”

## Political Violence

The discussed above voices of radical Muslim women mark a departure from traditional gender-based narratives presupposing liberal female proponents of moderate Islam and male discourses enforcing radical interpretations of Muslim faith and praxis. Whereas in the past radical clerics and activists were telling women how to dress or behave, and framed the boundaries of appropriate female engagement in various spheres of life, feminisation of radical Islam has led to a situation whereby women speak to other women as well as men on many different issues central to the ideology of political Islam: from *hijab* to *jihad*.

The idea of taking part in actual fighting is attractive to some women. Many posts can be found in the social media where women support and celebrate brutality and violence or express desire to inflict violence themselves. Suffice to mention the infamous tweet from 22-year-old Khadijah Dare (married to a Swedish jihadist fighter) asserting her wish to become the first British woman to kill a UK or US citizen.<sup>54</sup> Perešin underlines that “some women also manifest militant desires, expressing willingness to become a fighter or suicide bomber, by tweeting about martyrdom as the ‘highest dream.’”<sup>55</sup> Perešin also describes two all-female brigades, Al-Khansaa and Umm al Rayan, responsible for patrolling streets, conducting raids to search women, look for male fighters who might have attempted to hide dressing as a woman, and enforcing strict dress code and morality rules in public. According to Perešin<sup>56</sup> Al-Khansaa brigade was set up in Raqqa in February 2014 and is composed of 25–30 armed women, mostly British who are presented in the media as very brutal and applying cruel punitive methods.

Violence is a tool used in a process of framing and re-framing the political reality along certain lines. The more the lines are defined, the more staunch and strict the reality is, the less room for ambiguity, dialog, and compromise. However, violence, constituting a potent border making force which “changes the perceptions...about the very nature of group

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<sup>54</sup> Hunt, C., 2014. Young, vulnerable women being groomed for jihad. *Irish Independent*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.independent.ie/opinion/columnists/carol-hunt-young-vulnerable-women-being-groomed-for-jihad-30531667.html> (Accessed: 24.09.2014).

<sup>55</sup> Perešin, A., 2005. *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

relations and boundaries,<sup>57</sup> can become something more than means to an end. It becomes a very specific borderline with its own unique potential to disentangle the mixed, extricate political worlds otherwise entwined within the shared reality, and create impenetrable obstacles.

Furthermore, violence faces every member of the community with an unavoidable choice invoking a new type of either/or consciousness with no space for dual loyalties. “Communities, like individuals, draw borders not so much to assert presence but to exclude the influence of that which is perceived as threatening to the persistence of that presence” claims Bowman<sup>58</sup> maintaining that violence delineates the boundaries of belonging. This argument is reiterated by Appadurai<sup>59</sup> for whom violence, and especially extreme and spectacular violence, “is one the ways in which the illusion of fixed and charged identities is produced.” Violence thus is not a product of politics but conversely – a means to produce or at least reaffirm political agenda. Riches<sup>60</sup> observes that as both a social and cultural resource, violence employs four key properties that make it extremely useful both from a practical (as a means of inducing a change) and a symbolic (dramatic expression of ideas) point of view especially as the other social acts are not nearly controversial, conspicuous and relatively easily performed enough and also they can be more abstruse in their meaning. Consequently, radical political Islam applies violence not only to assault frontiers in an attempt to change them by denying the past, but also to erect the new ones, protected by an impenetrable barrier of rejection. In a world devoid of clear cuts, Bowman<sup>61</sup> suggests, violence is the ultimate bifurcating force reducing the complexity of societal and political reality; a border-marking tool between ‘us’ and the ‘past’, between the in – and out-group members of whom all are forced to take a stance, integrating what is within and isolating what is beyond and “producing particular crystallisations of sociality out of what had previously been larger networks of interaction”.

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57 Duijzings, G., 2000. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. London: Hurst & Co, p. 33.

58 Bowman, G.W., 2001. The Violence in Identity. In B. Schmidt and I. Schroeder, (eds). *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*. London: Routledge, p. 42.

59 Appadurai, A., 2006. *The Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay in the Geography of Anger*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 7.

60 Riches, D., 1986. The Phenomenon of Violence. In D. Riches, (ed). *The Anthropology of Violence*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 11.

61 Bowman, G.W., 2001. *Op. cit.*, pp. 30–34.

## Conclusions

Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's wife urged Muslim women: "I advise you to raise your children in the cult of *jihad* and martyrdom and to instil in them a love for religion and death."<sup>62</sup> In 2014 the Pakistani Taliban, Maulana Abdul Aziz, boasted to have as many as 500 female suicide bombers ready to act.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in 2014 the proportion of women leaving for jihad was 43% against 57% of men. In March 2015, the trend has already changed with 136 young women against 125 men reported to be travelling to Arab countries for the Islamic holy war.<sup>64</sup> One of the last decisions of the Islamic State was a permission for women to become suicide bombers without their husbands consent. "Those women who married our men can blow themselves up without having their husbands' consent," the ruling announced.<sup>65</sup> According to available documents and data, self-described caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the main person in charge of women's faith. It is believed that the new changes came after the militant group's heavy losses in Iraq and Syria, and this has encouraged them to promote the role of female *jihadis*.

For Muslim women from the radical milieu these developments imply unknown before level of independence. In future it might also mean that women will be participating in military operations. Alternatively, having lived in a warzone, women might not only become active participants and perpetrators engaged in acts of political violence in Iraq and Syria but also, in case of Western volunteers, they might be prompted to conduct similar operations upon their return to the home countries. As demonstrated in this paper, ideology can be forced to catch up with praxis and

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<sup>62</sup> [-], 2012. Al-Qaeda eyes children for jihad. *Middle East Online*, June 8, 201, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52706> (Accessed: 17.05.2015).

<sup>63</sup> Anthony, A., 2014. Pakistan Taliban Preps 500 Female Suicide Bombers, Aziz Says. *Bloomberg*, February 10, 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2014-02-09/pakistan-taliban-readies-500-female-suicide-bombers-cleric-says> (Accessed: 10.02.2014).

<sup>64</sup> [-], 2015. France: more women than men leaving for jihad. *ANSAMED*, April 15, 2015, [http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2015/04/15/france-more-women-than-men-leaving-for-jihad\\_d007dae6-f593-483c-b517-be7b-5639c3ec.html](http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2015/04/15/france-more-women-than-men-leaving-for-jihad_d007dae6-f593-483c-b517-be7b-5639c3ec.html) (Accessed: 15.04.2015).

<sup>65</sup> [-], 2015. ISIS doc says women can become suicide bombers without husbands' permission. *RUDAW*, May 17, 2015, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/17052015> (Accessed: 17.05.2015).

thus it is possible that the jihad ideology will evolve again offering new, gender neutral re-interpretations.

In spite of rich feminist discourse and claims that only Islam elevates women to their rightly place within the society, when one looks to the political sphere a great void poses a substantial challenge to these arguments. In the words of Trifković “the equivalents of Empress Theodora, Elizabeth I, and Catherine the Great, Maria Theresa, and Victoria do not exist in the Muslim world.”<sup>66</sup> When it comes to the political element, majority of Muslim women are perceived merely as transmitters of traditions. Such void means that “born again Muslim women, as well as women who fall under a neofundamentalist-imposed order, have to reconstruct and recompose their way of being a woman by dealing with strict regulations” concludes Roy.<sup>67</sup> We can hypothesise that radicalisation is for some women a way to recast new patterns into a traditional political settings.

Careful examination of the radical Muslimas’ discourses indicated their different motifs and aims, from religious, ideological and political to personal ones.<sup>68</sup> Even though religious motivation is cited repeatedly as the most important driver, it usually coalesces with the political colouring further fuelling the drive to actively support radical Islam. Many women see it as a chance to take part in the state-building process and to participate in the creation of a new society. Particularly in the case of those radical Muslim women who support ISIS, they talk about moving to or joining the state, not a terrorist group or organisation.

Despite its exploratory nature, this paper enhances our understanding of the ongoing process of feminisation that can be observed with respect to radical Islam. Whilst this phenomenon might be difficult to tackle, scepticism and suspicion towards it render us ill-prepared for encountering Muslim women who actually hold extremist views and act upon them. Further research should be undertaken to examine how to counter trends discussed above and a key priority policy ought to be developed for the long-term responses to feminisation of radical Islam.

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<sup>66</sup> Trifković, S., 2002. *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>67</sup> Roy, O., 2004. *Op. cit.*, p. 267.

<sup>68</sup> Benari, E., 2013. British Women Join Jihad in Syria. *Israel National News*. July 26, 2013, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/170288> (Accessed: 26.07.2013).

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