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***Appealing to Women's Obligations to Join the Caliphate:
Content Analysis of IS' English Language Magazine Dabiq¹***

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Introduction

Why Study Terrorist Recruitment of Women?

The Islamic State (IS), contrary to what one might expect considering its violent and misogynistic reputation, manages to recruit women from around the world to travel to and join the caliphate. The estimates vary from 550² to over 4,000³; in 2015, it

¹ This project, which has directed a disproportionate amount of my time, would not have been possible without the support of my professors, notably my supervisor Professor Hoffman who guided me through the entire process, my colleagues and friends, my family, and my non-judgmental dog, all to whom I am graciously indebted.

² Anita Perešin, "Fatal attraction: Western muslims and Isis," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, 3 (2015).

³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

was estimated that 10 percent of all Western recruits were female⁴. Canada was even seeing more female than male nationals detained as Islamic State supporters in Syria in 2019.⁵ How can this be? What might be an underlying reason for such an unexpected outcome?

IS continues to pose a significant concern worldwide, due in part to its continuing unconventional recruitment strategy. Despite a drastic loss of territory in the past several years, IS still maintains a presence as a terrorist organisation that continues to recruit both men and women successfully; it is not obliterated. Indeed, "even a brief examination provides evidence of widening and deepening female participation and mobilization as of late 2005."⁶

Some scholars, such as Vergani and Bliuc attribute IS' success in recruiting women to the emphasis IS propaganda places on women.⁷ IS employs propaganda that is directly aimed at women, such as images on Twitter posted by pro-Islamic State women. The organisation also publishes articles in its magazines which are explicitly for women and apparently by women, such as articles entitled, *To/From Our Sisters* in their online magazine *Dabiq*.

Despite the efforts ISIS makes to recruit women, Western policymakers typically focus their attention on the behavior of Muslim men.⁸ This blind spot, however, makes female recruits more dangerous because they are unexpected. "One of the most significant advantages held by female terrorists is that their potential is denied, ignored, and diminished and as a result they are almost always unanticipated, underestimated, and highly effective."⁹ They assist not only in attacks but in keeping community, reproducing, keeping family, and raising children. Thomas writes that the oversight of considering women in political violence is consequential for international relations, for

⁴ Perešin, "Fatal Attraction."

⁵ Stewart Bell, "Among Canadian ISIS detainees in Syria, women far outnumber men," Global News, 12 October 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6021043/canadian-isis-detainees-women-outnumber-men/>.

⁶ Karla Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, 3 (2007): p. 121.

⁷ Matteo Vergani and Ana-Maria Bliuc, "The evolution of the isis' language: a quantitative analysis of the language of the first year of dabiq magazine," *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società= Security, Terrorism and Society* 2, 2 (2015).

⁸ Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

female terrorists are not aberrations and can be perpetrators of terrorist acts and members of terrorist groups just as any man might be.¹⁰

When it comes to recruitment, feminists argue that terrorist organizations would find success with women if they focused on them as agents rather than simply as the object of male desire (as traditionalists suggest). The literature on women's involvement in terror organizations, however, has not provided a clear sense of what it might look like for a terrorist organization to use this recruitment strategy. Interestingly, IS appears to have done so.

In this study, I examine the messages IS used to recruit women into their ranks. The underlying idea of this research is that there is much to be learned about how terrorist organizations recruit women by studying the efforts of IS, a group that was relatively successful at attracting women to join their caliphate. Women are a largely overlooked subset of recruits, but it is important that the involvement of female terrorist recruits be taken seriously because they make up a notable proportion of recruits and often fly under the radar with more ease than men.

This is especially true of English-speaking women. The ability to speak English appears to play an important role in IS activities. However, these women did not affiliate with IS through Arabic speaking channels, radicalised Islamic Arabic-speaking husbands, or radical mosques. Something else reached these recruits. Odds are that something is *Dabiq*, a continuously published online propaganda form aimed at foreign women.

Why Study Dabiq?

Although IS uses a myriad of propaganda tools to gain global recruits – images, social media, videos, text, and long-form articles - it uses *Dabiq* for a lot of its outreach to English speakers. *Dabiq* is IS' English language magazine, which is published online in PDF (typically on the dark web) so it can bypass the increasing regulation and crack-down of extremist views on social media, as well as word limits.

¹⁰ Jakana Thomas, "Women's Participation in Political Violence" in *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. National Security* ed. Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and John A. Cloud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

IS uses *Dabiq* to explain complex scriptural debates (including to those new to Islam), create narrative, and update readers on political and military news. *Dabiq* is useful to IS because it is difficult to capture an extended piece of ideology in an image - such as one posted on Twitter - whereas text allows for this. It is also challenging to make long arguments for and explanations of agency in only a few hundred characters or an image.

IS explains to women in their long-form propaganda that they are valued as not just mothers and wives of jihadis, but also as crucial members of the caliphate (such as enforcers of law) and as valued Muslims who have individual obligations to uphold should they wish to possess such roles. This is the social contract that IS is essentially offering to women: if you wish to be a good Muslim, a good wife or mother, or hold an important position in society, then you must act to uphold your part of the promise - by joining the caliphate. This is how IS views the appeal to obligation working on women, and why they believe that it can successfully recruit them.

Dabiq can specifically help foster engagement recruitment strategies by answering the following question: how did a terrorist organization that successfully recruited women appeal to them?

Overview of the Theory: Recruiting Women by Appealing to their Agency via Obligations

What sort of themes does IS appeal to? Are they to a woman's husband? To love? Or rather, are they in line with the feminist approach: the Ummah, Hijrah, the Khilafah, Islam, and so forth? My thesis is that IS is doing something unusual as far as terrorist recruitment goes: they focus on female agency rather than only on females as objects of male desire, and do this by placing heavy emphasis on the concept of obligation in their appeals to women.

Obligation plays an important role in IS propaganda aimed at women. *Obligation* appeals to a woman's desire to be her own agent - ideologically, politically, religiously - because it provides her the opportunity to not only freely enter into an *agreement*, but also to act to uphold it and receive the returns for doing so. These returns may be prestige, comfort, independence, or an array of other things. Whatever the return, what IS promises women is an opportunity to be engaged in a political struggle.

This, in turn, suggests that what IS is doing - as far as female recruitment goes - is an example of what feminist security studies scholars would expect would be successful propaganda.¹¹ This is the theory that argues women can be persuaded to join terrorist organisations for reasons beyond coercion or love - in the same way men can. Analysing *Dabiq* in this fashion allows us to see if a relatively successful terrorist group is taking this approach to their recruitment strategy, and learn from their efforts.

Examining obligation allows us not only to see if IS is employing this strategy but also what *themes* of obligation might be present. Proponents of feminist security studies claim that women are capable of joining terrorist organisations for reasons such as ideology, religion, politics, prestige, and community service - like men.¹² These concepts align with a woman (or a man) being interested in themes such as the Ummah, Hijrah, the Khilafah, and Islam. For this reason, *obligation* themes are consistent with feminist thinking on terrorist recruitment.

Consequently, if IS appeals to *obligation* themes are in line with the aforementioned feminist stance, they are then acting consistently with what feminist security studies scholars would expect: that women can be persuaded by obligations beyond that of love - in instances when they are not coerced - and that they can join *not only* as a personal obligation to a husband or child but also to political and religious obligations such as the Khilafah and Islam. This adds another layer of depth to IS thinks it is doing: employing a set of appeals that attracted women without relying on outmoded ideas of love or threat.¹³

Therefore, the messages used by IS in *Dabiq* provide a good opportunity to test these ideas about how terrorist groups appeal to women in their recruitment propaganda. *Dabiq* provides a window into the ways in which successful Islamic terrorist organisations attempt to draw women into their ranks.

¹¹ See the feminist security studies school of thought outlined in the Literatrue Review part of this study. See: Badurdeen, "Women who Volunteer"; Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror"; Fair *In Their Own Words*

¹² Christene Fair, *In Their Own Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹³ For an overview of the traditionalist take of women in terrorism, see: Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover : On the sexuality of terrorism 1st ed.* (New York: Norton, 1989).

It is worth pointing out that it is not the goal here to test how many women were recruited – but rather, to discover to what s IS attempting to appeal? What does this organisation do in its global recruitment of women? The research question to be focused on is whether obligation is used as a tactic in *Dabiq* to recruit women, and if so which themes of obligation are used. By undergoing a content analysis of *Dabiq* and its approach to recruiting women, I aim to shed light on whether - and how - the tactic of appealing to a sense of agency is used by IS in its attempts to attract women by emphasizing obligations.

Organisation of the Study

The following pages lay out research contributions (both academic and substantial), literature review, theoretical framework, research design and results, as well as conclusions and implications.

Literature Review

This section will survey the current literature, and outline how a terrorist group can be in line with feminist security study theory on recruitment.

Recruitment by Focusing on Women as Agents

Generally, people are thought to join terrorist groups for reasons ranging from social isolation, racism, foreign occupation, disenchantment, religion, coercion, and the desire for glory. Most of these reasons presented by researchers and observers are about male recruits - particularly young men. It is broadly accepted that men choose to join the caliphate, so with them, the debate is over *why* they do so.

The times when women are the focus of study, there are generally two schools of thought about why they might join a terrorist organisation. Traditionalists say that women join terrorist organizations either because they are following their husbands or being coerced. In contrast, feminists argue that women join terrorist organizations for many of the same reasons men join these groups: to realize personal and political goals and for ideological reasons.

Traditional Security Studies

Traditional security studies hold that women must have a reason such as coercion or love to join a terrorist organisation because it is considered anti-feminine for them to do so on their own in the first place. Morgan¹⁴ was the first to undertake an in-depth analysis of female terrorist violence in her widely popular book, *The Demon Lover*. Morgan claims that such violent terrorism is an inevitable product of the patriarchy; women are coerced or trapped under male dominance and would likely not otherwise seek terroristic violence if it were not for the patriarchy.

This is the essence of the traditional take on female recruitment to terrorist organisations: women who join do so as victims of male desire and violence. This would include women being coerced by men to participate in the violence perpetrated by, or at least orchestrated by, men. When coercion is not at issue, Morgan argues that women might participate (or stand by) in these male-dominated activities because they are in love with the men, and as a consequence are exploited or set aside their own opinions as it pertains to the matter of terroristic violence.

Berko & Erez employ this view in a contemporary context; they researched Palestinian women who participated in terrorist organisations and concluded that the women - whether as auxiliary supporters or bombers - are not full-fledged members of the terrorist group and succumbed to joining as a result of patriarchal coercion.¹⁵ The women did not participate out of a similar zeal to that of their male counterparts, and “by and large, [they] assisted in operations that they did not initiate, plan or direct, submitting to men’s commands and following their orders.”¹⁶

An additional traditional security study is undergone by Schweitzer, who interviewed female terrorists detained in Israel, and argues that the Israeli media misportrayed the women as strong and independent when this is not the case.¹⁷ He proposes, in line with Morgan and the traditional security studies school of thought,

¹⁴ Morgan, *The Demon Lover : On the sexuality of terrorism*.

¹⁵ Anat Berko and Edna Herez, “Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism: Women’s Liberation or Oppression?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, 6 (2007).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

¹⁷ Yoram Schweitzer, *Female Suicide Bombers: Dying for Equality*, (Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2006).

that the women felt exploited (possibly via love) and coerced to join by the men in their lives, and regret their decisions to participate in terrorism.

Feminist Security Studies

Although there are a few studies that examine how IS targets women with its propaganda, there is an important discussion to be had about the kinds of messages that help draw women into terrorist activity. Feminist security studies take the stance that women can be recruited if their agency is appealed to, notably via themes of politics and religion. Appealing to women's agency means that IS is communicating that they can act of their own volition as men can. It appears IS is employing this tactic, instead of what traditional security studies theory would expect: that terrorist groups draw in women out of coercion, trauma, or romantic relationships with men.

Feminist security studies convey that women have the ability to make violent choices independently. Although people, including women, may do things such as joining an Islamist terrorist group for an array and multitude of reasons, feminist security studies remain open to the idea that women can be appealed to via agency; they can join for reasons *not limited* to love or coercion. This does not mean that do not join for love, it means that it is also possible, if not likely, that there is more to the story as to why they join.

Bloom was one of the first to research this as it relates to Islamic terrorism.¹⁸ She discusses how women can be willing volunteers in terrorist organisations, and suggests counter-terrorism tactics of delegitimizing and deglamorising violence as a means to reduce their recruitment. This position on reducing recruits assumes that women can decide to join or abandon a terrorist organisation of their own volition. This assumption is necessary for Bloom's conclusions on reducing recruits to stand. She emphasizes that it is dangerous to fall in line with the traditional temptation to, "portray these women merely as pawns of men, [because] some are politicized and mobilized much in the

¹⁸ Mia Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror," *Gender Issues* 28, 1 (2011).

same ways that men are. Some seek to demonstrate that their revolutionary zeal is no less than that of the men in their Community.”¹⁹

However, Bloom’s work contains nuance. She does not discount that one of the reasons women may act independently is resulting from trauma or abuse, often at the hands of men.²⁰ She looked at what might entice women to undergo suicide bombings in contemporary times by analysing and comparing cases in recent history. She found that in the extreme case of a woman participating in a suicide bombing, she is likely to have been exploited by the men from the terrorist organisation. For example, the men view the women as expendable, and they target the socially vulnerable, such as victims of sexual abuse.²¹

It is important to note that suicide bombing and joining a caliphate are not one and the same - surely not everyone who joins does so for the reason of a suicide bombing nor is it in a terrorists organisation’s (especially the ones seeking to form a caliphate) interest to lose all of its members to suicide bombing. Nonetheless, Bloom’s nuanced work does shed light on the complexity of roles within Islamic terrorist organisations.

According to Cragin et al “...studies’ of terrorists’ motivations need to address a variety of influential factors to be complete, and these factors apply equally to women and men.”²² Importantly, Cragin et al do not discount that there are personal, familial, social network, and ideological reasons one - whether man or woman - might join a terrorist group. These include, but are not limited to, social pressure, frustration at the state, or radical religious beliefs. Their findings suggest that in many different terrorist groups, the recruitment and participation of women likely go beyond merely an act of desperation or pragmatism by the male leaders.

Rather, women join and participate for a multitude of reasons - just like men - and are not always coerced. If a terrorist group is aware of this, they might expect to find success in gaining female recruits if they focus on their agency rather than as

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁰ Mia Bloom, “Female suicide bombers: A global trend,” *Daedalus* 136, 1 (2007).

²¹ Ibid., p. 102.

²² Kim Cragin and Sara Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara Praeger Security International ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009), p. 16

merely objects of male desire. It is important to note that one can admit that it goes without saying that some women certainly are victims, without dismissing them all as such.

Bond & Thomas are also important scholars who look at feminist security studies.²³ Their work aims to expand the research of those such as Bloom and Cragin et al for more generalizable findings, hence they studied 166 violent political organisations across Africa in the search for what might account for women's presence in such groups. Their focus was on organizational opportunity rather than propaganda, and their findings propound that groups who seek to recruit women thought that women might seek equality and respect as that of men, and thus appealed to opportunities in terrorist organisations for women to take important roles for themselves. This opportunity for agency was an important factor persuading women to join - not coercion.

As mentioned, scholars in this field explore in-depth the notion that women have the agency to join terrorist groups of their own volition. Notably, Fair has looked at the recruitment of women to the terrorist group in Pakistan known as Laskhar-e-Taiba (LeT).²⁴ Her research establishes that there was heavy use of textual propaganda which lauded mothers of jihadis. This work brings attention to the role that textual propaganda plays in recruiting women to Islamic terrorist organisations. She found that LeT has its own women's wing, which publishes long-form writings to explain to women in great detail, and with Islamic justification, that the hardships which they might face as a member of the terrorist group have a greater purpose, namely sacrifice in the name of jihad.

Fair's work shows that terrorist groups are capable of believing that the messages that long-form writing can convey are effective in garnering support, including in the case of women. LeT published stories and articles for women, and according to Fair, it was successful enough to justify the continued persistence of their long-form publishing on women's issues. IS also continued to publish long-form articles for women until its major territorial loss. It should be noted that LeT portrays the role of

²³ Jakana Thomas and Kanisha Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations," *American Political Science Review* 109, 3 (2015).

²⁴ Fair, *In Their Own Words*.

women as more auxiliary; most of their writings emphasize motherhood or wifedom of jihadis, whereas *Dabiq* shows a broader range of discussion for the role of women.

Further, Fair's take is a useful example of the feminist security studies approach because she is assuming that women can be persuaded to join for reasons not dissimilar to men. Fair points out how an Islamic terrorist group might believe that using scriptural justification for terrorism can be effective on female recruits.

Badurdeen also builds off of this in her analysis of women voluntarily joining Al-Shabab. Her application of feminist security studies used ethnography to look at returnee women who had joined, instead of propaganda tactics.²⁵ She found evidence to support feminist security studies ideas for what might cause a woman to voluntarily join, finding that "some women had joined these networks as a struggle to exercise agency within systems of oppression in patriarchal setups [via] the lure for emancipation."²⁶ Her work further provides a springboard for examining the potentiality of IS being aware that women can be appealed to joining terrorist organisations via agency, and are employing this in *Dabiq*.

Overall, these scholars all employ feminist security studies ideas when studying female recruitment to Islamic terrorist groups. Feminist security studies, as elucidated in the above major scholarly contributions of the field, is the approach which remains open to the idea that women can be, and are as likely as men, to join such groups for reasons beyond love or coercion - recruitment tactics such as drawing on ideology, religion, politics, or organisational opportunity are used to recruit women just as they are for men.

Identifying the Gap in the Literature

My research stands in contrast to the notion that IS is too misogynistic to attract women, which is the pretense that renders their recruitment to be largely overlooked. I highlight that rather, despite, "adhering to the strictest conventions of misogyny and

²⁵ Fathima Badurdeen, "Women who volunteer: a relative autonomy perspective in Al-Shabaab female recruitment in Kenya," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*,.. ahead-of-print (2020).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 616.

male rule—[IS conventions are] implemented, ironically enough, with the active and enthusiastic collusion of their female supporters.”²⁷

You can define the female role of mother, wife, recruiter, and even soldier or religious enforcer as *active*, if you like, but it is primarily as a supporter that IS women find their calling in the global jihad.²⁸ Nonetheless, they are crucial to the caliphate and are joining - for whatever reason - which my research sheds further light on. IS has even enlisted women as propagandists and established an all-female morality police — the notorious Raqqa-based al-Khansaa Brigade. It is vital to note that even if it appears that *supporting roles*, as Bloom puts it, seem to stand in contrast to a feminist take on extremist recruitment, this is not the case. My research looks at *how* women are appealed to, not whether certain jobs in the caliphate can or ought to be viewed as oppressive or feminist.

Feminists would argue that it would be effective for IS to appeal to women's agencies when attempting to recruit them. By discussing important obligations in their propaganda to women, we can examine what it looks like for a terrorist group such as IS to take advantage of this collusion of their female supporters rather than writing them off as objects of male desire. Shedding light on what this might look like is the next step in understanding what this sort of terrorist propaganda effort might manifest as. In the case of IS, it manifests as an emphasis on obligations.

Analysing the long-form text of *Dabiq* extends our understanding of feminist security studies as it pertains to female recruitment. Examining obligation as the indicator to understand what IS thinks it is doing aids us in filling the gap in the literature and has not been undergone until now.

Relevant Literature on Dabiq

There has been research conducted on the text of *Dabiq* which inspects language used in recruitment tactics. However, the majority of studies that focused on IS

²⁷ Bloom, “Bombshells, Women and Terror,” p. 3.

²⁸ Mia Bloom, “Death Becomes Her: Women, Occupation, and Terrorist Mobilization,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 43, 3 (2010): p. 447.

propaganda centred on their social media, images, and videos online.²⁹ Kuznar highlights the significance of narrative in IS-related media, and consequently of the long-form structure for which *Dabiq* allows.³⁰ One of the foundational pieces on *Dabiq* is the work undergone by Vergani et al , who analysed word frequency to draw out prominent themes in the text.³¹ They identified themes in the first year of *Dabiq* publications of internet jargon and an increasing concern with women.

Beyond exploring what themes might be quantitatively prominent in *Dabiq*, scholars also have begun narrowing in on these themes. Specifically, Speir analysed the entire corpus of *Dabiq* in his key work, to look at which type of Islamic message was being purported.³² He highlights that literature has rarely considered whether the Islamic ideology in IS propaganda was hi-jacked or not and points out how researchers often claim a priori whether or not an invocation of holy script by IS is Islamic or un-Islamic (555).³³

This also builds on literature such as that of Halverson et al's who examine extremist groups' "heavy use of the Qur'an [...] in their strategic communication", but not necessarily their interpretations of scripture.³⁴ Toguslu also looks at the importance of Qu'ranic narrative in *Dabiq* as a way of legitimizing their actions.³⁵ Similarly, my research is open to whether Islamic ideology is evident in *Dabiq* as a way to understand

²⁹ Sylvie Borau Samuel Wamba, "Social Media, Evolutionary Psychology, and ISIS: A Literature Review and Future Research Directions," *New Knowledge in Information Systems and Technologies* (2019).

³⁰ Lawrence Kuznar, "The Stability of the Islamic State (IS) Narrative: Implications for the Future," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 10, 1 (2017).

³¹ Matteo Vergani and Ana-Maria Bliuc, "The evolution of the isis' language."

³² Troy Speir, "Extremist propaganda and Qur'anic scripture: A 'radical' corpus-based study of the *Dabiq*," *Discourse & Society* 29, 5 (2018).

³³ It should be noted, that for the purposes of my research it is not immediately important whether or not religious references are considered to truly represent Islam or not – what is being explored here is whether or not they might use Islamic ideology as one of the potential appeals to women in an attempt to attract them to join the caliphate, *not* whether or not the Islamic ideology cited/interpreted is representative of Islamic scripture or not.

³⁴ Jeffrey Halverson, F. Bennet and Simon Corman, "How Islamic extremists quote the Qur'an," Report, Center for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University. <http://csc.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/csc1202-quran-verses.pdf>. (2012): p. 2.

³⁵ Erkan Toguslu, "Caliphate, Hijrah and Martyrdom as Performative Narrative in ISIS *Dabiq* Magazine," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, 1.

how ideology is employed in the recruitment strategies for women - specifically in the form of an obligation.

Relevant Literature about Dabiq and Women

We can analyse *Dabiq* for evidence of whether this obligation also applies to women or not; if so, it would show that women are appealed to with religious propaganda just as men are, and that IS appeals to their agency by telling them to uphold this obligation to religion and hijrah.

Gambhir highlights how *Dabiq* emphasises the concept of hijrah, or mandatory travel to the caliphate.³⁶ Hijrah is important because IS needs women for a functioning state (as discussed in the prior sections of this paper). Gambhir points out how *Dabiq* uses Islamic ideology to explain how this is a literal requirement (or in the case of my research, an obligation to uphold) of Muslims.

Researchers such as Kneip³⁷ and Heidarysafa et al³⁸ also differentiate between subsets of audiences - specifically concerning women as an audience. Kneip even investigates women's desire to join IS as a form of emancipation.

Remarkably, Heidarysafa et al have provided substantive work relating to IS recruitment of women via *Dabiq*. They sought to determine which emotions were attempting to be evoked in women via *Dabiq* and Rummiyah (relying on lexicon-based emotion detection techniques of coding) and compared this to a Western religion of Catholicism, finding that the emotional appeal is similar.

It is important to inquire beyond this research for what else might explain the differences in recruitment to a religious group. For example, Catholicism is not attempting to get women to *travel* to a caliphate. Heidarysafa et al's results suggest that certain topics play particularly important roles in IS propaganda targeting women -

³⁶ Harleen Gambhir, *Dabiq: The strategic messaging of the Islamic State* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2014).

³⁷ Katharina Kneip, "Female jihad—women in the isis," *Politikon* 29 (2016).

³⁸ Mojtaba Heidarysafa, Kamran Kowsari, Tolu Odukoya, Philip Potter, Laura Barnes, and Donald Brown, "Women in IS Propaganda: A Natural Language Processing Analysis of Topics and Emotions in Comparison with Mainstream Religious Group," *Cornell University Intelligent Computing*, (2019).

which are some of those which feminist security studies would expect. These relate to the role of women in early Islam, Islamic ideology, marriage/divorce, spousal relationships, and hijrah (moving to a new land).

We can see that Heidarysafa et al's main focus is on emotion, rather than rationality or ideology. Looking at how IS uses emotional language does not necessarily suggest whether or not they are appealing to women's agency. Not to mention that emotions are also complex, difficult to measure, and often idiosyncratic; the emotional evocation may struggle to manifest.

Extending the Understanding of Dabiq

As mentioned, there is the traditional school of thought on women's participation that sees women joining out of love for men, marriage, children, emotions, shame, etc - notably often as coerced actors, or even victims.³⁹ There is also the feminist security studies school of thought which recognizes a wider set of motives for women's participation in these organizations (for example, Chandler et al discuss this)⁴⁰. My work extends what is known about *Dabiq's* role as an IS recruitment tool by examining if they employ the feminist school of thought, or limit themselves to the traditional stance.

The research is currently quiet on how IS used *Dabiq* to lure women to join their caliphate. Studying *Dabiq* cannot tell us which appeals worked, but it can provide us with some insight into the ways its publishers thought about the challenge of recruiting women, and how they employ the feminist argument that effective recruitment of women can include appeals to agency.

Theoretical Framework

This section aims to explain how to understand the gap in the relevant literature which was identified in the section above. Both the theoretical approach and expectations of my research are surveyed.

³⁹ Jean Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1987).

⁴⁰ Robin Chandler, Linda Fuller, and Lihua Wang, *Women, War, and Violence: Personal Perspectives and Global Activism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Until my research, obligation as a research centerpiece was an unexplored area for recruitment of women to Islamic extremist groups. This focal point can provide further insight in the field as to how women are appealed to by terrorist groups, in this case, specifically IS. If IS thinks women can be obligated to join the caliphate, they are thinking beyond only appealing to reasons for love or relying on coercion to recruit them, hence providing us with an example of employing agency.

Defining the Concept of Obligation

Obligation can be defined as upholding a duty, agreement, or promise via action, rather than simply possessing a duty in itself.⁴¹ Being bound to the act of upholding a duty is an obligation; whereas a duty would be a commitment that doesn't necessarily include action. The call to action (for whatever reason) is the necessary criteria of an obligation, not a duty. This action is undergone by an individual voluntarily establishing - or not choosing to leave - a social *agreement*, which includes upholding promises which are part of the said *agreement*.

To illustrate, one might have a duty to protect their children, but they have an obligation to uphold that duty via action when in the face of danger; the choice to uphold and not leave the social agreement is the obligation. In the case of IS, they are calling on readers to uphold their duty to their marriage, the Ummah, Islam etc., by joining the caliphate. They are obligated to join if they wish to uphold their said agreement as good mothers, wives and/or Muslims.

Why Obligation is Crucial to this Research

The concept of obligation is important because it is one of the ways in which a clever terrorist organisation can tap into a woman's desire to be her own agent. Pateman explains that "to enter an obligation - to commit oneself - is to create a new social relationship... [which] depends on the assumption that individuals are free and

⁴¹ Carole Pateman, "Political Obligation, Freedom and Feminism," *The American Political Science Review* 86, 1 (1992).

equal to each other.”⁴² Feminist security studies analysts argue that women harbor such a desire to be independent and enter into contracts of the religious and political type with terrorist groups. Those who tap into this desire will be successful in recruiting women because, “[they], like their male counterparts, have complex motivations for taking part in terrorism, motivations that are hardly as simple as marrying a jihadi fighter.”⁴³

Indeed, it is a way in which a terrorist group like IS can try to successfully recruit women by appealing to their agency. This does not consequently mean that women may not also be free agents who are in love with a member of a terrorist organisation, or that it is not possible for them to be coerced, but rather it means that there are *also* these religious and political obligations which can be at play.

Baker points out in her piece “the strong and consistent tendency [for women] to claim volition and discount disadvantage,”⁴⁴ this is the preference which IS attempts to appeal to by allowing women to claim agency by calling upon their obligations. Appealing to obligations is the way in which IS manifests it attempts to appeal to women's agency. They appear to be attempting to appeal to this said agency for the purposes of recruitment in the form of the above-mentioned agreement. Because IS' primary goal in its propaganda is to incentivise the *act* of joining the caliphate they compose their appeals to agency in a way that will call upon this action; hence, obligation.

Further, if IS believed the effective way to gain female recruits was by appealing to love or through coercion they would not attempt to tap into women's desire and ability for agency. It seems that IS may be aware that “as long as women and young girls are angry over politics in the Middle East [and/or] believe that jihad is their religious duty... while at the same time [being] enticed by ISIS ideology, they will continue to be willing to join the group.”⁴⁵ Therefore, IS spending time writing to women with the pretense of independent choice would in actuality be a waste of time for them if they did not hold this belief or at least think it was worth a continuous

⁴² Ibid., p. 179

⁴³ Perešin, “Fatal attraction: Western muslims and Isis,” p. 39.

⁴⁴ Joanne Baker, “Claiming Volition and Evading Victimhood: Post-Feminist Obligations for Young Women,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20, 2 (2010): p. 201.

⁴⁵ Perešin, “Fatal attraction: Western muslims and Isis,” p. 39.

attempt. IS propaganda emphasizes ideological, religious, and political duties (and calls for the act of upholding them, which is an obligation) to gain recruits, and by not removing this tactic in their appeals to women, it suggests that they are in line with feminist security studies and are providing us with the example of *Dabiq* to analyse that tactic.

Searching for Obligation in Dabiq

I build upon the theory that IS works hard to “maintain a consistency of message, reminding the network” of its ideology and goals.⁴⁶ This allows for the development of the theory that IS will purport its ideology homogeneously and that this is an integral part of its propaganda. It would be inconsistent for IS to drop this message in its articles aimed at women in lieu of emotions such as love or shame if they thought women could be appealed to in ways similar to men. Heidarysafa et al show that religious appeal is utilized in *Dabiq* (albeit in regards to emotions rather than obligations), and this was a springboard to look at this and other themes of obligation which IS employed in its recruitment articles aimed at women.

Research Design

This section lays out the specific strategy I undergo to analyse the aforementioned research question. Data sources and coding schemes will be elaborated upon and justified. Potential limitations are also discussed here.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Undergoing a qualitative methodology of coding case studies is the desirable method to look at the way in which IS might appeal to women's agency. Testing a specific causal hypothesis quantitatively in this case would not allow for a nuanced

⁴⁶ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

investigation to uncover non-dominant ideas.⁴⁷ The descriptive approach - rather than causal - is the best approach for my research because it aims to stay open to alternative explanations and explore the possibility of obligations as a form of appeals to agency. Reading the texts using this approach allows me to contextualise each finding of obligation and address contradictions between multiple obligations (such as whether marriage or Islam takes precedence over one another).

Data Sources

Dabiq is broadly distributed and widely available meaning that it is aimed at capturing all women's attention rather than a particular sub-group. Articles in *Dabiq* aimed at women tend to be lengthier than articles referring to women in other languages published by IS, such as *al-Naba'*⁴⁸, and also explicitly allege to have women authors. This means that it is the most comprehensive example of IS' attempts of recruiting women through long-form text.

The other English language publication produced by ISIS, *Rummiyah*, is less suitable for this research because it is self-proclaimed as focusing mainly on the group's political stance and action abroad, whereas *Dabiq* is self-proclaimed as focusing on recruitment to the physical caliphate as well as broader issues such as migration, religion, unity, and community. It should be noted that *Rummiyah* replaced *Dabiq* after the end of its publishing in 2016, until 2017, and its emphasis on topics varied from *Dabiq's*, as described above.⁴⁹ The short duration of *Rummiyah* compared to *Dabiq* also means it is less suitable because it provides a narrower recruitment window and was published when the physical caliphate was in decline.⁵⁰ *Rummiyah* was meant to

⁴⁷ Jane Sutton and Austin Zubin, "Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management," *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* 68, 3 (2015).

⁴⁸ EUROPOL, "Europol Specialist Report – Public Information," Europol, 2019, https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/women_in_islamic_state_propaganda_3.pdf.

⁴⁹ Peter Wignell, Sabine Tan, Kay O'Halloran, and Rebecca Lange, "A mixed methods empirical examination of changes in emphasis and style in the extremist magazines *dabiq* and *rumiyah*," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 2 (2017): p. 5.

⁵⁰ Micha Bröckling, "Kill Them Wherever You Find Them' - Radicalizing Narratives of the "So-Called" Islamic State Via the Online Magazine *Rumiyah*," *Journal for Deradicalization* 17 (2018).

acknowledge that it is not practical to travel to a caliphate which has lost most of its territory and rather meant to persuade readers to undertake attacks on foreign soil.

It is worth taking note of the editorial process of *Dabiq*. IS had a media branch called the Al-Hayat Media Center. This subgroup of IS publishes multi-media propaganda and IS news in several languages. Researchers do not know a whole lot about Al-Hayat, but we can infer - as it pertains to *Dabiq* - that it is likely that it was published by a team of people which contained a hierarchy, some degree of organisation, and central message. Knowing that *Dabiq* was published by a Center, rather than by unknown and varying individuals, can help us in considering that IS maintained a degree of consistency in its broad message. Of course, this is not for certain, and the condition of the editorial process of the magazine can certainly influence any conclusions drawn from the results of this research and this should be considered a limitation of the data source.

This research analyses articles aimed at the audience of women - identified as those explicitly titled either *To Our Sisters* or *From Our Sisters* - from all (15) *Dabiq* publications from July 2014 to July 2016. Articles that were not titled as such had no large mention or suggestion that the audience was women or that they were specifically about women's issues. They are about men, scripture not specifically about women's plight, or about the caliphate as a whole. However, only issues 7 through 13 contain these articles aimed specifically at women.

Seven articles aimed directly at the recruitment of men (the same as the number of articles aimed at women) are also analysed for comparative purposes. The same coding scheme as used for the articles aimed at women is applied, which illuminates potential similarities or differences in recruitment tactics between articles aimed at men or women. The articles aimed at men were also chosen in the case-purposive fashion, and have consistent titles throughout the issues: *Amongst the Believers are Men*. These articles also began appearing at the same time - Issue 7 - as the articles *To/From Our Sisters* did. These male-oriented recruitment articles have a heavy focus on the theme of joining the caliphate and have no reference to an audience of women.

Lastly, seven general audience articles (1 from each issue 7 through 13) are coded using the same procedure employed in the other articles. These articles are not explicitly for men nor women. This aids in theory-testing and understanding as it

analyses multiple audience and article types in the IS publication limits potential problems with overlooking articles and provides a broader view of IS' recruitment tactics.

Coding Methods

PDF versions of all aforementioned *Dabiq* articles are textually coded and analysed. Ease of access is not an issue in my research as all *Dabiq* issues are readily available online in PDF format. We can triangulate the reliability of the PDF (to ascertain the content hasn't been doctored/changed by someone on the internet) by checking several sources online and seeing if they match – which they do.

Krippendorff exhibits how systematically categorizing communication data allows us to make inferences on the communication to describe and make inferences about its characteristics.⁵¹ Hence, coding is effective to show the obligation themes in IS' *Dabiq* recruitment articles, and subsequently a fitting way to analyse content, “describe and make inferences about the characteristics of communication”⁵², to help *understand* what IS is doing. Qualitative textual coding allows for the meaningful capture of the ideas contained in *Dabiq*, and of the concept I am testing for: obligation.

Coding Methods: Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the paragraph. This is because paragraphs are long enough to allow for the creation of a theme, whereas a sentence is too short, and we would find ourselves analysing sentences in relation to ones which came before or after. Using the paragraph as the unit of analysis means that we can examine each unit independently. The articles are too long and contain different features such as narrative, definition, etc. to use as a unit - it would confuse which obligation theme, if any, is prominent, for there may be multiple in each article.

It is worth pointing out that there is a variation in paragraph length from merely 2 sentences to upwards of 25. It is still apparent that the articles follow the general rules

⁵¹ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).

⁵² Ole Holsti, *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1969).

we would follow for a paragraph break, but tend to drag on when describing a narrative or dialogue. Taking into account this minor point, the paragraph remains the best unit of analysis for this research.

Coding Methods: Evidence of Obligation

First, I code the articles for evidence of obligation to identify both implicit and explicit ideas offered by the data through coding moments of significance within the data. The coding is completed using 4 subsets for each paragraph: 1) explicit mention of obligation (Category 4); 2) implicit mention with no ambiguity (Category 3); 3) implicit mention with ambiguity; 4) no mention (Category 1).⁵³

An example of Category 4 would be as follows, from Issue 10: “by Allah, it is obligatory for a woman to feel that the destruction of the entire world is easier on her than to remain in the guardianship of a man who is an enemy of Allah...”. Here we can see an explicit mention of obligation.

An example of Category 2 would be as follows, from Issue 8: “... start with the sister resolving to depart [to the caliphate] for her Lord’s cause.” Here we can infer that the suggestion and praise of a woman resolving to depart is an implicit appeal to the obligation to do so without mention of the word itself.

Coding Methods: Themes of Obligation

Following this, I then rely on textual coding to extract prominent obligation themes, and perform an analysis of the types of obligation. Types of obligation are as follows: marriage, children, Ummah (Muslim community), Hijrah (migration), Khilifah (caliphate), Islam. Keywords identified to extract the theme of marriage are those such as husband and widow; for children those such as son and generation; for Ummah those such as community and humanity; for Hijrah those such as travel and arrived; for

⁵³ See Appendix 1 for full examples

Khilafah those such as homeland and establish; for Islam those such as scripture and jihad.⁵⁴

One might ask: why these themes? Does khilafah not fall under the umbrella of Islam? The answer for the purposes here is no, because *Dabiq* distinguishes these themes, even discussing how they can come into conflict with each other. These six themes have keywords that are distinct enough to have no detrimental overlap of words. Further, the first two themes (marriage and children) are thematic obligations which broadly fall in line with the theory of traditional female recruitment in security studies, whereas the latter four (ummah, hijrah, khilafah, and Islam) support the notion that IS is appealing to a reader's desire for ideological, political, and or religious agency which is in line with the feminist approach.

The number of keywords in each paragraph suggests which theme of obligation is being discussed via the process of identifying the occurrence of certain words and phrases exhibiting a common theme.⁵⁵ The primary goal of thematic content analysis is to identify which paragraphs discuss which type of obligation if any. However, the articles are also read for context, because even if a paragraph mentions keywords of one topic - such as marriage - far more than another, it does not mean that the paragraph is not discussing how marriage yields an obligation, such as say, Islam. Therefore, relying purely on a quantitative count of keywords without understanding the context of supporting words and sentences in the paragraph would have been unreliable. Also, information from one paragraph is not used to infer the theme/subject of another because each unit of analysis is independent.

Coding Methods: Outcomes

Upon completion of coding, we can see how prominent, if at all, the concept of obligation is in articles attempting to recruit women. We also can see which obligation themes are the most discussed. These results can be compared to other article types to aid our understanding of whether or not IS appeals to agency to women in ways similar to men. This allows for an analysis of how IS attempts to recruit women through *Dabiq*

⁵⁴ See Appendix 2 for full examples

⁵⁵ Graham Gibbs, *Analyzing qualitative data*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008).

and which themes it thinks are effective. Based upon the results, we, therefore, see both whether and how IS is an example of how a relatively successful terrorist group attempts to recruit women by appealing to agency.

Limitations of this Research Design

Generalisability is potentially a problem if one were to seek to apply this knowledge outside of Islamic terrorist organisations seeking female recruitment. This is because my research looks at Islamic extremism recruitment in particular. That being said, there may be trends of appealing to women which can be drawn from my research which could be formatted to apply to other extremist groups.

There are, of course, trade-offs and limitations to choosing these cases and this method; coding is never perfect. Because obligation, and certain obligation themes, in *Dabiq* propaganda, are found in articles aimed at women, the problem with readership and effectiveness arises again. As established, that is not what is being examined in my research, however, it could affect IS' rhetoric as to whether they think the women readers are Muslim or not. This is not known, and it is also not known whether or not IS takes this into account. It is possible that using phrases and words from scripture appeals most potently to an audience that knows of such, but also it could be possible that IS does this to spark interest in Islam.

Further, if IS assumes that if their readers are acquiring *Dabiq* online, they might also assume that they possess the ability to look up unknown words online. Because *Dabiq* is in English, it seems intuitive that many of the readers do not speak Arabic (hence why they are reading in English) and are therefore less likely to have a strong understanding of the scripture (as it is in Arabic). This disregards women living in the West who might read Arabic publications. I put up with this limitation largely because I am not fluent in Arabic, and it would impact the reliability and validity of the research to attempt to interpret propaganda in a language that one does not speak fluently.

Results

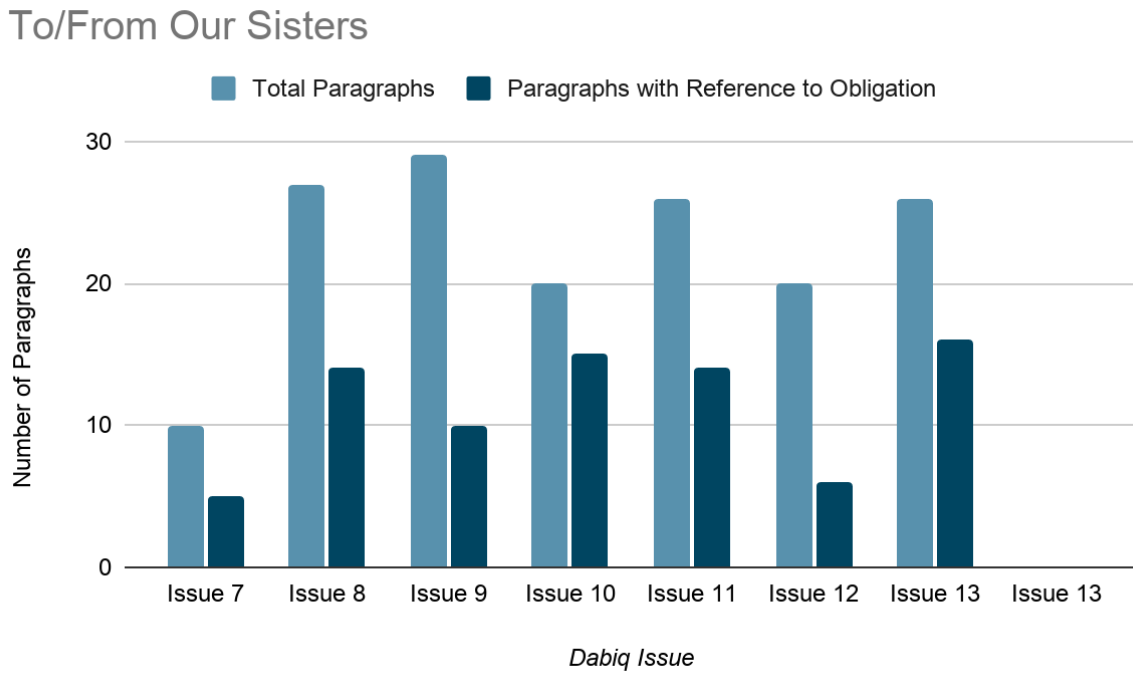
This section lays out the occurrences of appeals to obligation, in the form of frequency, including the prominence of themes in each of the three types of article audiences (women, men, general audience) Each section for each audience type contains figures for illustration. These frequency results are followed by comparisons between the three types. Lastly, this section will point out observations about how obligation plays an important role in IS' propaganda efforts - particularly Islamic obligations, and how they employ a feminist recruitment strategy in *Dabiq* articles aimed at women.

The results suggest that IS employs appeals to agency in ways that are in line with feminist security studies; manifesting as appeals to obligations. Such appeals are more prominent in articles to women than others, and the most dominant appeal to obligation is to the ideology of Islam.

Occurrence of the Concept of Obligation in Articles Aimed at Women

The articles in *Dabiq* titled *To/From our Sisters* have a total of 158 paragraphs, out of which 80 contain a reference to obligation (Categories 2 - 4). This is a rate of 5.06 mentions per 10 paragraphs. There are 13 paragraphs that contain an explicit mention of obligation (Category 4), which produces a rate of 0.823 per 10 paragraphs, or 1.63 per 10 paragraphs which mention obligation.

Table 1: To/From Our Sisters



The themes prevalent in the articles for women are as follows: 9 to marriage; 3 to children; 2 to the Ummah; 18 to Hijrah; 3 to the Khilafah; 43 to Islam. Only Issue 11 mentions obligation to children, and only Issue 11 and 12 mention obligation to marriage. Issues 7, 9-13 all mention obligation to Islam. It is not uncommon for an article to have references to multiple different obligation themes.

We can see that all articles mention obligation, at least implicitly, with only Issue 9 failing to contain an explicit (Category 4) reference. We can also see that obligation to Islam is the most frequently mentioned and widespread obligation theme, with only Issue 8 failing to mention it, and with a rate of 5.48 paragraphs which mention an obligation to Islam per 10 paragraphs that mention obligation at all.

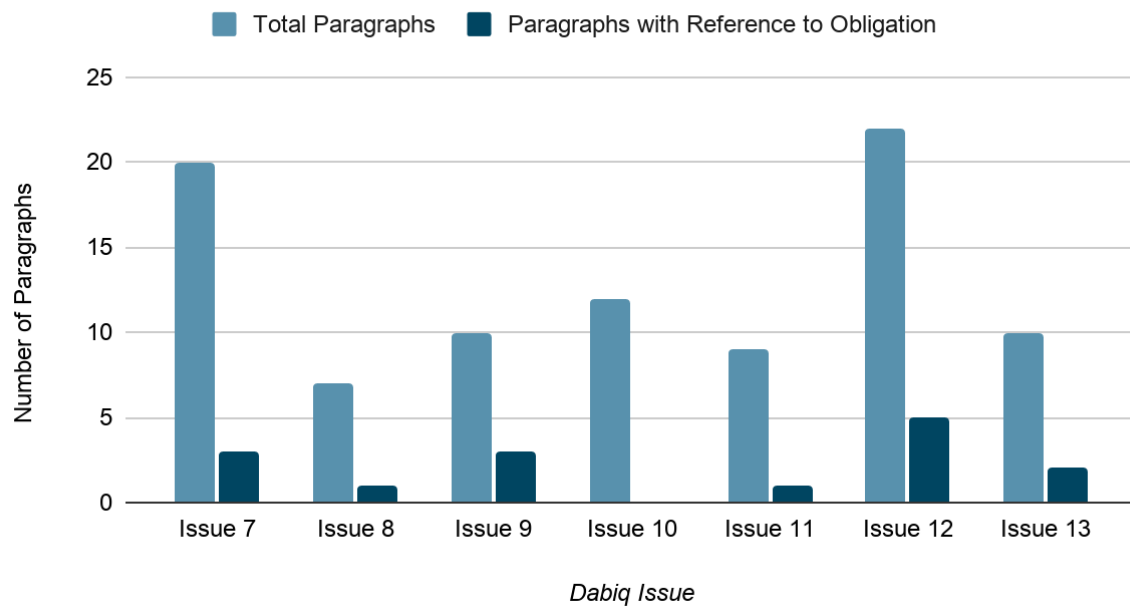
Occurrence of the Concept of Obligation in Articles Aimed at Men

The articles in *Dabiq* titled ‘Among the Believers are Men’ contain 13 references to obligation (Categories 2 - 4), for a rate of 1.44 per 10 paragraphs. There are not any

explicit (Category 4) mentions of obligation in these articles. Further, Issue 10 has no reference to obligation at all.

Table 2: Among the Believers are Men

Among the Believers are Men



There is no mention of an obligation to marriage in any of these articles. The themes prevalent are as follows: 1 to children; 2 to the Ummah; 2 to Hijrah; 3 to the Khilafah; 7 to Islam. There are 4 articles that mention an obligation to Islam, and a rate of 5.4 paragraphs that mention an obligation to Islam per 10 paragraphs that mention obligation at all.

Occurrence of the Concept of Obligation in Articles Aimed at a General Audience

In a selection of 7 differently titled articles aimed at a general audience, there are 18 mentions of obligation (Categories 2 - 4), for a rate of 2.86 per 10 paragraphs. Of these mentions, 3 are explicit (Category 4), for a rate of 1.67 per every 10 paragraphs which mention obligation. Two of these explicit mentions are in Issue 11, and the other in Issue

12. These two articles in Issue 11 and 12 are the longest: 18 and 16 paragraphs respectively. Two articles had no mention of obligation.

Table 3: General Audience

General Audience

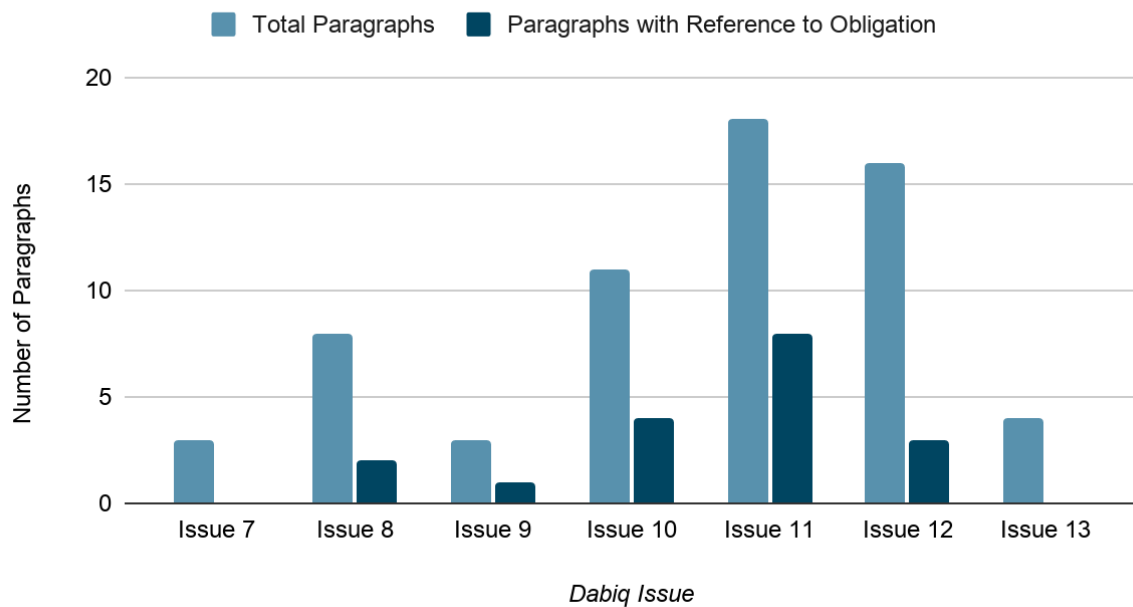


Table 4: Similarities and Differences of the Three Types of Articles: Rates of Obligation

Article Type	Mentions of Obligation Rate *	Explicit Mentions of Obligation Rate **
Women	5.06	1.63
Men	1.44	0
General	2.86	1.67

*Per 10 paragraphs **Per 10 paragraphs which mention obligation

Comparison of Themes

When it comes to the prominent theme of Islam we can see that in articles aimed at women there is more emphasis on interpreting scripture, and on women to learn it, for example, in Issue 7:

... Do not waste your time and energy in play, futility, and what does not concern you. Learn your religion! Learn your religion! Read the Qur'ān, reflect upon it, and practice it. Nourish your love of Allah and His Messenger. It is essential for you to love Allah and His Messenger more than your own selves, your husbands, your children, and your parents. Follow the example of Āsiyah – the wife of Pharaoh – who left the Duniyā for Allah and the Hereafter although she was a queen and had the wealth of the Duniyā.

Whereas in the articles aimed at men, the appeals to the obligational theme of Islam are typically about the hardships of day to day life of supporting Islam in the caliphate, for example, in Issue 9:

... He(rahimahullāh) was killed and never met his son. The worldly life, its pleasures, and adornments did not succeed in tempting him even for a single day. Every **Muslim** should raise his head out of pride for these men, with glory and honor, in the face of the people of falsehood. We ask **Allah** (ta'ālā)not to deprive us of His reward, nor to make us succumb to tribulations, and to generously bestow upon him as well as his brothers the reward and high rank in Jannah.⁵⁶

The difference which we can see here is that the authors in the articles aimed at women are spending time explaining why Islamic scripture is relevant to women, by drawing out narratives about wives and daughters, etc., in a way to show women that an obligation to Islam can specifically apply to them - they are not overlooked by IS' interpretation of Islam. It appears this is taken for granted in the articles to men, which discuss glory and reward instead, perhaps because it is assumed that men are already

⁵⁶ *Dabiq*, 9 (21 May 2015): pp. 42.

aware that IS' interpretation of Islam applies to them, and that they can choose to align with IS' interpretation.

It is apparent in Issue 10 of *Dabiq*, that a woman's understanding can trump that of her husband's:

... it is not permissible for you in any case to remain under the same roof with someone who has removed the noose of Islam from his neck, and the marriage contract between you and him was nullified the moment when he apostatized from the religion of Islam.⁵⁷

This passage about the obligation of Islam shows us that a woman's understanding of the religion can trump that of her husband's. By explaining this to women, IS is showing that if they can join the caliphate specifically without their husband's blessing - in fact, they have an obligation to do so.

In all three types of articles, the prominent obligation theme is the one to Islam. However, in the general audience subgroup there is one more obligation reference to Hijrah than to Islam, 7 and 6 respectively. In the articles aimed at women and the ones aimed at men, there are very similar rates of the obligation theme Islam: 5.48 and 5.4 respectively. However, the overall general rate of mention of obligation is notably higher in the articles aimed at women than at men: 5.06 compared to 1.44. In the articles with a general audience, this rate was somewhat in the middle: 2.86.

The only article type that mentioned an obligation to marriage was the article type with a female audience - and, it should be noted, only 2 articles did so.

When it comes to explicit mention of obligations (Category 4), the articles aimed at women had more of this than the articles aimed at men. In fact, the articles in *Among the Believers are Men*, had zero explicit mentions of obligation. Articles aimed at women had a rate for explicit mentions of 1.63 per 10 paragraphs, and the general audience articles had a rate of 1.67. It is important to note that the rate of mention of obligations at all (Categories 2-4) is much higher in the articles aimed at women, as discussed in the

⁵⁷ *Dabiq*, 10 (13 July 2015): p. 44.

above paragraphs, than in both other types. In raw numbers, articles aimed at women have 13 explicit mentions of obligations whereas the general audience articles had 3.

How IS Employs a Feminist Recruitment Strategy

As explained earlier, an appeal to obligation suggests that IS thinks that appealing to women's agency is worthwhile. However, because there were more explicit mentions of obligation in the articles to women, it may suggest that IS is trying specifically to make this clear to women, perhaps because they think men already know that they have agency, or are simply more swayed by topics such as glory, brotherhood, and the battlefield. The fact that IS emphasizes obligation in an explicit way to women more than men helps us understand how they think about recruiting women - potentially by attempting to directly recruit them and make them feel like they have agency and an important obligation to uphold rather than relying on treating them as objects of male desire for recruitment.

As discussed earlier, obligation themes of marriage and children fit less securely with the idea in feminist security studies that women can be persuaded to join via appeals to ideological, political, and religious agency. There were mentions of obligations to children, although infrequently, in the articles aimed at women.

That being said, it is apparent this is not IS' main focal point when it comes to recruiting women based on obligations. It would be imprudent to think that IS thinks women do not care about obligations to their children. Rather, it appears they may take this for granted in the same way they take for granted that men are aware they have agency and are capable of upholding ideological obligations. IS tactic in *Dabiq* seems to be to appeal to what is not often taken for granted, such as women caring about their children. Because obligations to children were also evident in articles aimed at men and to a general audience it further suggests that this theme is uniquely aimed at women.

However, the only article type to mention the obligation to marriage were those aimed at women. The understanding of these appeals to marriage aren't explained in a way to persuade women to solely obey their husbands, they are rather framed as persuading women that they have the agency to support a *good marriage*, whatever IS describes that as being. For example, in Issue 11, women have the obligation to take

care of an injured husband after battle in the name of IS because that is what a good wife would do, not only because their husband told them to, but because they can, and ought to, choose to uphold this duty. IS is appealing to women's desire to have agency in her marriage and play a valued role to IS by doing so. Furthermore, some articles explain to women that her obligation to Islam supersedes that to her husband, this further shows us that IS is using obligation as a way to appeal to women's agency instead of only as objects of male desire.

As we can see, IS clearly employed the use of appealing to obligations in its articles aimed at women. This suggests, as discussed earlier, that IS thinks it is worthwhile to appeal to women's agency rather than leaving their recruitment to love or coercion. This is in line with the feminist security studies approach to recruitment.⁵⁸ It appears that IS believes this tactic is effective as they continue to employ it, and they did not decrease it, in all their articles aimed at women until the discontinuation of *Dabiq*. The heavy use of obligation used in IS' articles to women shows that it plays an important role in their propaganda efforts. IS was especially successful in recruiting women to its rank and this unexpected approach of appealing to women's agency can be understood by looking at how they used obligation to do so.

All three types of articles have at least an implicit mention of the concept of obligation. There were no explicit mentions in those aimed at men, and a similar rate in the general audience and those aimed at women, but that is only per 10 paragraphs which mentioned obligation; almost double the articles aimed at women contained some reference to obligation than those aimed at a general audience.

Furthermore, there is little difference in which obligation themes are the most prominent between the articles aimed at women and those to men or a general audience. This suggests that IS authors are treating male and female audiences similarly; they are not emphasizing marriage, love, or children *notably* more to women than men. Also, as mentioned, they do so in ways that do not treat women as if they have no agency.

Likewise, there is no evidence that IS is placing more emphasis on obligation themes such as the Khilafah or Islam when writing to recruit men than when writing to

⁵⁸ Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror."

recruit women. This would be unsurprising to feminist security studies scholars who argue that appealing to women's agency is a successful tactic; they would claim that women desire to have political, religious, and ideological obligations appealed to.⁵⁹

Discussion

This section lays out an interpretation of the results and further explanation of how IS is making use of feminist security studies recruitment tactics. It also discusses the prominence of the obligational theme of Islam.

Interpretation and Explanation of Results: Feminist Security Studies

It is important to note that the *Dabiq* articles claim there is an action or duty to be upheld by the reader - one that a free individual must submit to as a result of accepting (or being persuaded by) IS' interpretations of any agreement, whether it be familial, political, religious, or otherwise.⁶⁰ The definition used is for internal consistency in the coding process; one could argue with it, but this take on it is grounded in the literature of political obligation and is the most effective definition for unearthing the concept in *Dabiq* because it necessitates action.

From the results, we can note that there is an obvious effort by IS to convince women that they have individual obligations; this is seen in the 13 explicit mentions of obligation, not to mention the 67 implicit mentions, in the articles aimed at women. This answers the research question as to what IS thinks it is doing: *Dabiq* is a manifestation of IS appealing to women's agency rather than leaving them as objects of male desire.

The magazine does not appear to treat the recruitment of women in a particularly dismissive way, as far as agency goes, in comparison to articles for men. Their efforts in *Dabiq* can illuminate what it looks like when a terrorist group takes this

⁵⁹ This is in line with the feminist security studies school of thought outlined in the Literature Review part of this study. See: Badurdeen, "Women who Volunteer:" Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror;" Fair *In Their Own Words*.

⁶⁰ *Dabiq*, 1-15 (2014-2016). Also see: Pateman, "Political Obligation, Freedom and Feminism."

approach which scholars of feminist security studies would expect. In the case of IS, it looks that discussing obligations was a major way in which they did this.

Further, there are more references to obligation in the articles *To/From Our Sisters* than in the articles *Among the Believers are Men*. This difference suggests that ISIS is being deliberate. They believe that this idea of obligation matters to women more than to men because women have a stronger desire to have their agency acknowledged. Why this is so is not particularly obvious - perhaps it is because women are more prone to feel subjugated to men, that they are only objects of male desire, particularly so in the context of an extremist Islamic setting.

In turn, this might suggest that IS is trying harder to persuade women that it is acceptable, if not desirable, to be their own agent and join IS, whereas in the case of men they may assume it is more likely that men are past this stage and will uphold obligations - despite the on-looking eyes of other people or their own doubts about IS. IS may believe that men do not face the similar pressures as women of struggling to go join the caliphate by themselves, and therefore need fewer nudges of this sort; the nudges for men are an appeal to glory which comes secondary to the assumption of agency.

Further, the paragraphs to women which are about obligation tend to be a nudge for them to interpret Islam and other obligations themselves (with the guidance of IS, of course) without taking heed of imams, their male counterparts, or other members of society; this is an appeal to agency. It is an obligational call to be brave by acting independently and shucking off doubters, whereas the call to men to be brave appears to pertain to the face of battle and for glory amongst peers.

Since IS emphasizes that obligations such as to the Ummah, Hijrah, the Khilifah, and Islam are important issues *specific* to women (even though they also discuss these in articles to men and general readers), they are signaling to female readers that they are valued as members of the caliphate and that their actions - upholding their obligations - are important, just like men's are.

Certainly, their obligations are not precisely the same: women are mothers and wives of jihadi soldiers, but, crucially, their obligation to the caliphate and the concepts other than marriage, take precedence over what their male counterparts tell them to do,

which is highlighted in the many paragraphs about obligation. The true authority is Islam, and the caliphate, not one's husband, father, or brother. This is in line with the idea that scriptural justification for terrorism can be effective on female recruits, as Fair points out.

One might then ask, why bother writing articles specifically to women at all? IS may want to transcend their reputation and the Islamic terrorist organisation stereotype of being oriented towards male soldiers. They appear to be communicating a sense of acknowledgment or reassurance of what lies in joining the caliphate - tapping into a woman's desire to be her own agent. Whether or not this is true upon arrival is an entirely different discussion. The articles aimed at women seem positioned to grab their attention, and the content then elucidates an attitude which says, *you, as a woman, have an important role to play, and an obligation to play such a role*. This necessitates an assumption which Bloom maintains: that women are capable of being willing volunteers in terrorist groups.⁶¹

The Prominence of the Obligation Theme of Islam

In addition to the above, we can also see that there is a prominence of the obligation to Islam compared to other obligation themes. This might be unsurprising given that IS is an Islamic group, however, this is also why it is particularly interesting.

IS is quite explicit about its interpretation of Islam being the foundation of its caliphate,⁶² thus, it is notable that they discuss such foundational obligations in their articles to women as much as they do men. They do not leave the interpretation of and acting upon scripture only to males - they fervently discuss it in their articles for women. This tactic could be similar to what Bond & Thomas found in their research: that women's presence in terrorist groups has something to do with them seeking the respect of men. Whether or not they receive it, of course, is separate. Surely, if IS wants women to believe they are only objects of desire for men, and unimportant actors in the caliphate, they would not discuss such foundational aspects of their existence with

⁶¹ Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror."

⁶² See *Dabiq* Issues 1-15. For a specific example see Issue 1 (5 July 2014): pp. 2-5.

women. Of course, perhaps this is a ploy by IS to trick women into joining, but that is not important here.

Further, by drawing out scriptures that pertain to women in particular not only are they attempting to relate to women but show them that women in the scriptures acted upon their obligation to Islam, just as they ought to now. In the articles, the importance of a woman's obligation to Islam supersedes that of her male counterparts, and is so important that it is in the scriptures of the religion, often in the form of narrative examples about how women acted and upheld obligations.

It is clear that by employing an obligation to Islam in articles to both men and women, IS believes that women are as capable as men are of being persuaded to take action as a result of an obligation to Islam. They appear to believe that this is an effective tactic for recruitment.

Conclusion

Key Findings

IS tailored recruitment messages to women in textual long-form, which granted them the opportunity to implement intricate concepts such as obligation, as well as clear up obligational dilemmas women might have. The research I undertake on the content of *Dabiq* articles provides insight into how IS appeals to women's agency, which manifests largely as obligations to notions such as Ummah, Hijrah, Khilafah, and or Islamic ideology, rather than on a primary emphasis of love, marriage or threat.

Dabiq emphasizes obligations on women more so than in articles aimed at other audiences, and also explains obligations to Islam more than other themes. This shows us what it looks like for a relatively successful terrorist group to focus on appealing to women's agency as feminist security studies would expect would be an effective tactic. As a result of these findings, researchers can now be confident of their foundations when on the lookout for terrorist recruitment tactics that appeal to women's desire to uphold obligations to the caliphate and Islam.

Contributions

My research shows us how an Islamic terrorist group that attracted a notable amount of female recruits appealed to their agency, as well as how these appeals are to obligational themes similar to those they employ in propaganda aimed at men. The field of feminist security studies has been bolstered by the evidence that IS is employing tactics that are in line with the field's theory that women desire agency.

By illuminating that *Dabiq* uses its interpretations of Islamic scripture to appeal to women's obligations, we can see that the women's obligations and Islam are not mutually exclusive. This is important because it can aid us in better understanding why higher than expected numbers of women might have joined IS when at first glance it appears that the group does not value women's agency (which of course, upon arrival they may not do).

This can help us re-evaluate the phenomenon of female recruits to Islamic terrorist organisations and reframe the question of how propaganda might be aiding this by expanding our focus to political, religious, and ideological appeals for women in the same way we do men, and understanding that women are reminded more than men that they have agency to uphold obligations. Proponents of feminist security studies would argue that creating this form of propaganda content would be a successful way to gain more female recruits, and we can see by examining *Dabiq* that this can be in the form of long textual appeals to and explanations of obligations.

Policymakers can use this research to refocus terrorist recruitment to focus on women as important actors and to understand that concepts such as ideology (political and religious) may be employed in terrorist propaganda. Counter-narratives must include ideas such as de-radicalisation and alternatives to political and religious extremism that include the option to have agency. These insights will aid in undermining IS and other terrorists organisations' recruitment efforts.

Limitations

Perhaps it is unsurprising that Islam is a prominent obligation theme because *Dabiq* is a propaganda machine for an ideological, religious, terrorist group. However, it

still shows that IS thinks appealing to obligations of this sort is effective. It appears that they think their readers are Islamic or can be convinced to convert and that this is what they consider the most compelling argument to join.

Not to mention, IS appears to believe that both men and women have the individual agency and obligation to evaluate their religion independently (although IS has its own ideas about the correct interpretations), and choose to convert. It should be noted that the call to convert is not explicitly discussed - it is rather taken for granted that Islam is 'true' and that the scripture justifies itself, as well as conversion.

Further Research

As this is descriptive research, which seeks to highlight how feminist tactics of appealing to agency are employed by IS to recruit women, the next step in research would be to assess to what extent this tactic has the desired effect, such as by interviewing IS recruits. The research provides perspicacity into how IS employs a feminist take on recruitment to extremist groups, which is the beginning of a wider research agenda about whether appealing to certain obligations has an actual impact on recruitment. This in turn could further inform counter-terrorism research and policy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Principles for the Presence of Obligation in Units

Category 1: No mention implicitly or explicitly

- This means that the term obligation nor any possible synonyms are mentioned (duty, job, swear to, promise, uphold, etc.) that could, upon contextualization, be inferred to mean that the concept of obligation is part of the paragraph
- If a synonym is evident, it must be used to infer the concept of obligation as defined. For instance, duty is not obligation, nor is obedience or devotion. The definition of obligation for the purpose must insist that a promise is being upheld

**For example: [entire paragraph] In the Name of Allah the Mighty, the Strong. May blessings and peace be upon the truthful and trustworthy one, and upon his family, his companions, and those who follow him in righteousness until the Day of Judgment*

- At no point in this paragraph is there any reference to an obligation or upholding of a promise. Any attempt to make a case that there is such evidence would have more support for refutation than support.

Category 2: Implicit mention with ambiguity

- This means that the term obligation is not explicitly mentioned. However, because certain words (such as synonyms) or phrases are mentioned, it can be inferred. Or, the concept of obligation is alluded to. The unit is considered to have evidence of obligation because without these words/concepts being alluded to, it would undoubtedly change the unit to be in Category 1, thus the words/phrases are significant to implying obligation.

**For example: If, however, you fear your Lord and His anger, and abandon this apostate husband in obedience to Him, then He will replace him with something better and will provide for you from where you do not expect.'*

- This section of the paragraph does not explicitly mention obligation or any synonyms. However, in the context of the paragraph, it can be inferred to be describing how the reader has an obligation to leave their husband if they are not upholding the beliefs of Islam (as IS interprets it). If this section was not present, the paragraph would then fall into Category 1, for there is no call to uphold a promise/maintain a contract - it would just be about how it is 'wrong' to support an apostate husband.
- It is possible to have an obligation to be dutiful, devoted, or obedient. However, it is also possible to simply be obedient without any implicit reference to upholding or being obliged to do so. Context is important here. See above example

Category 3: Implicit with no ambiguity

- The word *obligation* is not mentioned but there is an obvious reference to a promise being upheld (via action) as a result of the reader being involved in some sort of *contract* which imposed the need to uphold said promise (which is the definition of obligation). The reader is assumed to be aware that there is a promise to be upheld

*For example: *whose soldiers have placed their trust in Allah and shown resolve after swearing that war will not lay down its burdens until Islam rules every land and region...*
- Here one can see the obvious reference to upholding a promise through action because of the term *swearing*. The obligation is obvious here, as the soldiers have voluntarily submitted themselves to the agreement of *trusting Allah*, therefore being obligated to not cease the war until *Islam rules every land and region*. The contract is clear as is the action of upholding the promise, despite the lack of the explicit use of the term obligation.

Category 4: Explicit mention of the word obligation

- The word obligation is used, but comprehended to be directed at the reader and not part of a sentence which is irrelevant, for example, part of dialogue in a narrative which is being described in the paragraph

**For example: And I remind you of the individual obligation on every Muslim and Muslimah to make hijrah...*

- This part of the paragraph explicitly refers to the obligation and to what the obligation is pertaining. In this case, hijrah, because one is part of the agreement of being a Muslim (as far as IS is concerned) and thus must uphold a duty and take action (hijrah).

Appendix B: Keywords/Principles for Obligation Themes

Keywords are used to help identify the subject of the paragraph (unit of analysis) as it relates to obligation themes

Because there are complex paragraphs, and often long ones, it is important to identify the subject that contextualizes the rest of the unit of analysis. For example, a paragraph may mention many keywords from the marriage theme, however upon contextualization, one can see that the paragraph pertains to the precedence of one’s obligation to Islam over any marriage

Information from one paragraph is not be used to infer the theme/subject of another - each unit of analysis is independent

MARRIAGE	CHILDREN	UMMAH	HIJRAH	KHILAFAH	ISLAM
Husband	Son	Community	Arrived	Caliphate	Scripture
Wife	Daughter	History	Islamic	Land	Jihad
Spouse	Charity	Collective	State	Home	Ibn
Listening	Family	People	Travel	Homeland	Hadith
Patience	Shepherd	Extend	Soon	Rightful	Shariah
Divorce	Time	Total	Later	Led	Praying
Problems	Health	Unity	Journey	Destined	Mujahid
Waiting	Care	Enemy	Leave	Unite	Muslims
Marry	Mother	Humanity	Mujahideen	Establish	Prophet
Married	Father	Future	Cause		Allah
Lawful	School	Brothers	Return		Religion
House	Teach		Follow		Ihdad
Steadfast	Generation		Emigrate		Haram
Widow					Scholar
					Sin
					Paradise