



Articles

Changing God's Expectations and Women's Consequent Behaviors – How ISIS Manipulates “*Divine Commandments*” to Influence Women's Role in Jihad

by **Fernanda Buriil**



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Abstract

Given the evidence pointing to religiosity and gender as strong predictors of risk aversion, the recruitment of women into extremist organizations seems contradictory. This article is intended to help solve the puzzle of female behavior in terrorist groups by adding some nuance to the discussion: it is not religiosity itself that influences people's willingness to take risks, but their perception of god's expectations about their behavior. This is illustrated here with an analysis of ISIS's magazine Dar al-Islam and the evolution of their messages, from portraying a god that wants submission to a god that needs women's active participation in battle.

Key words: Terrorist recruitment; ISIS propaganda; women and ISIS; women in jihad

God's expectations and risk attitude

The gender gap in risk taking has been studied in the most diverse spheres of behavior, with overwhelming evidence suggesting that women are less likely to take risks than men. In contexts that range from financial decisions (Charness & Gneezy, 2012; Barber & Odean, 2001) to strategic decision-making in a simulated war (Johnson, McDermott, Barrett, Cowden, Wrangham, McIntyre, & Rosen, 2006), females are often less confident about their chances of success, they see higher risks in tasks than men do (Bromiley & Curley, 1992; Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002), and are less willing to take risks altogether.

Another relevant finding replicated in several studies points to an inverse correlation between religiosity and risk taking (Miller & Hoffmann, 1995). Although different religious denominations have different effects on people's attitudes towards risk, the simple fact of being religious seems to increase the likelihood of risk aversion (Noussair, Trautmann, Van de Kuilen, & Vellekoop, 2013). The importance attributed to religion and participation in religious activities are also consistently associated with reduced risky behaviors (Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007). Along similar lines, several studies have shown that, when primed with the idea of god or other spiritual terms, individuals are more likely to be prosocial (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007) and less likely to engage in immoral actions such as cheating in an exam (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011).

In the light of such findings, ISIS's relative success in recruiting women using religious arguments is a curious phenomenon. Emphasizing religious ideas and priming women with divine concepts are constant strategies used in the group's propaganda. How, then, instead of driving them away from risky tasks, does ISIS's indoctrination motivate some women to support and even perpetrate actions with extremely high chances of harming or even killing them?



The answer to this apparent paradox lies in nuances that have been overlooked in many of these past studies. The correlation between religiosity and risk aversion may actually be mediated by another variable: perception of god's expectations. Believers take very seriously ideas of what god considers to be right or wrong, what is sacred and what is sinful, and they are supposed to follow the "good" path in order to get god's approval. In Sinha's and colleagues' study (2007), for example, most risky behaviors avoided by religious participants concerned issues about which religious doctrines almost always have very solid views, such as drug use and sexual activity. The same logic can be applied to cheating in exams, widely considered to be an immoral act.

What happens, however, when people are primed with the idea of god and face the possibility of engaging in morally-neutral risky activities such as skydiving? Kupor and colleagues (Kupor, Laurin, & Levav, 2015) have found that, contrary to previous studies' predictions, participants are actually more likely to accept the risks of skydiving. Another recent experiment has also shown a higher willingness to take financial risks among subjects primed with god concepts (Chan, Tong, & Tan, 2014). What these recent studies suggest is that the relationship between believing in god and being risk averse is not so direct or absolute.

The image people hold of god and especially what they understand to be god's expectations about their behavior on earth are important predictors of their attitude towards risk. Regardless of whether believers are counting on divine rewards in life or in an afterlife, or they fear god's punishment for disobedience, the fact is that the anticipation of god's reaction is a powerful motivation for behavior. By manipulating people's perceptions about what god expects, certain actors can influence the way believers calculate risks and significantly change their willingness to take them. The propaganda produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) illustrates well how this strategy is used, and how the representation of god's commands can change according to how ISIS leaders want their followers to act.

Does religiosity matter at all in terrorist groups' behavior?

Some of the first questions that can be posed are whether ISIS *raison d'être* really is directly tied to religion and what role (if there is one) Islam plays in the radicalization of youth (as opposed to poverty, social marginalization, or other political grievances). Although there is no consensus regarding these questions, better answers can be reached by understanding that all these factors can interact and intensify the effectiveness of extremists' narratives.

As Coolsaet (2016) remarks, before 9/11, it would take years and years of indoctrination to turn people into jihadis, whereas today they join ISIS more suddenly and impulsively. The involvement of "born-again Muslims" with extremist organizations can indicate that they are more interested in the adventure and the battles rather than in the spiritual purposes of the jihad. This new wave of terrorists would embrace violence as the ultimate act of rebellion against the Western world, not because of an inner religious passion or devoutness. What this perspective misses is that the socio-political and religious motives are not exclusive, and that adding god's authorization and encouragement to political action can enhance the purpose with which believers engage in it.

Even though these "born-again Muslims" do not have a history of religious devoutness and know little about the central texts of the religion they claim to profess, this does not mean that the belief in god and the images they create of him do not influence their behavior. In fact, this unfamiliarity with the broad teachings of Islam and the desperate need to please god after years of neglect can make new recruits much more vulnerable to the frames chosen by the extremist group. As Fareed Zakaria (2016) put it, "today's terrorists



are not religious extremists who became radicals but rather radicals who became religious extremists.” Even if these individuals are selected into extremist organizations because of their stronger desire for adventure and their willingness to take risks, the fact that they choose or end up being part of a *religious* one can affect their behavior in important ways. If a certain religious ideology is essential to the image of the group, members that decide to join or stay in it will feel compelled to conform. Presenting these individuals who have little knowledge of the very religion they then claim to profess with strong statements about god’s will can channel their predisposition to violence in ways that benefit the ultimate goals of the organization. Women, too, can be led to perpetrate violence to please god.

Are men and women in the West recruited the same way?

According to Marc Sageman (*in* Bloom, 2012), women are exposed to the same jihadist propaganda as are men. On the internet, they can participate in the forums and chat rooms just as men can. In fact, they can even not reveal their gender at all. This “gender neutralization” makes the virtual space a powerful tool for women, who feel they can fulfill the expectations of jihad by mobilizing, recruiting, and supporting individuals in the physical and ideological wars. Malika el-Aroud, widow of Abdessater Dahmane, who killed the leader of the anti-Taliban Afghan Northern Alliance in 2001, became famous among the jihadi community exactly because of her active role online. Using her status as a martyr’s wife and taking advantage of loopholes in Belgian law, el-Aroud ran pro-Al-Qaeda websites and became a role model for jihadi women as a “female holy warrior for the 21st century” (Bloom, 2012, p. 237).

Although it is true that the virtual space creates more opportunities for women to engage with other members and potential recruits of the terrorist organizations, there is no complete “gender neutralization” in the real world, as men and women are usually assigned to different roles in the organizational structure. Both men and women can have access to magazines like *Dar al-Islam*, but the articles within them are usually very clear about the sex of the people to whom they refer and address themselves. Excerpts selected from the Qur’an and the hadiths are equally clear about the obligations of male and female Muslims in society. The purpose of this analysis is to identify how the authors of *Dar al-Islam* played with believers’ perceptions of Allah’s expectations in order to influence their attitude and participation in jihad.

Why Dar al-Islam?

ISIS’ media branch, al-Hayat Media Center, specializes in producing and releasing videos, messages, and online magazines on their websites, Twitter, and Facebook accounts. The sophistication and prolificacy of al-Hayat Media Center is impressive. According to Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, ISIS currently operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any terrorist organization (Yan, n.d.). In July 2014, ISIS began releasing its most famous magazine *Dabiq* in English, Arabic, French, and German. Later in the same year, it released the first issue of *Dar al-Islam*, a French-language only publication. In 2015, ISIS continued its endeavor to target specific audiences by publishing *Istok* (in Russian) and *Konstantiniyye* (in Turkish). Since the end of 2016, all these magazines have been replaced by *Rumiyah* (Rome, in Arabic).

The choice of *Dar al-Islam* specifically for this study is not without a reason. France and Belgium especially have become fertile breeding grounds for ISIS militants, and at least 470 Belgian citizens went to Syria to join the fighting (Miller & Warrick, 2016). Perhaps more interestingly, female French speakers are more likely to



join ISIS than women from other countries. According to Jayne Huckerby's report (2015) published by the New York Times, roughly 10 percent of the Western recruits made by the Islamic State are female, while, in France, the estimate is that almost 20 percent of the people affiliated with ISIS are women.

Dar al-Islam can be a window to understanding the most successful strategies used by ISIS to recruit both males and females in Europe. It is important to analyze not only the general content of the magazine, but also how, by selecting certain passages and *hadiths*, ISIS propagandists manipulate people's perceptions of what Allah expects from men and women. The following is an analysis of the eight issues of the magazine that are available online on Archive.org and Jihadology.net. The translations from French to English were conducted by the author of this paper.

Dar al-Islam: rescuing Muslims from the World of War

The audience ISIS targets in Europe is certainly not one of lifelong devout Muslims with a thorough understanding of Islam and Islamic texts. In the very first issue of *Dar al-Islam*, almost all religious terms in Arabic are followed by a proximate translation and a thorough explanation of the concepts. Even some important regions like the Sinai get footnotes clarifying their geographical location.

With a first introduction to key concepts of Sunni Islam also come very important arguments about the role of ISIS in the ultimate goals of the religion. Allah would have permitted the Islamic State to reestablish a caliphate and get support from other Muslims because the organization is fighting for the most fundamental concept of *tawhid* (oneness of god) by combatting the *shirk* (those who adore other idols). In their interpretation, Christians, Jews, Shi'a, and those who simply defend democracy and the laws of men fit into the latter group. *Dar al-Islam* argues that the Qur'an "proves" and legitimates the caliphate and that it is the responsibility of Muslims to either join their brothers in the lands governed by Islamic rules or to combat their enemies where they are, especially in France, the United States, and their allies. Throughout all other issues, guidance on how to fulfill those roles are provided.

By the fifth issue, *Dar al-Islam* finally figures out its style and structure. The different sections of the magazine all have clear purposes. Although the news and events covered in each publication are different, they all contribute to 1) "prove" the veracity of some selected religious excerpts and the wrongness of ISIS's enemies, 2) show how the Islamic State is establishing the laws of Allah by applying appropriate punishments to deviants, and 3) propagandize the benefits of living in the caliphate.

A More Personal Appeal

Publishing the magazine in French is not the only way ISIS leaders try to get closer to their potential francophone recruits in Europe. They make sure to use common social experiences, local events, and media references with which residents can empathize. In the second issue, they make a statement about the intended audience of the magazine combined with a call for a more active participation of those reading it:

"...[T]his magazine is not addressed to the researchers, to the miscreant journalists or the pseudo-Muslims that want to study the Islamic State and that will attack us anyway even if our orthography and syntax were perfect. We are also not addressing ourselves to the pseudo-partisans of Jihad who think that they do something for their religion by spending their nights on social media." (Dar al-Islam, n. 2, p. 2)

The words in the publication are addressed to people like Amedy Coulibaly, who was killed by the French



police in Paris after his attack to a kosher market. Coulibaly, known by other ISIS members as Abou Basir Abdallah al-Ifriqi, had lived a life of crime, punishment, and resentment in France. Becoming a “martyr” was his redemption:

“...[b]y the sword and the allegiance, brother Abou Basir Abdallah al-Ifriqi was preserved from the troubles of life in France, this mundane love, the fact of living among misbelievers, and finally the mass apostasy of those who solidarized with the enemies of Allah.” (Dar al-Islam, n. 2, p. 6)

A final example of the efforts made by ISIS to personalize the message is the section “L’État Islamique dans le Mots de l’Ennemi” (The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy) that appears for the first time in the third issue of the magazine. The section is very similar to Dabiq’s “In the Words of the Enemy,” which featured world leaders and experts, especially Americans, talking about ISIS and its danger. In the French version, French personalities are prioritized, like international consultant and instructor of the Institut d’Études Politiques Samuel Laurent. The enemy’s words that ISIS chooses to publish usually combine antagonism to the laws of Islam and opinions about the capabilities of the organization that instigate fear in the West.

The Portrayal of Women in Dar al-Islam

Vulnerable and Victimized

One of the most interesting recent changes observed in the structure of terrorist organizations, more specifically in Islamic extremist organizations, concerns the participation and role of female members. Differently from their secular counterparts, religious terrorist groups have largely avoided using women in their armed operations. In 2008, Ayman al-Zawahiri, at the time Al-Qaeda’s second in command, clearly stated online that women could not join his organization (Sciolino & Mekhennet, 2008). Another Al-Qaeda leader in Saudi Arabia, Yussufal-Ayyiri, although agreeing with the interdiction of women in battles, has been very emphatic about women’s role in encouraging and supporting their husbands and sons in their efforts to join jihad. He explicitly says that women should not engage in physical combat, but reiterates that their motivational role is essential for the jihad and the Muslim *ummah* (community) (Von Knop, 2007, p. 406). But what is ISIS’s current ideology and organizational strategy towards women?

The broad message in the first issues of *Dar al-Islam*, published in the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015, does not seem to deviate much from that of Al-Qaeda. Women are rarely referred to and, when they are, it is usually in a condition of vulnerability. They are put in the same category as children and diseased people, who should be protected and kept away from the battles. They are also used to illustrate the horrors of what the West has been doing and motivate men to engage in the war:

“No planes were launched to defend the Sunni women in Iraq and their children that went through persecution and massacres.” (Dar al-Islam, n. 1, p. 8)

“Three days ago, nine women were killed in a bombing attack on a bus... Are you going to let the misbeliever sleep calmly in his home while the Muslims’ women and children tremble, afraid of the sound of the planes crossing over their heads all day?” (Dar al-Islam, n. 2, p. 6)

Women are also often represented as property of men. Whether daughters, sisters, wives or slaves, women should be kept far from the enemy. Several excerpts in the magazine remind the readers of the threat the enemies pose of taking away their women:



“They [the rawafid] came... to take your houses, your lands, and your goods, they came to kill your men and take you women in captivity, the Iranians came seeking revenge on the Iraqis for the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.” (Dar al-Islam, n. 3, p. 6)

Two pages of the second issue of the magazine are dedicated to an interview with the widow of Abu Abdullah al-Ifriqi (Amedy Coulibaly), Hayat Boumeddiene, whose real name is not mentioned – she is referred to throughout the whole article as “wife” or “sister.” With a layout that significantly differs from the rest of the magazine, these two pages are framed with delicate flowers. The interview consists of only three questions: what Boumeddiene felt once she got to the caliphate, what her husband felt when the caliphate was proclaimed, and what message she has for Muslims in general and sisters in particular. Boumeddiene tells the readers how enthusiastic Coulibaly was about the caliphate, how happy she is to have arrived there, and how easy the trip to the Islamic State was. The third answer, the message to the sisters, takes three quarters of the whole interview, and is a call for women to be supportive of their husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. She says that, if the first Muslims managed to spread Islam throughout large territories, it was because they had pious women behind them. Muslim women, finally, should follow the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ [1] and be chaste, decent, truthful, and obedient to Allah.

To this day, Boumeddiene is being sought by the French police for allegedly having helped Coulibaly with the Paris attacks, but the extent of her involvement in the operation is still unclear. Even though she has been described by the French Police as “armed and dangerous” (Gardner, 2015), the image portrayed in the message is that of an obedient woman, who is simply doing what Allah expects from her and other sisters: supporting their men.

Brave and Powerful

Allah’s rules regarding women’s behavior as presented by ISIS, at least initially, are very restrictive, which facilitates men’s control over them. The exceptions to this strict conservatism towards women’s attitudes begin to appear when loosening the rules would offer strategic gains to the organization. According to the Sharia, women are not allowed to travel without their husbands or a mahram (unmarriageable kin). Although some details like the length of the journey vary, the prohibition seems to be a consensus:

“Let no woman travel for more than three days unless her husband or a Mahram is with her.” (Sahih Muslim)

“It is unlawful for a woman who believes in Allah and the last day that she travels the distance of one day and one night without a Mahram accompanying her.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 1038)

Even for the purposes of the sacred pilgrimage (*hajj*), the prohibition should stand:

“One of the conditions for the permissibility of a woman travelling for Hajj is that she is accompanied by her husband or a Mahram. If neither of them is accompanying her, then Hajj will not be obligatory.” (Imam al-Kasani)

Dar al-Islam focuses its message, however, on another perspective of this issue, one that facilitates the migration of women to the regions dominated by ISIS:

“Has a woman by herself the right to travel to accomplish al-hijrah [exodus or migration to Islamic regions]? Al-Qurtubi said: “The savants are unanimous that it is an obligation for women to travel, even without a mahram, if she fears for her religion or for herself or if she emigrates from the land of



misbelief." [Al-Mufham Sharh Sahih Muslim vol.3 p.450]." (in *Dar al-Islam*, n. 3, p. 10)

The most surprising words regarding how women should behave amid the conflict appear in issue number 10, the last publication of *Dar al-Islam* before it was apparently replaced by the newest magazine *Rumiya*. In this issue, pretentiously titled "Game Over," ISIS claims that France has lost its war against Islam and the Islamic State, and that their soldiers in the enemy's lands are running towards death to meet with the Lord. It is also in this issue that the message to Muslim women most dramatically change, with a clear call to the physical battles.

While, in Boumeddiene's interview, the role model for Muslim women was Maryam (Mary, mother of Jesus), a symbol of decency and obedience, the female figures brought up by the author Umm Sumayyah al-Faranciya in her article have much more agency. "The Women Around the Prophet" starts off by saying how important it is for Muslims to dive into their history and see the sources of their success. This history, it continues, is full of strong women who "far from being passive, they integrated different spheres of society and contributed actively to its prosperity as well as to the diffusion of Islam" (*Dar al-Islam*, n. 10, p. 31). Over pages full of roses and pink headings, Al-Faranciya reminds her readers that, in the beginning of their religion's history, Muslims had to resist waves of violent reprisals and hostility. Among those actors of resistance were women who actively converted their colleagues, brothers, and husbands, and guided their sons to embrace Islamism and martyrdom.

Al-Faranciya reminds Muslim women that they can follow the path of Aisha, one of Mohammed's wives, known to be very educated and to play a crucial role in spreading Islam, as well as in unifying Muslims after the death of Mohammed. They could also be like the women who advised Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab on state affairs. After all, "How to deny the participation of women in the affairs of society when the caliph himself used to be advised by a woman?" (*Dar al-Islam*, n. 10, p. 31).

The boldest revelation comes in the subsection about battles and the jihad. Al-Faranciya affirms that the battlefields were also full of women, and that examples abound to illustrate the courage of several role models among them. They accompanied Mohammed in military expeditions as nurses and also participated in both land and sea battles. If until then they had been portrayed as the vulnerable ones needing protecting, women now have their heroism unveiled by history. Not only could they participate in combat, they have protected Mohammed himself:

"The most fabulous story remains that of Nusaybah Umm Imarah al-Ansariyah during the battle of Uhud, who protected the prophet with all her body against the enemy. Mohammed himself would have said that 'during the battle of Uhud, whichever way I turned my head, to the right and to the left, I saw Umm Imarah combatting in my defense.'" (Dar al-Islam, n. 10, p. 33)

Nusaybah would have participated also in the battles of Khaybar, Hunayan, and al-Yamamah, where it is believed she lost an arm and were stabbed over a dozen times. Far from being the exception, Nusaybah would be just one of the many women that followed men into wars.

Another interesting reminder in the article is that not only by the sword one can win battles. Umm Hakim, for instance, was said to have killed seven enemies by simply grabbing a hook that held the tent over them. Her example can inspire many women who want to contribute to defeating the enemy but lack the skills or courage to operate weapons. In case physical fights or subtler strategies to kill enemies do not appeal to them, the author makes sure to explain that there are still many other ways women can get involved in the war and in the development of the Muslim community. They can, for example, be nurses and medical doctors helping



the wounded, poets and writers spreading the Muslim message, and businesswomen and farmers who feed the community.

Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

One of the explanations proposed for the increase in female participation in terrorist organizations is that these groups would be pressured by critical conditions such as social dislocation, losses in conflict, and increase in law enforcement (Cunningham, 2003), which would essentially make them recruit women as a measure of last resort. Indeed, ISIS' call for women to be more active in jihad may stem from its difficulties in the conflict.

When the magazine released its first issues, in 2014, ISIS was in one of its best moments, taking over the cities of Raqqa, Mosul, and Tikrit, besides the Kurdish towns of Sinjar and Zumar, and announcing the establishment of the caliphate. In 2015, with the intensification of U.S. airstrikes and the stronger involvement of Russia and France in September and November, respectively, ISIS started to accumulate important losses, especially in Tal Abyad and Ramadi. In December, the U.S. announced that three senior ISIS leaders were killed in an airstrike, including its finance minister. In 2016, although ISIS continued to claim responsibility for terrorist attacks around the world, it accumulated battle losses. After two years of occupation, ISIS lost Hit and Fallujah to Iraqi and Kurdish forces. The number of male deaths could have finally made ISIS leaders resort to the employment of females.

But having organizations like ISIS becoming more acceptant of women's participation for a matter of survival is just half of the issue. They have to find ways of getting the attention and support of a group of people they have ignored for a long time and convince those women, as well as the male members of the organization, that including females in their operations is acceptable and beneficial for the whole community. How can such a shift in organizational dynamics take place without creating dissent or compromising trust in the group? The answer to this question seems to be exactly in the religious aspect of extremist organizations. Projecting the highest power and authority onto god takes away the responsibility and accountability from the physical leaders of ISIS. By attributing the discourses, the selected verses or interpretations of the Qur'an, and the sayings in the hadiths to Allah or Mohammed, they can benefit from the belief that these figures are unconditionally truthful and unquestionable. Especially because they are presenting these specific ideas to an audience of non-experts, people who did not have an extensive knowledge of the Islamic texts, they can manipulate these words more effectively in order to satisfy the organization's needs.

Ignorance regarding the mainstream literature on Islam makes indoctrination easier, as the target-recruits have little to compare the extremist ideas to, and no means of questioning them. The ability to make different text selections and to frame the same issues differently from one time to another (as in the case of women's role in jihad) while maintaining the respect and unquestionability of their sources is a powerful feature of ISIS. If members start losing their faith or question the veracity of the promises, they are reminded that everything is under god's control and defecting equals damnation.

Conclusions

As the case of ISIS shows, the openness of religious extremist organizations to women's participation is not exclusively dependent upon the religious rules for which they live, but also the context in which the organizations find themselves, their current capabilities, and their needs. Most of ISIS' propaganda had been



invoking Allah's commands that ask for women to be docile, obedient, and supportive of the men in their lives conducting the jihad. There are signs, however, that this exclusively supportive role will not stand. As the most recent issues of *Dar al-Islam* magazine show, Allah now "commands" that women must be much stronger and active. ISIS leaders have been focusing on women's role in the history of Islam and convincing them of their importance in the building and protection of the new caliphate. With the recent battles and territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, ISIS will likely be more acceptant of the use of females in their operations both in the Middle East and in the West, and their propaganda should continue to reflect this strategic change.

Even if currently representing just a small percent of the members of Islamic terrorist groups, women represent an important asset to them. The problems that may arise from ignoring women's capabilities and desires to engage in terrorism are already visible. Terrorist groups have realized that they can take advantage of the general belief that women are less threatening and dangerous than men, and they are now more willing to make use of females' presumed innocence to conduct their operations. Females can also make it through security checks easier (Huckerby, 2015), and they can more easily hide harmful objects underneath loose clothes. Relying on the idea that women are averse to risk and generally less likely to engage in terrorism might prove dangerous, as it neglects the ability of extremist groups to manipulate what god expects of them and the power these expectations might then have on the believer.

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Note

[1] In Islam, not only Jesus is an important figure (one of the prophets and messengers of Allah), his mother Mary (or Maryam) also assumes a very prominent position. Mary is frequently mentioned in the Qur'an as one of the most honored, respectful, and pure women in history.