Chatting about marriage with female migrants to Syria

Agency beyond the victim versus activist paradigm

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narrative

For some time now reports have appeared in the media about women leaving for Syria, either as 'jihadi brides' or as militant activists. This narrative shifts the focus from security issues to marriage, and works with online material using private chatting rather than public posts. Given the restrictions on research in this field, and insofar as it is possible to know more about the women's concerns using methods short of fieldwork, the authors here present some findings of this exploratory research project. Ed.

CHATTING ABOUT MARRIAGE WITH FEMALE MIGRANTS TO SYRIA
Agency beyond the victim versus activist paradigm[1]

Over the course of the last two years, we have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of women migrating from northwestern Europe to areas in Syria which are under the control of ISIS, and to a lesser extent, Jabhat al-Nusra. It is estimated that these women (who self-identify as *muhajirat sham* or women migrating to Greater Syria) constitute on average about 15 per cent of the total number of migrants from the West.[2] Al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 and his call upon Muslims to fulfil their religious duty to perform *hijra* (to emigrate from the lands of disbelief to the newly proclaimed Islamic State) was a major catalyst.[3] These *muhajirat* have not only drawn the attention of the media and the security forces, but also of researchers – especially those engaged in or affiliated with terrorism and radicalization studies.

In this narrative, we argue that the questions researchers focus on, and the methods they employ, strongly feed into each other and produce a particular kind of knowledge about *muhajirat sham*. A rather narrow range of questions dominates the literature, which centres on how these women are drawn to migrate to Syria, to what extent they are or will become a security risk, and how to develop successful trajectories for deradicalization (Bakker & de Leede 2015; Carvalho 2014; Hoyle et al. 2015; Nacos 2015; Peresin 2015; Peresin & Cervone 2015; Saltman & Smith 2015; van San 2015; Zakaria 2015). Faced with the problem of gaining access, authors largely rely on secondary sources and the *muhajirat*'s publicly accessible posts on social media.[4]

From victims to militant activists
Although some authors point to the danger of uncritically taking up gender stereotypes (Saltman & Smith 2015: 69, 71; Laster & Erez 2015; also Nacos 2005), in most of the literature on the *muhajirat*, the women's agency tends to be either underrated ('women as victims of devious men') or overrated ('women as

trying to outdo their male counterparts'). Once female migration to Syria had been acknowledged, it did not take long for the tropes of 'sexual jihad' and 'jihadi brides' to emerge. Stories about 'sexual jihad' – a term used to refer to women who provide sexual services to male jihadists – arose in the course of 2013 in Tunisia. Scores of young Tunisian women were said to have left for Syria to serve large numbers of jihadists, sometimes through temporary marriages. However, these stories were soon reported to be part of the Tunisian government's efforts to stem the tide of migration to Syria and of the Syrian regime's disinformation campaigns (Reuter 2013).

The term 'jihadi brides' refers to women who migrate to Syria to marry jihadi fighters. Often presented as naïve, overtly romantic, and drawn to the heavily Orientalized images of heroic fighters, these women are regarded as victims of unscrupulous men who lure them to Syria (Peresin & Cervone 2015: 6; Zakaria 2015: 119).[5] Although the use of terms such as 'sexual jihad' and 'jihad brides' only gained prominence when women started to migrate to IS-controlled territory, such framing has its precedents. A decade earlier, when 'informal Islamic marriages' were being discussed by politicians, the security services, and the media in the Netherlands, the women involved in such marriages were also, first and foremost, viewed as victims, who had been recruited by male extremists employing 'loverboy-like' practices to mobilize them for the jihad (NCTb 2006: 22; Moors 2013).

Whereas the trope of the 'jihadi bride' is still widely employed, especially in the media, it has become increasingly criticized in the literature, together with the framing of women as victims (e.g. Saltman & Smith 2015: 5, 42, 71). The *muhajirat*'s growing public online presence has partly shifted the dominant discourse towards recognizing the women as actors and even militant activists who function as propagandists and recruiters for IS.[6] This in itself privileges those *muhajirat* who are most interested in spreading their message to the world at large – that is, the more ideologically engaged women – and, in turn, further amplifies their voices. When Saltman and Smith (2015), for instance, presented profiles of five sets of Western *muhajirat*, they selected those with a strong media presence, posing fully covered, carrying Kalashnikovs and expressing their desire to take part in the jihad.

Some authors use the term 'female foreign fighters' (Bakker & de Leede 2015) to refer to the *muharijat,* or more implicitly point to their potential engagement in violent extremism, comparing them with the earlier presence of female fighters in left-wing and secular groups and the more recent female suicide bombers recruited by Islamist groups (Zakaria 2015; Bakker & de Leede 2015; Nacos 2015). Moreover, those authors who recognize that women in IS-controlled areas are not actively

involved in jihadi violence, nonetheless present them as potential fighters and terrorists. Arguing that these women may become frustrated with their limited roles, they express their concern that this may then push them to turn to extremist violence in Western countries (Hoyle et al. 2015; Peresin & Cervone 2015).[7]

Different questions, different methods
As much research focuses on the activism of the most ideologically motivated and media-savvy women, this raises the question as to whether and how a different focus and method may produce different kinds of knowledge about the *muhajirat*. Our research with the *muhajirat* did not start from questions about security and radicalization, but forms part of a broader anthropological project that explores what kinds of Muslim marriages have become a topic of debate and how this relates to the perspectives and desires of those concluding these marriages. Marriages are not simply a private affair. Depending on the context, interested parties such as families, state actors, and religious authorities are often involved in how a marriage ought to be concluded. In many settings, marriages are central to the regulation of sexuality and procreation, the production of kinship, and the organization of care. As such, they are central to the production, reproduction, and transformation of families, ethnicities, religious groups, nations and other social formations (Young et al. 1981; Hasso 2011; Franklin & McKinnon 2000: 278),

Whilst we used online material in our research project, we did not focus on public posts, but worked through private chatting. We recognize that this kind of online research is far removed from the longer-term immersion that is the hallmark of anthropology. Private chatting remains at the level of discourse (what people say) rather than allowing for the observation of people's practices (what people do). Moreover, the absence of facial expressions and tone of voice make it more difficult to assess people's answers, and, in contrast to conversations that evoke elaboration and detail, online chatting pushes participants to summarize. Still, as the field is so overdetermined by both the more sensationalist media reports and the ways *muhajirat* present themselves to the public, we argue that, in spite of these drawbacks, private chatting with those who do not desire such a public presence produces new forms of knowledge about the *muhajirat*.

Others have pointed out how private chatting creates a sphere of intimacy in which people are often willing to share sensitive details about their lives (cf. Miller & Slater 2000), and how chat sessions via the internet and mobile phones have become important channels through which people create and reinforce friendships, kinship ties and so on (Coleman 2010). This was no different for the women in our research. For them, private chat-

ting online was often the only way they could communicate with significant others in the Netherlands.

We were in contact with 22 women from the Netherlands or Belgium who travelled to Syria.[8] Contact was usually initiated through Facebook Messenger and later, when the women concerned had provided their telephone numbers, through WhatsApp. Some women (or their husbands) did not want to participate in the research because they considered it too risky and were concerned about their families living in the Netherlands or Belgium, had a previously negative experience of journalists, researchers, or the security services, or did not expect much good to come from engaging with those who do not share their worldview. Others were willing and sometimes eager to participate in the research, but circumstances – be they personal, infrastructural, or war related – did not always allow for substantial chat sessions.[9] We consider 10 of the women we contacted to be key interlocutors, as they were both willing and able to provide insights into the conclusion of marriages.[10]

The large majority of our interlocutors were adult women in their early 20s. Many were Moroccan-Dutch (a few were Moroccan-Belgian), with a little over a quarter of them being converts (of various ethnic backgrounds). Over two-thirds of the *muhajirat* were married in Syria, usually quite soon after they had settled there; a few of them already knew their husbands back home. The remainder, a substantial minority, were already married before migrating to Syria. They either travelled together with their husbands or followed them later.[11] Most of the women – both those who had already married back home and those who married in Syria – married partners from the same ethnic background, or if not, then someone of the same nationality, or a convert from another Western country. None of our interlocutors had married anyone from Syria or a *muhajir* from the Middle East.

The *muhajirat* and their marriages

The *muhajirat* consider marriage to be a highly recommended practice in Islam. While this sentiment is widely shared amongst Muslims in general, the living conditions in IS-held territory further encouraged the *muhajirat* to marry. 'It is difficult if you are by yourself while a jihad is going on', one of the women explained. With 'by yourself', she did not mean living alone (the *muhajirat* usually either live in women's quarters or with a befriended family) but living without a husband or one's own family. The *muhajirat*'s strong opinions about how a marriage ought to be concluded, although by no means uncommon, are, however, less widely shared among Muslims generally.

Following strict rules of gender segregation, they are against free dating. Instead, they intend to find a partner through a mediator, and will only meet their partner a limited number of times and always in the presence of others. Rejecting material matters such as a high dower or a lavish wedding, their main

concern is to find a practising brother with similar religious beliefs. In the words of one of the *muhajirat*, 'back home we were really concerned about his *aqida* [belief], we do not need to worry about that here'.[12] By opting for such a form of marriage, the *muhajirat* distance themselves both from mainstream styles of free dating as well as from those arranged marriages where material and familial interests are the main concern (Moors 2013).

In the Netherlands and Belgium, Islamic marriages are a private ritual with no legal effects. Except for a prohibition barring religious functionaries from concluding a religious marriage prior to a civil marriage, the state does not regulate religious marriages.[13] Hence, the parties involved have considerable leeway over how to actually arrange and organize a marriage. For a marriage to be Islamically valid, the groom and the bride need to express their intention and consent (through offer and acceptance) in the presence of two adult male Muslim witnesses. Most schools of law also require that the woman's marriage guardian (her *wali*) either concludes the marriage on her behalf or gives his consent, while the groom needs to pay the bride a dower (*mahr*).[14] No written document or registration is required, nor is the presence of a religious authority necessary.

Under Syrian law, marriages of Muslims have been formally regulated through the statutory Law of Personal Status, which requires some form of state registration.[15] The early arrivals amongst our interlocutors who started to come to IS-held areas from early 2013 onwards, reported that their marriages were concluded informally. A few women already knew the men they were to marry and had previous contact with them through the internet, while others met their husbands in the presence of a mediator, sometimes only once – on which occasion, the woman would lift her face veil so that her potential husband could see her face.[16] The marriage contract was often concluded at home, sometimes at first only orally. Some of the women reported that they choose their own *wali*: 'the husband of my close female friend' claimed one convert; 'my brother, because my father did not agree' reported another, a born Muslim woman; while yet another born Muslim said she had selected 'a friend of my husband' because she did not consider her father suitable as he did not yet perform his five daily prayers. In many cases, their dower had little or no material value. Several women mentioned that they only asked for a Quran, or an uneven number of dates, because they wanted to follow the Sunnah.[17]

After the caliphate was proclaimed, IS officials increasingly attempted to control and regulate the conclusion of marriages, restricting the freedom of action of both the bride and the groom. In some ways this was similar to what had happened during earlier processes of state formation in the Middle East and elsewhere, when the state extended its control over matters of personal status. In line with the Syrian Law of Personal Status, IS also started to require that marriages were either concluded at the Sharia court or at home

in the presence of an official who would then register the marriage at the court. In a similar vein, Islamic rules about who should function as a woman's *wali* were implemented. In the case of a woman with a Muslim father, this should first be her father and then other close male paternal relatives in a fixed order; in the case of a convert, the *qadi* (judge) at the Sharia court would function as her *wali*.[18] Our interlocutors mentioned that sometimes a number of phone calls had needed to be made to fathers back home in order to persuade them to agree with their daughters' marriages.

Other attempts made by IS officials to regulate the conclusion of marriages were more specific. In IS-held areas there were heavy restrictions on private pre-marital contact between men and women, with one of our interlocutors stating that state functionaries would prohibit couples from marrying if they found out about any such prior contact. Moreover, IS also imposed restrictions on men. The latter not only needed the approval of the *wali* of their prospective wife, but also the leader of their group (the *amir*) needed to give his permission.[19] Besides this, IS made attempts to impose a *minimum* amount of dower (our interlocutors mentioned $500) in order to make marriage a more serious commitment and to protect the *muhajirat* from men who would only marry them because they would ask for so little compared to Syrian women and other women from the Middle East. This stands in contrast to developments elsewhere in the Arab world, where attempts to regulate the dower or the costs of marriage entail setting a *maximum* amount in order to facilitate marriage – that is, to counter the trend towards delayed marriage (Welchman 2007: 91-2; Hasso 2011: 62ff, 80ff).

Agency revisited

The above then points to a strong contrast between, on the one hand, tropes such as 'sexual jihad' and 'jihadi brides' which evoke notions of male licentiousness and unrestrained sexuality, and, on the other hand, IS attempts at regulating marriages. Moreover, inferring women's lack of agency does not tally with how the *muhajirat* themselves talk about marriage. Our interlocutors expressed their desire to conclude an Islamic marriage because they considered getting married to be a recommendable religious act. They also willingly submitted to IS regulations, as they had opted for a life under IS rule, which they equated with living under the Sharia.[20]

If it is difficult to define the *muhajirat* as victims, the desires they express and the lives they live are also quite different from those of militant activist women with highly public online profiles. Our interlocutors presented various reasons for migrating to Syria – from feeling no longer accepted once they had started to wear strictly covering styles of dress to expressing the need to help their fellow Muslims – yet their most common motive was a desire to live in an Islamic state under Islamic law, as good wives and mothers, supporting their husbands and caring for their children.[21] They mainly engaged with sisters

(fellow Muslims) from a similar background (their knowledge of Arabic was often limited), while some also remained in contact with their families back home, sharing stories about family life and exchanging advice about subjects such as cooking, health and child care. They were not very active outside of their own social circle, had only limited contact with the local population, and did not get involved in forms of public activism. Temporality also matters here, as their lack of engagement ties in with the fact that most *mujahirat* arrived after the proclamation of the caliphate in June 2014. The only woman amongst our interlocutors who would fit the label of activist had arrived more than a year earlier, in spring 2013. As she herself explained, 'I also notice the difference between me and the newly arriving sisters, I came here to work for the jihad and the new ones are here to live under the Sharia'.

We do not claim that the insights we gained through our chats are representative of the whole population of female migrants from the Netherlands (and even less so for those from Belgium) to Syria. We can, however, state with confidence that a substantial number of *mujahirat* are adult women in their 20s who went to Syria because they desired to live under IS rule. Considering them either as victims or as militant activists does not tally with how they talk about their lives. Rather than expressing an interest in joining the violent jihad, they see themselves as first and foremost responsible for domestic life. This does not imply that giving birth, raising children and caring for husbands are not central to the reproduction of social formations, in this case IS. Yet, in contrast to other cases, where women themselves highlight the political nature of motherhood, our interlocutors were rather reluctant to consider their domestic activities as part and parcel of the world of politics.[22] Their main investment seems to be in attempting to normalize life under IS rule. This normalization remains, however, fragile, as many of the women – a staggering half of our interlocutors – have experienced widowhood in the past couple of years. ●

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1. While we use the term Syria in the title of this article for the sake of brevity, our interlocutors migrated to those areas in Syria that are under control of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham, with Sham referring to Greater Syria or the Levant) or al-Qaida affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Research for this project is funded by the ERC advanced grant on 'Problematizing "Muslim marriages": Ambiguities and contestations'.

2. According to a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 550 out of a total of 4,000 Western migrants are women (Saltman & Smith 2015: 4). Together with the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), this institute runs the largest database on Western females joining ISIS, including 'social media material on over 100 female profiles'.

3. We use terms such as Islamic State, *hijra*, *muhajira* and jihad as emic terms. Many Muslims strongly disagree with the political theology ISIS has developed about the caliphate, *hijra* and jihad and object to its claim to Islamic statehood.

4. Carvalho (2014) and van San (2015), however, have also created their own networks on Facebook.

5. Our discussions about the tropes of 'sexual jihad' and 'jihadi brides' are limited to Muslim women who actively desire to live under IS rule. It does not include the experiences of the Yazidi women and others who are forced to live under IS rule.

6. We use the term activism for public engagements to promote, counter, or direct processes of societal change.

7. Van San (2015) is a divergent voice, as she points to the dynamics of online communications which push people to present themselves online as far more radical than they act offline.

8. Of the 22 women, 17 were from the Netherlands and 5 from Belgium, mainly from the Flemish part. Of these 22 women, 19 lived under IS rule, and three in territory held by Jabhat al-Nusra. Considering that – according to Dutch security (AIVD 2016: 6) – about 60 women have left for IS-held territory since 2012, we have therefore been in contact with a substantial number of these *mujahirat*. As this is not a random sample, it is, however, not possible to use the demographic information provided to draw conclusions about the total population.

9. From July 2015, IS only allowed internet access through internet cafés. This substantially restricted our contact with our interlocutors.

10. The focus of our research (marriage rather than terrorism and radicalization), our long-term engagement with the field, including research about controversial topics such as face-veiling (Moors 2009) and Salafism (de Koning 2013), the self-identification of Navest as a committed Muslim, and as having existing contacts with several of our interlocutors prior to their departure to Syria, all contributed to our gaining some level of trust.

11. Not all women automatically followed their husbands to Syria. In fact, one of our interlocutors pointed out that some of those who did not want to accompany their husbands opted for a divorce.

12. Our interlocutors referred to *aqida* first of all as a marker of belonging. Most of them had only recently started to study *aqida*.

13. In the Netherlands, religious functionaries are prohibited from concluding a religious marriage if this is not preceded by a civil marriage (Dutch Civil Code, Article 68 Book 1). Article 21 of the Belgian Constitution stipulates that a civil marriage must always precede any religious ceremony (Torfs 2005: 641).

14. Only the Hanafi school of law allows a woman to conclude her first marriage without a *wali* (Masud 2009: 81), while the dower is either an effect of marriage or a condition of its validity (Welchman 2007: 90).

15. The Syrian Law of Personal Status is based on Islamic legal sources. With respect to marriage, the Druze and the Christians follow their own religious rulings (Rabo 2012). Carlisle (2008), who did research in Damascus, points out that it was relatively easy to register informally concluded marriages later through a confirmation of marriage procedure.

16. See also Nisa (2011) for similar practices amongst face-veiling women in Indonesia. Some of the *muhajirat* only started wearing a face veil after they had migrated, as wearing a face veil is mandatory in IS-controlled areas, while it is prohibited in Belgium and highly controversial in the Netherlands (Moors 2009).

17. The Sunnah refers to the transmitted record of the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad and his companions.

18. This designation of who is to function as a *wali* is similar to that mentioned in the Syrian Law of Personal Status; however, the latter allows, under specific conditions, for the possibility of marriage without the consent of a *wali*.

19. Carlisle (2008) reported that men serving in the Syrian military also needed to get permission from the army to marry.

20. There is a huge literature on Muslim women's agency: see, for instance, Bracke and Fadil (2012) who elaborate on how the opposition of force versus choice works in the case of headscarf debates, drawing on the work of Mahmood (2005), and her notion of agentic power which includes forms of willed submission.

21. Whereas Muslim women elsewhere may also share similar desires (see, for instance, Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006), they would strongly dissociate themselves from IS.

22. Peteet (1997: 103, 114), for instance, writes about 'activist mothering' (birthing and nurturing children) under warlike conditions in the case of Palestinians in the camps in Lebanon, and Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006: 622 ff) refer to the term 'political motherhood' when analyzing the involvement of mothers in the transfer of Islamic knowledge to the next generation of Muslims in Europe.

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