10 i-Imams studying female Islamic authority online

*Claudia Carvalho*

Hashas, Mohammed, Jan Jaap de Ruiter, and Niels Valdemar Vinding (eds), *Imams in Western Europe: Developments, Transformations, and Institutional Challenges*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018
doi: 10.5117/9789462983830/ch10

**Abstract**
Using Facebook as a case study, this chapter details how self-proclaimed jihadist women construct and disseminate an online discourse to engage their audience with jihadist ideology. The empirical data provide a glimpse into the mechanisms that enable female Islamic authority online, while the theoretical framework describes the elements of jihadist propaganda used to grant legitimacy to those who assume the roles of, in this case, female i-Imams. The study shows that female online authority promotes the transformation of women into warriors.

**Keywords:** i-Imam, i-Khutba, female virtual leadership, jihad, Islamic State

1 **Introduction**

Since the advent of the Internet, and with it Islamic websites, in the late 1990s, Islamic religious authority has acquired a new layer of complexity: cyber religious authority. Online spaces that are used by i-Imams to inform, lecture, and decide about Islamic subjects are very popular, particularly among Muslim youth. The online minbar (‘pulpit’) has become a virtual platform for the i-Imams: a (usually) hardly controlled space where communications formatted as fatwas are often issued without any legal validation or guarantee of the professional or educational training of the issuers. The question of legitimacy and authenticity is even more pertinent because the Internet is an open, free, and global communication tool. Moreover, i-Khutbas (‘Internet sermons’) are attractively presented in simple English via Facebook, YouTube, or Google Plus and offer an interactive way to debate all aspects of Islamic living from rituals to sacred sources.
More recently, these sites also serve the goal of the radicalization and online recruitment of young women to engage in jihadist war scenarios, including in Syria and Iraq. In this chapter, i-Imams, understood from a female perspective and as a virtual Islamic authority, and i-Khutba, understood as the various shapes virtual Islamic discourse may take, are central to a state-of-the-art study of the imamate in Western Europe (Carvalho, 2014). The present chapter approaches the online construction of female authority through the analysis of the online performance of young Spanish-speaking Muslim women, specifically using Facebook as a social networking case study.

On Facebook, the female informants export similar rules of engagement to their online groups as those that prevail in their daily lives. The case study presented here concerns Spanish-speaking Muslim women of Moroccan origin, as well as convert Muslim women of Spanish origin, between the ages of eighteen and 40, counting in total 50 individuals, all of whom live in Catalonia. The women from both groups use similar building blocks of discourse and narratives, based upon ‘a true part of Muslim tradition’ (Mernissi, 1991, pp. vii-viii), in a self-constructed online participation that is not focused on gender opposition since they do not strive for a ‘direct struggle against men’ (Sadiqi, 2003, p. 35). Their online participation is part of an individual struggle to be mujāhidāt (‘female participants in jihad’), and even muqātilāt (‘women who fight with arms’) – for the Quran does, they claim, call for qitāl (‘conventional fighting’) (Cooke, 2002, p. 232). In this online space, authority is constructed through the pursuit of religious knowledge and religious education, with the highest regard awarded to the women who are proficient in both Classical Arabic and Spanish. This model of authority founded on language competence was already noted by the Moroccan anthropologist Fatima Sadiqi, who acknowledged the social importance of code-switching among Moroccan women (2003, p. 39). The situation is similar on Facebook, where women who understand and write in Classical Arabic are seen as having a better understanding of the Quran, and therefore being more competent in interpreting the sacred sources.

Women who want to further their online role as i-Imams usually use a simple digital tool to achieve this goal: they make their Facebook profile public. Open access to their page implies that they are willing to give voice to their veil and claim their place among the religious authorities. The fact that the woman who wants to assume a distinctive online social status maintains a public Facebook page opens a bridge between the public sphere (polis), women (gender), and ritualization (religion). Public spaces and ritual practices in Islam are predominantly male. Hence, women are
developing new cognitive schemes to format contexts and contents that will confer meaning and authority to ritualization processes. In fact, these new cognitive schemes lead women to both religious knowledge and new learned performances that, in the case of jihadism, introduce them to violent behaviour patterns.

This model of Islamic online authority has two sides. On the one hand, it is a ‘bridge-building discourse’ framed by the faculty of *ijtihād*, defined as reasoning and interpretation; on the other hand, it is a bridge-building network process framed by the ideology of jihadism (Ahmed, 2011, p. 7). For this reason, it is relevant to attempt to build an empirical study of the female ritualization of religious violence and female religious agency together with the notion of local cultures to unveil the identities, roles, and activities of self-proclaimed online female jihadists.

This chapter first explores online female religious authority, and then discusses how the study’s informants employ their online Islamic authority to direct their audience to migrate to Syria and become part of the offline jihadist fight. Our attention then turns to the online space, or the Web 2.0, to understand how its specific features help in promoting jihadist discourse among young cyber users. All of this is discussed in the context of a case study that aims to demonstrate how Spanish-speaking Muslim women use Facebook to develop jihadist narratives and, through them, convince other women to transfer their jihadist performances from the online world to the offline world, or more concretely to the so-called caliphate of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

2 Methodological considerations

The present study addresses the Facebook social media network as the specific field of research, focusing on Facebook accounts and/or pages from Spanish-speaking, Sunni Muslim women residing in Spain, specifically in Catalonia. All of them were aware of my research activities and agreed to share the contents of their pages for the purpose of my study. Follow-ups were done in the shape of interviews (via private messages and Skype) to get to know the informants and their circumstances better, assess their actual religious knowledge, and clarify the goals of their performances online. In their study on the evolution of jihadism in Catalonia, Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo (2015) wrote that between 2004 and 2012, ‘four out of every ten individuals sentenced for jihadist terrorist activities in Spain during the period were located in Catalonia.’ This high number of jihadist
individuals highlights the importance of the Catalan region to the study of jihadism in Europe. This number should also be interpreted in relation to the high presence of Salafi imams in the area: ‘50 Salafi worship places, half of all those currently in existence in Spain’ (Reinares and García-Calvo, 2015).

The dominant language of the informants is Spanish. They have some understanding of transliterated Arabic, although its syntax is frequently incorrect, and only a limited number have fluency in Classical Arabic – an important skill, since one’s proficiency in Classic Arabic determines the individual’s capacity to achieve a position of authority. The language level reflects one’s hermeneutic competence in interpreting the sacred sources and indicates the possession of greater religious knowledge.¹

In the offline context, language is also a crucial factor for understanding the role of imams in Spain, and more specifically in Catalonia since the autonomous region’s official language is Catalan. The lack of training of the local imams can be detected directly through their communication tools, as not all of them are fluent in Spanish, let alone in Catalan. Originally from Morocco, many of the imams do not speak or understand Spanish and perform their sermons in Classical Arabic, hence creating a gap between themselves and the younger Muslim generations who prefer using Spanish. Another crucial factor is the role and the space of women in Spanish mosques. In 2014, when I conducted my fieldwork in the region, it was evident that the mosques were spaces reserved for male believers. Women are mostly only in mosques on Fridays and/or for Classical Arabic classes, which usually take place on weekday mornings. The perception of the ‘invisibility’ of women at the mosque was reflected in small details, such as the surprised and delighted reactions from children that were in clear contrast to the men’s noticeably hostile attitude towards my presence in the mosques’ courtyards.

During the period of data collection, none of the women declared that she had or was about to travel to the Islamic State controlled territory or that she was located in the region. Moreover, during the period of data collection, no information was shared that indicated that any of the informants had in fact travelled to the region. Still, because they expressed their desire to travel and to join the Islamic State, they are regarded as potential jihadist migrants. That was for example the case of S.C. (El Pais, 7 July 2015), a mother and converted Muslim who was in charge of the recruitment of young girls to the jihadist cause.

Even though there is no information on whether any of the informants in my study did in fact migrate to Syria, there are examples of Spanish-speaking

¹ I translated all the quotes of the informants, in Spanish, Arabic, or other languages, in the study and in this chapter into English. Original quotes are listed in my dissertation.
women who were not part of the study attempting to travel to territories controlled by Islamic State. One example is S.Y., a Moroccan-born Muslim, married and the mother of a three-year-old child. She worked as an online recruiter for the Islamic State and was captured in December 2014 in Turkey (Audiencia Nacional, 2015). At the time of her arrest she was waiting to enter Syria together with her child. For the specific purposes of this chapter, and considering that Spain is the location of the case study, I use the definition of a jihadist according to the law Ley Orgánica 2/2015: it concerns individuals that are involved in ‘The act of accessing in a usual manner a website that has contents directed to promote recruitment to a terrorist organization or group, or to collaborate with it, or to pursue their goals. The facts will be understood as committed in Spain when the access to those contents is done from Spanish territory’.

The study also considers open source jihadist publications and comments, photos, and videos on Facebook that are posted online in a consistent and frequent manner. For this analysis, the publications that generate long threads of conversations, reactions, or a significant amount of ‘likes’ were given preference. Data collection was conducted between February 2013 and December 2014 through monitoring, selecting, collecting, and examining data posted on Facebook to get a representative view of the cyber jihad feminine sphere. Although this monitoring was aimed at Spanish-speaking Muslim women, I have also used information about and data from female Facebook users who expressed themselves in other languages. Even though the Spanish-speaking informants are in general not fluent in other languages, they frequently resort to the Facebook option of ‘see translation’, and in some cases ask other users to help with the translation. All informants use a kunya, or nom de guerre, to hide their true name. To protect the sources, I have opted here to designate them by using the Arabic word umm, meaning ‘mother’, and adding a different letter to indicate each informant. In the end, the study aims to formulate answers to the following questions:

‒ What are the key concepts explored by women who aspire to a role of religious authority?
‒ What are the elements and the events, be they of a religious, political, social, or cultural nature, that lead to framing and developing the online relationship between the female i-Imams and their female audience?
‒ How does an i-Imam give shape to her online authority?

To attempt to answer these questions it is imperative to analyse both the
textual and visual components of their narratives, identify the key concepts
of the female jihadist narrative, relate their discourse to the construction
of agency in an online environment, determine whether these reflect the
objective of acquiring authority, and finally relate this process of acquiring
female authority to the female jihadist recruitment networks.

Gary Bunt’s *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and
Cyber-Islamic Environments* (2002), *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online
Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2003), and *iMuslims: Rewiring the
House of Islam* (2009) were the first scientific approaches to the online
presence of Islam. Bunt introduced concepts such as ‘e-Jihad’ and ‘cyber
Islamic environments’. Since then, there has been much development in
the field of Digital Media Studies in general and digital Islam in particular.
As a matter of fact, Digital Media Studies evolved to integrate studies of the
‘Internet of Things’ with issues connected to the ‘mobile’ world (Carvalho,
2015). Therefore, the ‘i’ in ‘i-Imam’ depicts the ‘i’ in interface communications
that include both Internet and mobile services. Similarly, I apply the notion
of ‘i-Khutba’ to the digital Islamic sermons that occur with frequency, that
vary in length, and that the sisterhood community considers an authentic
religious service. In the term ‘i-Imam’, I include the collection of women
who have been invested with a role of religious authority through their
Facebook connections and who guide their online performance through
a jihadist narrative.

3 i-Imam: Female virtual leadership

In the Sunni Muslim tradition, an imam is defined as the ‘leader who
constitutes the community, and without him God’s ordinances cannot be
implemented’ (Crone and Hinds, 2003, p. 33). At the beginning of Islam, reli-
gious authority was in the hands of the prophet’s companions, the individuals
who had been in direct contact with him and thus could narrate his life’s
deeds. The companions transmitted narratives about the prophet’s conduct
to the people close to them, who in turn continued the chain of transmission
to the next generations (Crone and Hinds, 2003, p. 2). For this reason, those
who had learned from the sources closest to the companions could claim
to have stronger religious authority. The same principle is respected and
applied today by Salafis, a religious Islamic line of conservative thought
that aims at imitating the deeds of the prophet Muhammad and of *al-salaf
al-ṣāliḥ* (‘the righteous predecessors’, including the prophet’s companions).
This is also the vision shared by the Spanish-speaking Muslim women in this study, who use Facebook, have mastered Islamic studies and Classical Arabic, observe the pious Salafi doctrine, and are entitled to lead the online minbar and to teach their sisters the ways of salvation. Teaching, disseminating, and defending Islam are the main actions of da’wa, a mandatory task for all Muslims. According to Wiktorowicz (2006, p. 212), part of Salafism is the task of the promotion of ‘a vast educational network’ that branches into jihadism and religious violence.

The cyber environment is ideal for the endorsement of violent messages and rituals because it offers a less visible identity, fewer controls on authority and legitimacy, and a more feasible, faster way of disseminating jihadist discourse to a growing virtual audience (Lawrence and Cooke, 2005, p. 23). However, other women publicly contest the women’s performance of religious authority, either about the correctness of their knowledge of Islam or about their language skills in Classical Arabic. In some of these public discussions men also interfere to set the tone of the arguments, recommending good manners, suggesting that they (i.e. the women) read other scholars’ works, or even praise the guidance of the woman who is leading the group’s conversation.

Leadership has always been a sensitive subject in the history of Islam, from the death of the prophet Muhammad. Like other forms, virtual Islamic leadership suffers from a lack of unifying religious guidance. Virtual leadership is, in the words of Philipp Holtmann: ‘a steady process of trend-setting and steering communication to influence the behaviour of individuals in order to achieve a goal. This process, [which] involves the target-oriented use of forces and resources, is rendered by a computer and independent of time and space. It is based on mutual information’ (2012, p. 72). Muslim women have transformed the problem of virtual Islamic leadership to their benefit by claiming a role of their own in the cybersphere. Islamic female agency is apparently evolving online, and the products of that evolution are being transferred into the offline world. One of those evolving products is *ijtihād*: allowing individuals to self-investigate the sacred sources. This is an important faculty that in the offline world is much more of a male domain. Cyber environments facilitate the exercise of *ijtihād* by women because they do not exert gender segregation. For that reason the cyber gates of *ijtihād* are accessible to Muslim women who wish to employ this theological tool. At the same time, the use of it grants the possibility for Muslim women to affirm their agency online.

Another religious argument that these women use to construct online leadership is supporting their authority on legal dispositions of Saudi scholars. This is a paradoxical situation because Saudi scholars have a
strict religious perspective on gender matters and contest any female religious authority. It is also a clear statement that proves that these women in particular, and sympathizers of Islamic State in general, have a basic level of religious knowledge and their interpretation method is reduced to ‘cherry-picking extracts from the Quran’ (Duderija, 2015, p. 8).

These arguments, together with the jihadist actions in Syria, Iraq, and Europe, shape virtual female Islamic leadership and work as motivational factors for the recruitment of female jihadists – justifying the importance of the scope of the present analysis. The next section treats how these women frame their religious views in the online space and how they adapt the jihadist narrative for a youth audience.

4 The ‘Call of Duty’

Although the privatization and individualization of religious knowledge (Cesari, 2003, p. 138) are a dialectical component of living and experiencing the religious self (Campbell, 2012, p. 9), the reality is that the online individualization of religious knowledge is succeeded by the online networking and connection to other individuals that have similar profiles, group affiliations, language, likes, and preferences. For example, the popular computer game Call of Duty serves as an encoding use of language to reach Muslim youth and encourage them to become jihadists. In the opinion of Akil Awan, Andrew Hoskins, and Ben O’Loughlin (2011, p. 54), the utilization of references to youth culture is critical to attracting English-speaking ‘diasporic Muslim audiences’. The Internet is the preferred means of communication between young women, who use it to socially interact, develop networks, and access information (Lövheim, 2008). What is more, the online presence of Muslim youth reflects the expression of what Jon W. Anderson labels the “missing middle” between the Islam of intellectual subject to textual analysis (of thought) and Islam of the masses more likely to be examined in terms of social forces’ (2001). Facebook content created around the jihadist narrative is designed to be easily accessible to all types of audience.

The networks formed online by young Muslim women can be seen as ‘neo-communities’ (Allievi and Nielsen, 2003, p. 21), as they are the result of participation in a high-tech-oriented society by a European Muslim minority that is more attached to the virtual space than to a specific urban environment. The Internet as a social, religious, and transnational space has challenged the pertinence, and even the authority, of the offline
imam (Sisler, 2007). The transfer of authority and legitimacy from the context of urban space into that of the Web 2.0 has induced alterations in the notions of authority and legitimacy (Bunt, 2013). These changes are also felt in jihadist discourse and practice. The online reformulation of authority, legitimacy, and authenticity imposes great challenges on the offline imamate in Western Europe. Or, as one of my informants said: ‘To identify the genuine imam against the false one, the quality of his being endowed with the knowledge of everything, is clearly marked out in the Holy Quran, Sura Yasin, 36:12, which text reads as follows: “We shall surely raise the dead to life and We record what they did and the traces of their deeds that they have left behind.’ This sura has a two-fold meaning: first, the virtue of having a solid knowledge of the sacred Islamic sources; and second, the virtue of practicing the good deeds transmitted by that learning experience.

The next section treats how authenticity (‘genuine Imam’) and authority (‘quality of knowledge’) are employed to promote a sense of belonging to the Islamic sisterhood.

5 Digital Umm, mother, and virtual sisterhood

Da’wa (religious narrative) is the preferred way to spread the Islamic word, and dedication to it is one of the main female tasks online. As Umm G. says in a written Messenger conversation:

I use the Internet all the time to search and to share information about da’wa or to watch what is going on in Syria and Palestine. I also use it to connect myself with the other sisters. We help each other to become better Muslim women. We all seek a deeper understanding of Islam and of how to engage in jihad and it is more comfortable to do it among ‘sisters’.

The dissemination of jihadism online is at full speed among women as a permanent reminder of the individual duty to pursue jihād fi sabīl-illāh (‘jihad in the path of God’). By using keywords such as ghurabā’ (‘strangers’) or kuffār (‘infidels’), they reinforce a clear separation between ‘true Muslims’ and the rest, whether they be ‘weak’ Muslims, the followers of other Islamic sects, or non-believers. By participating, a sister is immediately integrated into the process of virtual sisterhood, or becoming a digital Umm. The ‘Umm sisterhood’ is a connection to
all the ‘mothers’ of jihadism who aim at achieving Paradise together. ‘Imagine entering the gates of Jannah [paradise], hand in hand with those that you love. Yes, keep that in mind and continue to struggling [sic]’ writes Umm M., after posting an image of a Muslim couple walking hand in hand.

The communications of the digital Umm are linked to the performance of religious rituals, the promotion of adab (‘good manners’), and the exteriorization of affection and solidarity. Anna Piela (2012, p. 119) indicates that ‘spiritual and emotional connection’ are two key features for defining sisterhood. Even though the sisters are present online as a group, they also keep being individuals who have their own perceptions and experiences when it comes to letting these online narratives and practices structure their religious knowledge. The process called ‘Individual Rituality’ (Heidbrink, 2007, p. 177) is crucial for comprehending these religious manifestations online, and even more crucial for understanding the dynamic between offline-online-offline transfers of ritual activities (as will be seen below).

Another source of identification in the online sisterhood is the dress code. The sisters encourage each other to dress in allegedly Islamic clothing such as the hijab, the niqāb, or even the burqa. Indeed, to them a vital element of proper feminine religious behaviour is the use of garments such as the niqāb and the burqa as the exterior symbol of pious Islamic practice. The sisters employ this in their profile picture on Facebook or as a part of the messages they convey via imagery. The imagery refers to transformations, and reflects the stages of ever-deeper radicalization of the ‘sister’. For example, they might begin by choosing cute Islamic cartoons or female Disney characters dressed in Islamic clothes as their profile picture before they move on to displaying women who are brandishing weapons. The central message of the photos or cartoons is the beauty of modesty: ‘Sisters don’t let your last day on earth be the first day you wore the hijab,’ said Umm F. to her female audience while reinforcing this principle of behaviour with a set of photos of women wearing the hijab. The apocalypse narrative, the idea that the world is coming to an end and that therefore the Last Judgement is imminent, is an integral part of the ‘Salafi-Jihadi’ discourse. Through the act of posting videos, images, photos, or text online, these women form a new community, a virtual sisterhood, and this includes a new shape of online agency in the domain of jihadism.

In their analysis of the work of the scholar Tariq Ramadan, Mohammad Hashas and Jan Jaap De Ruiter (2014, p. 159) point to the relationship
between ‘secularism and the issue of women in Islam’ to explain that cultural practices should be distinguished from Islamic practices. In the offline realm, the Islamic community has always set limits on the presence and performance of women in jihad-related conflicts, framing these limits as in accordance with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence and cultural discourses. In addition, women who have digital agency and a digital authority framed by a jihadist narrative, pay for their religious activism with real-life costs to their personal safety and security. The vulnerabilities and risks they experience online are transferred into the offline world. The i-Virtue of the jihadist discourse deletes the innocence of the offline veil. Indeed, due to their typical Muslim attire they are directly identified and subject to public and official scrutiny, for instance by facing thorough airport security checks. Gaining ascendancy in the virtual world as well as relevance in the real world has important social, religious, and cultural implications that first and foremost affect European Muslim women.

The following section discusses how female authority is performed online and how that performance turns into an effective jihadist recruitment tool.

6 Repeat after me, ukhti, my sister: on performing female authority

‘Giving birth’, and ‘being a mother’ are expressions that help define jihad from a feminine perspective, in the opinion of my informants. A recurrent theme on many jihadist websites is inciting women to promote the love of martyrdom in their children. Moreover, mothers are also encouraged to accept their girl’s martyrdom. For example, informant Umm Z. wrote: ‘Mother do not be sad, Allah is with you! Prepare for my Janazah [burial]!! I am coming to meet you as a Shaheeda [female martyr]. Do not plan my wedding! As I chose my martyrdom day as my wedding day.’

The performance of each female i-Imam follows a very personal style. According to Umm T., her most important task while using her own online minbar, Facebook, was persuading other women to convert to Islam: ‘The woman also can use the adequate opportunities to educate, guide and invite others [to the faith].’ For some women, it is choosing and posting Quranic citations and/or parts of the hadiths. For others, it is spreading imagery and videos related to war scenes, jihadist fights,
or just the visual symbols of jihadism (black banners, black horses, and swords, among others). Imagery plays a decisive role in the framing and legitimization of the jihadist narrative. Images convey messages without the need of translation, and often with a far more emotional impact than text. Arabic calligraphy and Islamic motifs are a constant presence in their online performance and narrative. The examples of Arabic calligraphy I collected during my research are usually in black and white, through the reproduction of small excerpts of the Quran. The Islamic motifs come from architectural details in symbolic mosques that have an important value in collective Muslim history. They represent ideological and political power, a strong past that is a reminder of the umma’s glorious moments and achievements (Fighel, 2007, p. 35). According to Jonathan Fighel, these visual elements are an important instrument of the indirect process of radicalization online:

The Islamic motifs, in a sophisticated manipulation, are embedded within propaganda; they can be easily recognized as legitimate Islamic historical symbols and factors that support a radicalized interpretation of Islam. The new radical motifs can easily gain legitimacy, as they appear to be authentic when they are used in proximity to widely accepted mainstream Islamic symbols and cultural references. (2007, p. 36)

One interesting common denominator in the imagery of the sisters, shared through posting the same items over and over again, is that they are accompanied and justified by comments related to religious texts. Citations from the Quran are usually posted without historical or spatial context and without regard for their sequentiality, i.e., without referring to the preceding or following verses. These disconnected citations are part of the strategy of framing Islamic knowledge in such a way that violent conceptions of jihad become acceptable (Awan, Hoskins, and O’Loughlin, 2011, p. 27). Umm C., for example, wrote her name surrounded by bullets and two modified rifles, and posted the photo on her Facebook wall. Awan, Hoskins, and O’Loughlin (2011, p. 28) argue that here we are in the presence of the ‘classical theory of cognitive dissonance which suggests that individuals seek out information confirming beliefs or behaviours while actively avoiding contrary information, in order to mitigate uncomfortable psychological tension.’

The same happens with the citations of hadiths, narratives of the prophet Muhammad’s words and deeds, which should obey the authoritative criteria of analysis determined by the muḥaddithūn (‘scholars with great
expertise in hadith’) to evaluate the authenticity and the reliability of the hadiths. Umm B., who gradually acquired an online authority among the Facebook sisters, narrates for them the story of the best Muslim women in da’wa:

Umm Sulaim (one of the Prophet’s companions) would teach her son Anas Ibn Malik about Islam, this she was doing knowing that her husband refuted Islam. […] Her son Anas became a servant of the Prophet (pbuh). […] If we speak in general terms we find women who had a very strong role in their sacrifice and service in the cause of Allah. Sumayyah was the first Muslim person to die for Islam. Khadija, the Prophet’s first wife who was very rich, spent all her money supporting the da’wa.

This post is from 2013 and has been extensively shared and commented upon by the sisters. My informants firmly believe in the jihadist narrative, in the jihadist hero, and in the duty of doing da’wa for their spouses: ‘The work of the women in the field of da’wa is to give strength to the work of our men, and to expand it to areas where the efficiency of women is higher than the efficiency of men.’

Likewise, naṣāʾīḥ (‘advices’) on how to promote their husbands’ ultimate sacrifice and to help others who are willing to become a shahīd (‘martyr’) are kindly spread throughout the feminine jihadist cyber sphere. Women give advice as a part of the da’wa process (Becker, 2013), to transmit Islamic knowledge to the online sisters. The contents of the advice vary from regular daily life subjects (clothing, food, children, relationships) to the translation and interpretation of the Islamic textual sources. Translation is a vital step in the process of correctly transmitting any religious knowledge, as many of the women are not fluent in Arabic. By translating and transliterating their comments, these women also broaden their audiences in number and diversify them in terms of both general education and physical provenience. In the sisters who are capable of translating from Classical Arabic, the women recognize a direct religious and linguistic authority. This authority is further bestowed on them when they bring into play jihadist linguistic terminology, which is perceived as proof of their absolute adherence to the jihadist narrative and above all their command of the subject. Table 1 summarizes words belonging to the jihadist vocabulary, the themes to which these words refer, and examples taken from the women’s posts on Facebook. The author has translated the examples from Spanish to English.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples offered by informants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>jihād fi sabīl-illāh</em> ('jihad for the sake of God')</td>
<td>Legal justification of war</td>
<td>Guns are the shield of the Quran… the battles are for the sake of Allah and victory is close.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>kuffār</em> (‘unbelievers’)</td>
<td>Enemies/Infidels</td>
<td>Well, sure that the unbelievers are not all the same. Allah has divided them into 2 groups: the ignorant and the proud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ghurabā’</em> (‘strangers’)</td>
<td>Selected Muslim role models</td>
<td>We ‘the strangers’ do not bow our heads for nothing except to Allah … we are the soldiers of Allah, the way we travel is reserved just for us … ‘God is great’, Allahu akbar.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caliphate</td>
<td>Islamic State as interpreted by IS</td>
<td>Allah ‘azza wa jalla’ (Mighty and Majestic He is) chooses whom He wishes to be part of this Khilafa Islamic revival…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salafism</td>
<td>Piety and Purity</td>
<td>Whoever hates scholars of Salafyya is innovative, misplaced and hypocritical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apocalyptic Discourse</td>
<td>Last Judgement</td>
<td>In that Day (Doomsday), the weight on the scale will say the truth. The ones whose actions will have weight, will be those who have succeeded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hijra</td>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>Those who believe, those who have completed the hijra and those who fight with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah have the highest rank with Allah … and they are the victorious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Janna</em> (‘paradise’)</td>
<td>Ultimate goal of Jihad</td>
<td>Oh martyr, what have you seen that made you smile? He sees his status in jannah (paradise) before he dies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>mujāhidīn</em> (‘people engaging in jihad’)</td>
<td>Heroism</td>
<td>Bring up your children to be brave and courageous. Let your houses be places for lions and not for chicken farms in which your sons will be fed and then slaughtered by tyrants like if they were sheep…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female role in classic Islam</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>#WholsMuhammad pbuh? The man who stood up for women’s rights when the pagan Arabs were burying their daughters alive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table contains examples of jihadist narrative elements that stimulated long and pertinent threads of discussion among the informants. This illustrates the role of the leading female informants, who in the eyes of the audience have better Islamic arguments and answers. As such, the audience members trust their more educated sisters to teach them, smoothing the path to their assimilation into and understanding of the ritualization of jihad in the religious Islamic framework. Their acts and performances online respect the need for a temporal and spatial structure. For example, the online space is sacralized by the *niyya* (‘right intention’) that the performer should keep at all times and in all spaces if they are rightly and truly committed to act with respect and purity. The sisters constantly issue reminders of the relevance of their religious mission online, and of their need to be even more of a role model online than they are offline, since they define social media platforms as sacralized spaces. Similarly, in terms of respecting a temporal structure, the sisters follow a precise timetable. For example, every Friday before the regular sermon they remind the rest of the online community of the need to pray special suras.

Still, the authority established online by these women has a limited reach, as female i-Authority appears valid only in the virtual world. In the offline world, female authority is graded down. Women may have a determinant role in the task of mobilization and recruitment online, but the arrangements for travelling to and settling in Syria are confided in a network of men, as notified through a public male Facebook profile: ‘A salamou aleykum, the brothers that want to do the hijra send me a message, and for those who are sisters, my wife will take charge of you’. An additional fact that differentiates female authority and indicates that it is mostly only part of the virtual world is, for example, the question of using guns and women’s physical and direct participation in the frontline of the war. Upon their arrival in Syria, women have commented on their personal Facebook pages that they receive small calibre guns, while the modified assault rifles are reserved only for men. Clearly, physical jihadist combat is, in the majority of cases, thought to be a male task.

7 ‘Umm’ got married: Female authority and the jihadist recruitment

The perfect woman, the one that can be considered a female i-Imam, is, these days, the one who performs the hijra, supports her husband by cooking, raising jihad-loving children (Von Knop, 2007, p. 410), and posting all of
her jihadist i-Khutbas daily on Facebook. Their endeavour is to perform rituals in a pure way, transmit the right knowledge, be authentic when selecting the sources, and be modest in behaviour. ‘Good homes are built on the pious wife. Therefore, it is obligatory for a Muslim to choose a pious wife’ posted Umm H., quoting the fatwa ‘Advice to Muslim Women’ of the Saudi preacher Shaykh al-Fawzan (b. 1933). Al-Fawzan publishes his work on websites like https://salaf-us-saalih.com and www.fatwa-online.com, and the women focused in this case study prefer his religious guidance.

Women depart for the caliphate of Islamic State in search of a jihadist authority position in the fight for Allah, and of a role of power in concord with their newfound online voice. After arrival, they again connect to the online world so that they can share their narratives of life in Syria. The other sisters are willing to listen, learn, and ask questions about the living conditions in Syria, and they urge those who are already there to fill them in on all sorts of details — from the mundane to the theological justifications of jihad. Historically, the idea of combining hijra (‘emigration’) with da’wa (‘proselytism’) and jihad is a tradition stemming from the prophetic times (Peresin and Cervone, 2015, p. 495).

The lives of the ‘sisters’ in Syria are described as happy and pious, just like in the time of the prophet Muhammad, as they constantly reassure the sisters online. Umm X. – ‘Got married’ is the most frequent Facebook status of the sisters, and they try to illustrate how pleasant their lives are in the ‘Sham’ (Syria) by posting photos that confirm this state of alleged happiness.

8 Conclusion

Female i-Imams that support the jihadist narrative in general and the ideology of the Islamic State in particular encounter an effective online space in which they can perform their religious authority and convince other women to enter jihadist recruitment networks. In that sense, the jihadist narrative has the elements and motivational factors to encourage individual participation in the jihadist fight. Islamic online female authority is anchored in online Islamic female agency, i.e., the practice of taking independent action online and the goal of being recognized as a leading religious individual, as a female i-Imam.

However, this online female authority is contested. As one Moroccan female religious scholar living in Catalonia (I have chosen not to reveal her name or location out of safety considerations) explained to me in an interview, these individuals speak for themselves and should not be trusted by their audience. In her opinion, ‘wise imams’ should have the exclusive
right to issue fatwas about what is authentic jihad, and should condemn all forms of violence. Spanish mosques are controlled by the security and police forces, so the imams issue politically correct *khutbas* and coordinate statements that openly condemn jihadist discourses and activities. However, as mentioned before, this kind of *khutba* deals with the youth audience that is ‘at risk’, in terms of its language and contents. These *khutbas* are not in tune with daily face-to-face communication, and more needs to be done in terms of socio-economic and political measures to prevent the grievances that ultimately degenerate into engagement with extremist Islamic narratives. It is exactly this void that is being filled by jihadist sermons.

The vulnerabilities and risks associated with female online agency do not represent for these women an obstacle, but a concrete sign of their increasing power, authority, and value within the digital Islamic community. They feel they are on the right path to Allah, *fi sabīl-illāh* (‘on the path of God’), whether in the virtual world and/or on territory controlled by Islamic State. They are no longer innocent, passive religious subjects; now they are the ones endowed with religious authority, transmitting their message through an online minbar, or platform of communication. Through their online performance, the young Spanish-speaking Muslim women shape a form of religious authority that is framed by the jihadist narrative and results in effective jihadist recruitment.

**References**


About the author

Claudia Carvalho is a PhD Student at Tilburg University, School of Humanities, analysing the theme of Female Online Jihadism. In 2003 she completed her Master Degree in International Relations with a thesis about the Israeli-Arabic conflict that was later published as a book. She then attended the Course on National Defence promoted by the Portuguese Defence Ministry in 2005. Key publication: ‘The Importance of Web 2.0 for Jihad 3.0: Female Jihadists Coming to Grips with Religious Violence on Facebook’, *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 11 (2016).