

Married to Jihad

Investigating intra-jihadi dynamics through female members of the Jordanian Salafi Jihadi movement

Benedicte Tobiassen



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Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages

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Author: Benedicte Tobiassen

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Abstract

We know that women participate in jihad and that there are numerous reasons why women decide to join jihadi groups. We also know that deployment of women differs between groups and that most women obtain supportive roles. What we do not know, however, is what jihadism mean to women who are affiliated with such groups and movements. Thus, the overall goal of this study is to explore what jihad means to women who are born or married into the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement.

The topic is important because a female Salafi jihadi is not just a woman who decides to take up arms or to become a suicide bomber. A female Salafi jihadi should also be understood as a low-key, grassroots actor whose interpretation of Islam helps jihadi ideology spread and take root in society. A key argument in this thesis is that familial networks matter greatly with regards to women's decisions on whether or not to join their husbands' jihad. By approaching the movement through the lens of its female members, the thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of intra-jihadi dynamics and their opportunity structure for recruitment in Jordan.

Through interviewing wives and daughters of Jordanian Salafi jihadis, this study shows that a female jihadi is a woman whose entrance into jihadi circles are due to coincidences such as birth, the surrounding community, or due to marriage between the movements' members. It may well be that the women disagree with their husbands. However, by being a part of the milieu and not fronting dissent or talk loudly about disagreeing, they are – however passively – contributing to uphold the social structures and norms of the movement.

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Benedicte Tobiassen,

December 1, 2019.

Notes on Arabic Transliterations

All transliterations are based on the guidelines provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies.¹

Accordingly, names of jihadi ideologues and leaders, as well as names of jihadi groups, will be written as they appear in English speaking media. Thus, throughout the thesis I will use jihad instead of *jihād*, al-Qaida instead of *al-Qā'ida*, and the Islamic State (IS) although it is commonly known and transliterated as *dā'ish* in Arabic.

All words are transliterated according to how it is written in Modern Standard Arabic [fuṣḥā] and not in Colloquial Arabic although the latter was most frequently used during interviews.

¹ "IJMES Transliteration system for Arabic, Persian and Turkish," International Journal of Middle East Studies, last modified April, 2014, accessed November 17, 2019, <https://ijmes.ws.gc.cuny.edu/files/2014/04/TransChart.pdf>

Abbreviations and Arabic vocabulary

AQAP	al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula
<i>farḍ ‘ayn</i>	individual duty which every Muslim are required to complete
<i>farḍ kifāya</i>	collective duty which only a certain number of community members are required to complete
<i>fitna</i>	chaos or strife, sometimes understood as temptation
<i>ḥadīth</i>	collections of sayings, teachings, actions and traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad
IS	denoting the Islamic State and its predecessors (ISIS, ISIL, ISI)
<i>khilāfa</i>	caliphate; the reemergence of a caliphate guided by <i>sharī‘a</i> and led by a rightful caliph, a common goal for most Salafis
<i>mahram</i>	a male family member of unmarriageable kin
<i>manhaj</i>	the specific manner or method in which Salafis employ their religion
<i>mujāhid/mujāhida</i>	fighter/female fighter; one that engages in jihad
<i>al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ</i>	“the pious predecessors,” refers to the three first generations of Muslims
SMT	social movement theory
<i>sharī‘a</i>	Islamic law
<i>sunna</i>	the teachings, sayings, actions, experiences and omissions of the Prophet Muhammad; constitutes a source of law alongside the Qur’an
<i>tawḥīd</i>	the unity of God; God as the sole legislative entity

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1. Introduction

While talking with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi², he abruptly paused and reached for his cellphone. “I want to show you something,” he said. Showing a disturbing photograph of a young man lying on the ground with a gunshot to the head, he explained: “That is my son, who was killed in Iraq.” As I offered him my condolences, al-Maqdisi immediately dismissed them: “He died for *tawhīd*!³ That was my wish. I wanted him to go like that instead of dying in his own bed.”⁴ Yet, when asked whether he would wish the same for his daughters, al-Maqdisi replied with an outright ‘never’: “I do not only speak for my daughters, I speak for all women. Do not go to Syria, do not go to Iraq. It is war over there. It is okay for men to go because they can fight. What are the women going to do there? It is very dangerous for them.”

Although it is difficult to understand al-Maqdisi’s complete conception of jihad based on this story, it nevertheless highlights how he sees jihad as a heroic act pertaining to martyrdom. Not only were women absent from his narrative, he even explicitly dismisses them. That being said, we know that women participate in jihad and that there are numerous reasons why women decide to join jihadi groups. We also know that deployment of women differs between groups and that most women obtain supportive roles. What we do not know, on the other hand, is what jihadism mean to women who are affiliated with such groups or movements. On that note, I have formulated the following research question: *What does jihad mean to women who are married or born into the Jordanian Salafi Jihadi movement?*⁵

The research question is important because a female Salafi jihadi is not just a woman who decides to take up arms or to become a suicide bomber. A female Salafi jihadi should also be understood as a low-key, grassroots actor whose interpretation of Islam helps jihadi ideology spread and take root in society. Subsequently, it matters because the tabloid image of a jihadi

² Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi is one of the leading Salafi jihadi ideologues in Jordan and is often described as the godfather of the global Salafi jihadi movement. Al-Maqdisi is also known as the mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who in 2003 established the group Al-Tawhīd wa-l-Jihād that would later become al-Qaida in Iraq.

³ The oneness of God, meaning that God is “the only entity with the right to legislate and rule”, in Abu Hanieh, *Al-Mar’a*, 38.

⁴ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁵ Jihad has several meanings and is often understood as “struggle”, “effort” or “holy war.” In this thesis jihad is best understood as “violent Islamism.” Inspired by Thomas Hegghammer, Islamism is defined as “activism justified with primary reference to Islam,” and the term “jihadi” will sometimes appear as “militant Islamist” or “violent Islamist,” from Thomas Hegghammer, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists’ Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000615>.

is that of an angry, young and single male “outsider” believed to have been “brainwashed,” while in reality, most jihadis live what would constitute normal lives, with wives and children. As there are approximately seven to ten thousand adherents to the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement, all believed to be male, there must also exist thousands of wives and daughters whose lives also revolve around this ideology. Approaching the movement through its women contributes to greater insight and allows us to better understand the movement’s dynamics. A part of our inquiry is to explore whether there are gender-specific interpretations of Salafi jihadi ideology in Jordan.

In order to answer my research question, I have employed four questions of analytical and descriptive nature to guide the thesis: (1) What personal causes can explain why women do not participate in armed action? (2) Correspondingly, what structural factors can help explain why some women join their husbands in jihad? (3) How do women relate to the fact that their husbands waging of jihad might result in them never coming back? (4) How do women become part of the movement? The wives in the movement may well disagree with their husbands. However, by being a part of the milieu and not fronting dissent or talk loudly about disagreeing, they are – however passively – contributing to uphold the social structures and norms of the movement.

Even though the research question is gendered by nature and I study this phenomenon through the lens of its female members, it is important to note that this is not a study of gender. Rather, this thesis has taken a sociological approach inspired by social movement theory (SMT), and as such it is a problem-driven, not a theory-driven thesis. I do not aim to develop social movement theory in itself, but aim to employ it to elucidate the different facets of this study’s topic. SMT is hereby understood as a theory that focuses on “the role of horizontal social networks play in social movements,”⁶ as well as “how ideas, individuals, events, and organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective action, with some continuity over time.”⁷ Thus, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of intra-jihadi dynamics and their opportunity structure for recruitment.

⁶ Janine Clark, “Social Movement Theory and Patron-Clientelism: Islamic Social Institutions and the Middle Class in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen,” *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 8 (2004): 945.

⁷ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 5.

Existing literature

The studies we have on women and jihadism are typically concerned with the female role in jihadi groups and whether or not women should be able to participate in armed action.⁸ Classical sources tend to be negative to women's participation, whilst contemporary jihadi ideologues and leaders have modified these to incorporate women in the battlefield or in martyrdom operations. Hence, some of the literature focus on the evolving tendency in allowing women into the ranks of jihadi groups.⁹ The importance of women's non-military support for the survival of jihadi groups and the success of jihad, is not to be underestimated. Nevertheless, research on women still tend to grapple with the female role in martyrdom operations and highly visible jihadi groups such as the Islamic State (IS),¹⁰ instead of aiming the attention at the more grassroots-level jihadi women like those in Jordan.

Jessica Davis argues that jihadis are less likely to employ women as fighters or tactical operatives if there is strong cultural or societal pressure against it,¹¹ which is applicable to the conservatism of the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement. She also indicates that women are more likely to become a part of groups where they have personal connections.¹² Katharina Von Knop introduces the concept of "the female jihad," arguing that women are more important to the survival of jihadi groups by following a gender-specific interpretation of the radical ideology.¹³ The term has proven very useful for my study and will be discussed later on.

⁸ Nelly Lahoud, "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014); David Cook, "Women Fighting in Jihad?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005); Katharina Von Knop, "The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda's Women," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 5 (2007); Christopher Anzalone, "Women and jihadism: Between the battlefield and the home-front," *Agenda* 30, no. 3 (July 2016);

⁹ Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Von Knop, "The Female Jihad,"; Al Qaeda's Women,"; Karla Cunningham, "The evolving participation of Muslim women in Palestine, Chechnya, and the global jihadi movement," in *Female Terrorism and militancy: Agency, utility, and organization*, ed. Cindy D. Ness (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁰ Maleeha Aslam, *Gender-based Explosions: The Nexus Between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2012); Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford and Ross Frenett, *Becoming Mulan? Western Female Migrants to ISIS* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015); Jennifer Philippa Eggert, "Women Fighters in the "Islamic State" and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis," *Die Friedens-Warte* 90, no. 3-4 (2015); Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7 (August 2017); Charlie Winter, *ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, September 13, 2018.

¹¹ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," 397.

Despite the scholarly attention on the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement,¹⁴ its women are almost entirely left out. In fact, of the three books written by Jordanian researchers addressing the issue of female Salafi jihadism, only one of them provide a brief status quo of women's involvement in the country. Through analyzing social media accounts sympathizing with jihadi ideology, and information derived from casefiles on women standing trials before State Security Court for supporting groups such as the IS or Jabhat al-Nusra, researchers Mohammad Abu Rumman and Musa Shteivi found indications of an emerging "Jihadist women's network" in Jordan.¹⁵ The reason for this development, Rumman and Shteivi claim, is that women are becoming more and more affected by their male relatives' presence in the Salafi jihadi movement.¹⁶

Hasan Abu Hanieh's *al-Mar'a wa-l-Siyāsa min Manẓūr al-ḥarakāt al-'Islāmiyya fī al-Urdun (Women and Politics: From the Perspective of Islamic Movements in Jordan)* from 2008 devotes a chapter to the Salafi jihadis.¹⁷ The chapter is mostly based upon the works of previous and contemporary influential jihadi theorists, ideologues and leaders, and their opinions on the role of women. Hanieh gives considerable attention to Sayyid Qutb as Jordanian Salafi jihadi ideologues "agree with Sayyid Qutb's views regarding women, society and state."¹⁸ Accordingly, they see the woman's main role as nurturing the new generation and the family as the cornerstone of society. The only time Hanieh points to women in Jordan specifically is on the very last page, where he writes that women are increasingly becoming a part of the global Salafi jihadi movement in many regions of the world, including Jordan.¹⁹

¹⁴ As listed by Joas Wagemakers in *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 14-15: Anouar Boukhars, "The Challenge of Terrorism and Religious Extremism in Jordan," *Strategic Insight* 5, no. 4 (2006); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Jordan's 9/11: Dealing with Jihadi Islamism*, ICG Middle East Report no. 47 (Amman and Brussels, 2005), Brian Katulis, Harding Lang and Mokhtar Awad, *Jordan in the Eye of the Storm: Continued U.S. Support Necessary with Ongoing Regional Turmoil* (Washington DC: Center for American Progress, 2014), esp. 14-19; Yair Minzili, "The Jordanian Regime Fights the War of Ideas," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol V, ed. Hillel Fradkin, Hussain Haqqani and Eric Brown (Washington DC: Hudson Institute, 2007), 55-69; Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Jordan's New Generation of Salafi-Jihadists Take to the Streets to Demand Rule by Shari'a," *Terrorism Monitor* 9, no 18 (2011): 7-9; Joas Wagemakers, "Contesting Religious Authority in Jordanian Salafi Networks," *Perseverance of Terrorism: Focus on Leaders*, ed. Marko Milosevic and Kacper Rekawek (Amsterdam, etc.: IOS Press, 2014), 118-122.

¹⁵ Mohammad Abu Rumman and Musa Shteivi, *Sociology of Extremism and Terrorism in Jordan: An Empirical and Analytical Study* (Amman: University of Jordan, 2018), 69

¹⁶ Rumman and Shteivi, *Sociology of Extremism*, 69.

¹⁷ Hasan Abu Hanieh, *Al-Mar'a wa-l-Siyāsa min Manẓūr al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyya fī al-Urdun* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung/Economic Printing Press, 2008), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/05722.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi confirms this in interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

¹⁹ Hanieh, *Al-Mar'a*, 43.

A more recent publication by Abu Hanieh and Rumman, *Infatuated with Martyrdom: Female Jihadism from Al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, deals exclusively with female jihadism.²⁰ The study barely touches upon the female Salafi jihadi landscape in Jordan. Rather, Abu Hanieh and Rumman seek to understand recent transformations and developments within female jihadism, and the many doctrinal hurdles jihadis have to overcome for women's "transition from secondary and traditional roles in jihadist milieus (as housewives and childrearsers), to the new phenomena of female jihadists' migration and mobilization and departure for jihad, and suicide 'martyrs'."²¹ They also aim map out "the motives that drive hundreds of women and girls from across the world to 'belong' and pledge loyalty to IS," and at the same time address if there is a contradiction "between the fanatical, bloody, and cruel nature of violent extremist organizations, on the one hand, and the supposed 'emotional' nature of women, who tend not to gravitate towards this style of life and behavior, on the other."²²

Through case studies of Saudi female Salafi jihadis, Abu Hanieh and Rumman suggests that women who engage in jihadism often share family ties with male jihadis.²³ The information is however not obtained through personal interviews with women, but from available "Saudi security narratives and its media leaks, or from the sources of the jihadist current," due to the difficulties of obtaining "reliable and impartial information."²⁴ They also emphasize that violent Islamist groups in the Arab world have historically been male-centric, with women assuming supportive roles through kinship and intermarriage relations.²⁵ That being said, Abu Hanieh and Rumman do provide the first, at least to my knowledge, description of what constitutes a female jihadi. In their view, a female jihadi is not only a woman that believes in Salafi jihadi ideology, she is also one that embodies one or more of the following indicators: A female jihadi is a woman who migrated to territories controlled by a jihadi group or attempted to do so, who openly declares her belief in the ideas of one or more jihadi groups, who participates in terrorist or suicide operations or attempted to do so, or a woman who was

²⁰ Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hasan Abu Hanieh, *Infatuated with Martyrdom: Female Jihadism from Al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, trans. Banan Malkawi (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung/Economic Printing Press, 2017).

²¹ Rumman and Hanieh, *Infatuated with Martyrdom*, 14.

²² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-65.

arrested for any of the abovementioned attempts or for her activities in supporting a jihadi group.²⁶

As pointed out by Valentine M. Moghadam, Islamist movements “differ from each other in terms of tactics, strategies, and even some discourses (...) they are similar in their approach to gender, public morality, and the preferred legal system.”²⁷ On that note, it is worth mentioning Anne Sofie Roald’s study on the Islamist movement in Jordan. As Roald points out, the social structures in the Arab world are built on patriarchal organization.²⁸ Even though female political participation has increased, Jordan remains a traditional and conservative society “in the sense that law-school gender hierarchy, with men as the breadwinners and women being mainly housewives, is maintained in contemporary society.”²⁹ She quotes a Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front, who expressed that “equality will lead to oppression of women, whereas sharia protects women. This protection will disappear if there is equality between the sexes.”³⁰

Despite their contribution, they nonetheless say very little about the female perspective on jihadism, meaning what women themselves say about their presence in jihadi movements. However, they serve as good sources of information. As opposed to much of the extant literature, my research is based upon firsthand interviews with women belonging to the Jordanian Salafi jihadi milieus on their perceptions, involvement and experiences with jihad in neighboring Syria. My thesis thus contributes to a better understanding of the intra-dynamics of the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement.

Who are the Jordanian Salafi jihadis and how do they network?

Salafism is probably best understood as “the type of Islam whose adherents claim to follow an idealised group of early Muslims known as the “pious predecessors” (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible.”³¹ The pious predecessors include the three

²⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

²⁷ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Violence and Terrorism: Feminist Observations on Islamist Movements, State, and the International System,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 21, no. 1-2 (2001): 126.

²⁸ Anne Sofie Roald, “Islamists in Jordan: Promoters of or Obstacles to Female Empowerment and Gender Equality?” in *Religion and Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2009): 42, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uio.no/10.1163/187103209X440209>.

²⁹ Ibid., 44.

³⁰ Ibid., 53.

³¹ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 2.

first generations of Muslims, and it is their practices that Salafis strive to revive in order to return to the “authentic” and “pure” Islam after having been corrupted for centuries by errant Muslims who have introduced religious innovations and distortions.³² Through following a strict interpretation of the Qur’an and the *sunna*³³, which Salafis see as the only legitimate source for religious behavior, they claim to know and understand the reality of these predecessors.³⁴ Joas Wagemakers divide Salafism into three currents³⁵: *quietists*, who stay away from politics and whose main focus is studying Islam and educating others in it; *political* Salafis, who share their basic ideology with other Salafis, but engages in politics and various types of activism; and, lastly, *jihadis*, whom Wagemakers describe as “radical (and sometimes violent).”

First of all, as pointed out by Shiraz Maher in *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Salafi jihadism does not belong to a particular group or movement.³⁶ Rather, it is a thought or an ideological strain in which individuals can identify. Jihadi thought has been present among Jordanian Salafis since the 1990s and is believed to have turned roots into the kingdom after the return of fighters participating in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan (1979-1989).³⁷ Militant, underground organizations “designed to challenge the state through violence” thus began to appear.³⁸ When Salafis came from Kuwait to Jordan after the Gulf War in 1991, jihadi thought increased dramatically.³⁹ Amongst the latter was Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who would become not only one of the most important intellectuals for the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement, but considered one of the intellectual godfathers of the global Salafi jihadi movement itself.⁴⁰

As Wagemakers specify, the jihadis do not differ from the other branches of Salafism when it comes to the legitimacy of “classical jihad” in which jihad should be waged against non-

³² Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2016), 7; Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 5.

³³ The Prophetic tradition, often referred to as *hadīths*.

³⁴ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 19; Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islam,” *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 249.

³⁵ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 52-57.

³⁶ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 16.

³⁷ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement in Jordan,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 2000): 222.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 180.

Muslim invaders of *dār al-Islām* (Muslim land). Salafi jihadis also believe in launching jihad within the Muslim world against leaders they deem to be apostate for their reluctance in applying *sharī'a* (Islamic law) in full.⁴¹ This type of revolutionary jihad, according to Wagemakers, “has its roots in radical reading of the Salafi tradition itself” and is influenced by the radical Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb. In *The Jihadi's Path to Self-Destruction* Nelly Lahoud shares an important note regarding jihadism one needs to keep in mind: “Jihadism means different things to different jihadis, as it represents a worldview that is defined by an individualist approach to interpreting religious doctrine.”⁴² However, there are some core values most Salafi jihadis concern themselves with, such as for example protecting their faith through jihad and regarding physical struggle in the name of God as the very pinnacle of Islam.⁴³

What most Islamist movements have in common is the overall goal of establishing or reinforcing *sharī'a* as the sole legislative source.⁴⁴ Another common trait is that recruitment often happen through kinship connections such as social or family ties, and through informal organizations or networks.⁴⁵ The Salafi jihadi movement in Jordan is no exception, as informal networks based on a shared interpretation of Islam serves as a resource for achieving the movement's goals.⁴⁶ In Wiktorowicz' article “The Salafi Movement in Jordan,” this type of organization is described as “a “social movement community,” composed of “informal networks of politicized participants who are active in promoting the goals of a social movement outside the boundaries of formal organization.””⁴⁷ This is especially the case, he writes, in movements that reject the hierarchy and rigidity of formal organization, and movements that are linked together by a common understanding of how society should be organized and governed.⁴⁸

Jordan has never been a religious or theocratic state when it comes to applying Islamic law as the sole source of legislation. On the contrary, the government has always projected a

⁴¹ Ibid., 57.

⁴² Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadi's Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 97.

⁴³ Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 15, 32.

⁴⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalization & Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*, second edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 99.

⁴⁵ Moghadam, *Globalization & Social Movements*, 124-126.

⁴⁶ Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement,” 219.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 220-221.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

conservative image in its politics and its support for loyal Islamic organizations.⁴⁹ As a result, numerous forms of civil society and institutes developed that, instead of being controlled directly by the regime, are “heavily controlled bureaucratically” to ensure that they do not pose any political or security threat to the hegemony of the state.⁵⁰ The Salafi movement, however, does not enjoy the same treatment. The emergence of militant jihadi groups in the 1990s, as already mentioned, challenged regime power, forcing the regime to limit their organizational freedom and opportunity structures more generally.⁵¹ On the other hand, interacting through informal networks might as well be seen as a tactical avoidance of public surveillance, as most of the Salafi jihadis’ activities are, to a great extent, secret.⁵² Therefore, the personal relationships and networks upon which the movement is built, heavily rely on trust between its adherents.

As Wiktorowicz claimed in a footnote in 2001: “There is a growing, though still limited, trend of family conversions as well, whereby a husband adopts the Salafi approach and passes it to his wife and children. Salafis argue that this is becoming more prevalent because the nuclear family is breaking away from the extended family by moving into separate residences. Cross-cutting familial pressures are thus less severe. Less affected by family pressures in daily existence, members of the nuclear family are more receptive to alternative ideologies. This phenomenon, however, remains limited.”⁵³ It is unclear what branch of Salafism he was referring to, or if he meant Salafism in general. Anyhow, the Jordanian jihadi current had only been present for a brief decade at the time, and if one is to look at it through the framework presented above, one might assume that women are increasingly becoming subject to Salafi jihadi thought through personal relationships and intermarriages.

Central argument and general outline

A key argument in this thesis is that familial networks matter greatly with regards to women’s decisions on whether or not to join their husbands’ in jihad. I also argue that we must broaden

⁴⁹ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵¹ Wiktorowicz, *The Management*, 6; 128-129.

⁵² Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 23; Marwan Shehadeh, “The Effectiveness of Social Networks and Sleeper Cells of Salafism in Jordan,” Policy Paper, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (January 2018): 20, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/14084.pdf>.

⁵³ Wiktorowicz, *The Management*, 177.

our understanding of what a female Salafi jihadi is.

In the following chapter, I will describe how I worked during the different stages of the fieldwork, challenges and limitations of the chosen methods, as well as reflect upon ethical implications. Through exploring how women experience their role as wives and mothers in *chapter three*, I will assess their personal causes for not participating in jihad, and, subsequently, why they support their husbands leaving for a battle from which they might never return. In *chapter four* I seek to understand why some women decide to join their husbands in jihad through the case of “Noor.” I will discuss structural and personal causes, as well as the importance of networks and family as a possible motivation female Salafi jihadis from Jordan. Lastly, *chapter five* concludes the study and provides an account of its main findings.

2. Methodology

This thesis builds on a field study conducted in Jordan between September 2018 and March 2019. Overall, the study is based on in-depth interviews with five women who are affiliated with the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement, either as daughters or wives of jihadis, or both. In addition, I will draw on conversations with two of the leading Salafi jihadi ideologues in the country, Abu Qatada al-Filastini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a former member of al-Qaida, as well as interviews with local researchers. Conversations with intermediaries who know the movement well, and secondary literature such as books, articles and reports will supplement these. The method chosen is mainly open-ended interviews which “allows the interviewees the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broader aims of the project.”⁵⁴ In this chapter I will describe how I have worked during the different stages of the fieldwork.

Research strategy

It was the absence of a specific segment of the Salafi movement, noted by the Dutch scholar Joas Wagemakers, which sparked my interest in this research topic. In his book about Salafism in Jordan, he mentions that because of the general prohibition of contact between unrelated men and women, he was not able to interview female Salafis.⁵⁵ Thus, he calls for a female researcher to engage in the study of Salafi women. Prior to leaving for Jordan, I spent most of my time reading existing literature on the Salafi movement and its jihadi branch in order to map out the existing environment. Upon arrival I had an extensive list of both key intermediaries and other valuable contacts, and a list of names of male Salafi jihadis I was hoping to reach in order to meet their wives. My supervisor had connected me with journalist and researcher Manar Rachwani, who connected me with various people who had great knowledge on the topic. Thus, I met with various journalists, researchers and academics the first two months. Through these meetings I obtained great insight about how much Jordanians’ perceptions and knowledge of Salafi jihadis differ. The response when I presented my research topic was usually twofold. Some would try their best to help me further even though this was far from their field, if only to suggest someone new. Others reacted by asking why I would even bother engaging with such ‘crazy people’.

⁵⁴ David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 5th ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2014), 166.

⁵⁵ Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan*, 22.

As mentioned in the existing literature, Hasan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu-Rumman have done extensive research on the Salafi movement and its currents in Jordan, and I knew from other contacts that they were important gatekeepers in getting to know Salafi jihadis in the country. I met with Abu Rumman within the first two weeks of my stay. He told me that there was no use in looking for female Salafi jihadi individuals. If anything, I had to look at family ties. He then put me in contact with “Zayd,” a man with great knowledge and extensive ties to the movement. When I finally reached him, his immediate reaction to my research topic was: “Female Salafi jihadis? In Jordan? You will not find any.”⁵⁶ It was devastating at first. However, it appeared what he meant was that what exists in Jordan is not the high-profile female suicide bomber or an underground all-female brigade. What the country does have, according to Zayd, is thousands of women who are connected to the movement through kinship ties. Through Zayd I met Munif Samara, a doctor whose clinic was frequented by Salafi jihadists, and a close acquaintance of Abu Qatada and al-Maqdisi.⁵⁷ It was through him I met most of my informants.

I knew from the beginning that conducting in-depth interviews was necessary in order to understand female Salafi jihadism in Jordan. As already mentioned, there is a lack of empirical data on women in the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement, as most of the existing research focus almost entirely on its male adherents, its history, its development and its [male] ideologues. By using open-ended questions, I would create a space in which my informants could reflect upon various topics valuable for my research.⁵⁸ This way the informants themselves chose how much they would like to share, and the conversations could in some instances take turns that I could not have planned beforehand.⁵⁹ Thus, the experiences, reflections, and opinions of my interviewees guided the focus of the thesis.

A total of five women were interviewed in a total of five interviews. Four of these were done in the homes of the interviewees. Two of the interviews were conducted with respectively two and three informants, and one follow-up interview was conducted in the waiting room of a medical clinic. Three of the interviews were recorded, while notes were taken during the group

⁵⁶ “Zayd,”

⁵⁷ Shiv Malik, Mustafa Khalili, Spencer Ackerman and Ali Younis, “How Isis crippled al-Qaida,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>; Ben Hubbard, “In Jordan Town, Syria War Inspires Jihadist Dreams,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/13/world/middleeast/in-jordan-town-syria-war-inspires-jihadist-dreams.html>.

⁵⁸ Aksel Tjora, *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder i praksis*, 3. utg. (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk, 2018), 113.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 114.

interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to four and a half hours. Out of the five of my interviewees, I met with all but two twice. Two of the women hold a degree in higher education, with between four to six years of university studies. The remaining three barely finished high school and married at a much younger age than the former two. Only two of the women are working today, respectively once or twice a week.

Challenges and limitations

A frequently mentioned problem within the field of terrorism research is the lack of primary source information, mostly due to the difficulty “(and sometimes near-impossible) exercise” of obtaining information through first-person accounts and interviews.⁶⁰ Now, one could argue that the Salafi jihadi movement in Jordan is not a terrorist movement, and I would not label it as such either. Still, the views and beliefs, and the adherents’ support for groups such as Al Qaida and the IS, makes for an ideology many would consider similar to those of terror organizations or groups.

An intermediary that trusted me and my project was crucial in gaining access to Salafi jihadis and their families. I was hoping that after meeting with one woman, she would introduce me to her friends, and from there I would get invited to women-only meetings or get to know an all-female jihadi network. That did not happen. In the conversations, most women told me about friends of theirs who also lost their husbands to jihad, or whose husbands were spending time in prison, killed in Syria or stuck there [due to jihadi activities]. Some of these husbands even had several wives. I asked them if they knew if any of their friends, the other wives, or others of interest that they knew of, would want to share their stories and thoughts with me.

I would usually wait until the second time we met as we had established a more secure relation by then. They all said they would ask, or that they would take me to their house. However, there was always an excuse: “The children are sick;” “I could not get a hold of her;” or “She never responded.” The one of the five who actually joined her husband in Syria, told me that she traveled back to Jordan with a group of women who had “suffered the same fate as her.”⁶¹ According to the latter, however, she was not allowed to keep in contact with these women and

⁶⁰ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 9.

⁶¹ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, December 2018. Noor traveled to Syria with her husband. He was killed in battle and she managed to return to Jordan.

did not know much about their current whereabouts. In addition, she had never known their real names.

In the end I had to rely on my male intermediaries. Zayd told me that the Salafi jihadi community is protective of their women and advised me to try and meet with the men first, in order to access their wives from there. Accordingly, I asked the men I met if I could meet their wives. They all said yes, but when I would follow up on my request, they would say that she was not interested, that she had refused to meet with me, often because of jealousy. That might well be true, but I later learned that it was mostly due to fear of repercussions. I therefore argue that there is no coincidence that my five interviewees have one particular thing in common: None of them are living with their husbands and none of them have for a long time. I dare assume that spending longer time in the field would have gradually granted more access.

My gender would in some cases be an issue due to Salafi jihadis' rejection of gender-mixing between unrelated men and women. As I met with most in the office of one of my intermediaries or in a public place, it was usually not a concern. However, it did occur a couple times that male members of the movement refused to talk with me, even though I wore proper clothing to the meetings. Language could also be a barrier sometimes. During my studies I have mainly focused on Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), not spoken dialect, but having lived in Jordan a few years earlier, I had picked up quite a few words and phrases that were very different from those of MSA. Still, it had been three years since I used it.

I had initially prepared an interview guide, in both English and Arabic, with questions and topics I wanted to talk to the informants about. However, in the first interview with one of my informants, I was not able to understand everything she said as she spoke very fast and only in dialect. I lost track and did not get to ask important follow up questions. Luckily, she allowed me to record the conversation in order to translate the parts I did not understand. I was taking dialect classes at the time, and my teacher would help me with the translation. That way I was able to come up with even more questions and ask her to elaborate on thoughts and topics I found interesting. The next time we met, I brought a friend to translate, with the permission of my interviewee and her family, of course. The interviews with the four others were easier, as we could use both Arabic and English.

I have to take into consideration that the fear of repercussions could have caused my informants

to withhold valuable information or to “decorate” their stories. It is in their power what to tell and what not to. It could also be that they would answer according to how they would like to be portrayed. However, in spite on some contradictions now and then, I experienced my interviewees to be truthful. If there were topics they did not want to go deeper into, they either told me or they would start talking about something else. Other limitations were of course a very restricted budget, and limited time. Hiring a fixer could have been helpful, but I realized it would be too expensive, as the living costs in Jordan are extremely high. However, towards the end of my stay, in a desperate moment, I thought I might give it a try and contacted a few female fixers.⁶² They both told me the topic was too dangerous and that they would never work with that community.

Ethical considerations

Before every interview, I did my utmost to inform my interviewees about my intentions and my research topic, and why I was talking to them in particular. Due to security reasons and the sensitivity of the topic, I will not use the names or the exact age of any of my key informants. Instead, I have given them names of dear friends of mine. Although Zayd did not explicitly ask to be anonymized, I do so as he is a close acquaintance of some of my informants. Also, he does not consider himself a part of the movement. I have also agreed to leave out any information that could make them recognizable, such as country of origin, where we met, what areas they live in, and other revealing facts. Even though some personal information about the informants would have given more depth to this thesis, anonymity was not only a promise, but also a premise for the interviews. Therefore, I was careful that they did not use any names, including their own, in those that were recorded. Immediately after having conducted the interviews, I would transcribe them in Norwegian and delete the recording from my phone. I was extremely careful not to include any information that would make the document traceable to the interview object.

Why these women?

Common to the five women I spoke with is that their husbands all left for jihad, and none of them have returned. Two died in battle, one is sentenced to lifetime in prison, one is stuck between the Syrian-Turkish border, and the whereabouts of the fifth is unknown. Four of these

⁶² A fixer is an intermediate who makes arrangements with sources valuable for the specific topic one is researching for a living.

men supposedly joined Jabhat al-Nusra in the early stages of the Syrian war, but later joined other fractions. The last was caught conspiring with the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi⁶³ in the early 2000s. Three of these women are also daughters of Jordanian jihadis. Thus, an underlying aim of this study is to obtain two central goals of qualitative research. The first is to understand jihadism through learning about the experiences, choices and motivations of a group that is usually underrepresented, both in media and in research, while the second entail interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena.⁶⁴

⁶³ The founder of al-Qaida in Iraq and was also the brain behind the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, the attacks of three hotels that killed more than sixty people. He was assassinated during an American missile strike in 2006.

⁶⁴ Charles C. Ragin and Lisa M. Amorosso, *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2011), 114.

3. “Family and patience – that is our jihad”

“Weren’t you thrilled when your husband told you he was going to join the *jihad* for God, even though you knew that perhaps he might never return?”⁶⁵

The quote is taken from the magazine *Baytuki*, meaning “your home” in Arabic, published by al-Qaida in December 2017. The magazine was allegedly partly launched as a critique against the IS and their call for women to the front lines. As reflected in the title, the group sees that the woman’s place is in the home, not in the battlefield. In fact, women are often described as being “excluded” from partaking in jihad, and those affiliated with jihadi groups are often perceived as mere victims subjugated and oppressed by traditional, patriarchal, male-dominated structures. In short, jihadi women are forced into the roles of housewives and mothers. Although the general perception of a jihadi is that of a male Muslim, research shows that women play an important role in ensuring the survival of Salafi jihadi community by supporting their male relatives and by educating their children in the Salafi jihadi ideology.⁶⁶ The aim of this chapter is accordingly to assess the personal causes for women not participating in armed action. I will also explore how they experience their roles as wives and mothers. Essentially, do they wish to accompany their husbands on the battlefield? Do they feel left out and excluded? And, how do they relate to the fact that their husbands’ waging jihad might result in their husbands never coming back?

Traditionally left out of the battlefield

Muslim women have historically and traditionally⁶⁷ been excluded from partaking in armed struggle mainly due to the interpretation of classical Islamic sources that are “fairly negative about the role of women in jihad.”⁶⁸ Thus, women have been kept away from the battlefield, although there were incidents at the time of the Prophet Muhammad when women would participate in warfare. But after closer investigation it is evident, according to researcher David

⁶⁵ “Al-Qaeda’s chick-lit: how to please your holy warrior,” *The Economist*, Middle East and Africa section, February 3, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/02/03/al-qaedas-chick-lit-how-to-please-your-holy-warrior>.

⁶⁶ Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 409.

⁶⁷ I do not suggest that female participation is ipso facto forbidden by religious sources, as several interpretations propose otherwise. In fact, Muslim women have assumed the roles of fighters and suicide bombers in both Palestine and Chechnya, mentioning some, as well as for al-Qaida in the early 2000s and for the Islamic State in later years. Rulings allowing women to partake in jihad is far more uncommon among the more conservative Jordanian religious leaders, which are partly the topic of this study.

⁶⁸ Cook, “Women Fighting,” 383.

Cook, that most of the women who did join battles during the Prophet's era held supportive, encouraging roles rather than that of a fighter.⁶⁹ The latter's view is supported by, amongst others, Nelly Lahoud, who claims that women participating alongside the Prophet during battles were the exception and not the norm.⁷⁰ The reason for the exclusion is mainly threefold:

In several hadiths associated with the Prophet and one of his wives, 'Aisha, the Prophet states that a woman's jihad is not fighting but performing the *hajj*.⁷¹ Because the *hajj* in itself was considered demanding, and sometimes even dangerous, the trip to Mecca was seen as the female equivalent to jihad. This is supported by ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who states that "there are many difficulties in hajj,"⁷² although he does not elaborate on what these difficulties are. The second reason is related to the strict gender-segregation that most jihadi groups follow, and the fact that women must be covered to protect themselves from men, and vice versa, as her appearance may cause *fitna*.⁷³ If a woman was to join the battlefield, she would have to take off her veil, which in turn would lead to *fitna* and terminate jihad altogether. Thirdly, it is explained by the reasoning that women would have to travel together with their husband or a *mahram*, but in a war zone, women would inevitably find themselves surrounded by males who are not a close relative, and therefore their presence would be seen as unlawful.⁷⁴ Another important aspect of the rejection of women's participation in armed jihad is related to the woman's honor. Protection of the female honor is sometimes used as a reason for male fighters to join jihad in the first place. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi stresses the importance of the latter:

It is hard for women to be involved because if she gets arrested, they will threaten her honor and dignity, and they will rape her. We are not allowed to sacrifice our women in the battlefield. Many of the people in the battlefield have no manners. It is different with men. They are ready to do these hard things.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Ibid., 376.

⁷⁰ Lahoud, "Neglected Sex," 793.

⁷¹ Ibid., 792.

⁷² Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Salafi jihadi ideologue, interview with author, Jordan, January 2019.

⁷³ Lisa Taraki, "Jordanian Islamists and the Agenda for Women: Between Discourse and Practice," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1996): 143. The term *fitna* is best understood here as "chaos" or "temptation."

⁷⁴ Lahoud, "Neglected Sex," 792.

⁷⁵ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Salafi jihadi ideologue, interview with author, Jordan, January 2019.

This does not, however, exclude the women's role from jihad entirely. As a matter of fact, women's non-violent support as wives, mothers, and sisters of jihadis is a necessary contribution to the success of jihad.⁷⁶ (Underlying assumption that women are supporters through kinship ties) According to the founding leader of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Yusuf al-Ayyiri, a woman can serve as either the most powerful incentive to encourage men to carry out jihad, or the most powerful obstacle if she objects.⁷⁷ Accordingly, the success of jihad depends just as much upon the supporting role of women as of the male fighters. Women are also seen as having essential roles when it comes to the short- and long-term survival of the jihadi organizations.⁷⁸ After all, they are the ones giving birth to and raising new generations of jihadis. As an earlier Jordanian member of al-Qaida, who had just been reunited with his family after serving several years in prison, put it: "If the women leave, who will take care of the children?"⁷⁹

Protecting the nucleus: Women as agents of preservation

"Our responsibilities include our raising children and to raise them right way according to the Qur'an and the sunna," one of my informants (hereafter referred to as Maryam) told me while discussing whether or not she felt "excluded" from jihad.⁸⁰ It soon became clear that the women I met were all content with being relegated to the domestic sphere. To understand this, we should look at how the women themselves view gender and their gender roles. For them, men and women are not created as equals, but instead as two compatible parts with different strengths and weaknesses that ultimately complete each other. Maryam, "Layla," and "Asma" explicitly mentioned this. Asma, for example, noted: "I agree on equal rights, but women and men are not the same. Look how different our bodies are! And men and women look at things differently. Women are much more emotional, and men are more rational."⁸¹ Layla, on the other hand, stated: "I do not want to be equal to the man. I am not a man! Islam gives women the most rights. Do I feel less worth, degraded? Not at all! I can do whatever I want, but I want the man to provide and take care of me."⁸² Lastly, Maryam referred to the role of the mother:

⁷⁶ Lahoud, "Neglected Sex," 783; Von Knop, "The Female Jihad," 411.

⁷⁷ Lahoud, "Neglected Sex," 787.

⁷⁸ Von Knop, "The female jihad," 398.

⁷⁹ "Ahmad," earlier member of al-Qaida in Iraq, interview with author, Jordan, October 2019.

⁸⁰ "Maryam," "Layla," and "Asma," group interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁸¹ "Asma," interview with author, Jordan February 2019.

⁸² "Layla," interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

Islam is not a religion of equality; it is a religion of justice. I do not want to be equal to the man, we have different needs. God created us differently, we have different strengths and weaknesses. He created the woman weaker and the man stronger. Take the mother in Islam for example. Her rights are higher than of the father because of what she went through while bearing children and giving birth. It is always mother, mother, mother. Then father.⁸³

Jordanian researcher Hasan Abu Hanieh found that Salafi jihadis in Jordan view the family as the “ultimate source for setting the moral standards of society.”⁸⁴ Salafi jihadis hence claim that they afford women a more prominent position than any other civilization, and that the “proper” place for a woman is at home where she can nurture an “exceptional generation, raised on the Qur’an and in the ways of the Qur’an, and that this vision is in harmony with the highest ideals and values in Islam.”⁸⁵ This is partly based on the writings of the late theorist Sayyid Qutb, who has had much influence on the Salafi jihadi movement. The latter considered the family as the cornerstone in which one can measure how civilized or backwards a society is.⁸⁶ Also al-Ayyiri allegedly wrote that “the woman is the one that raises her children in the doctrine of jihad.”⁸⁷ Maryam seems to agree with this view:

Family is the main unit of the Islamic community, it is the cornerstone, and if you are not raising a good family, what will happen to society? The family is the main core and if you focus on raising the family to be good, the society will be good as well.

On that note, establishing a good family is of utmost significance to Layla, Maryam and Asma. In order to do so, they emphasize the importance of staying at home with their children instead of working: “It is not forbidden for us to work,” Asma says “but you have to make sure that your work does not get in the way of you managing the house, your children and your husband. Most women cannot do that, but if she can she is allowed to work.” “I could never do that!” Maryam replies. They do not think that it is necessary for all women to work but acknowledge that there is a need for female doctors, teachers and nurses. It would, however, have to be in an all-women’s clinic or an all-girls school: “She has to make sure that working does not cause her to be surrounded by unrelated men. I mean, she should not put herself in that position. Her being there might cause temptation, and who knows what could happen. A woman needs to

⁸³ “Maryam,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁸⁴ Hanieh, *Al-Mar’a*, 62.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 59.

protect herself,” Layla states as we are talking about women becoming a bigger part of the Jordanian work force. Thus, a woman causing *fitna* does not only apply to the battlefield, but society as a whole.

The worst part about women increasingly joining work force is however not the possibility of *fitna*, according to Asma:⁸⁸ “A woman working might cause a man that has to provide for his family to lose his job.” That would, according to Asma, interfere with his duty from God, which is providing for his wife and kids, and sometimes even his own parents or sisters. “It is better for us to stay home so the men can fulfill their job. Deep inside I think everybody knows that it is more important to spend time with your kids than working. Can you imagine a better, more important job than to assure that your children grow up to know the right religion?”⁸⁹

Consequently, the women were skeptical towards putting children in daycare or in school, arguing that you have to be careful and choose wisely as you do not know what the children will be learning there: “The children could be taught things that are out of your control; and you are responsible for raising them in the right path.”⁹⁰ Evidently this is normal among Salafi jihadis, as many reject public educational institutions and are careful not to expose their children to education they considered not to be based on the foundations of Islam.⁹¹ Lastly, Layla once more stressed the importance of bearing children: “If you are married you have to have children. I mean, if people are not having children, where are we going to get the Muslims from?”

Women and the different types of jihad

As we recall, al-Maqdisi said he would never let his daughters go to Syria. However, he is of the opinion that if there was an invasion or a foreign occupation, women would be expected to take up arms and fight to protect themselves and the community.⁹² Under such circumstances jihad becomes *farḍ ‘ayn* [an individual obligation]. This brings up the discussion on different types of jihad and the need to differentiate between *farḍ ‘ayn* on the one hand, and jihad as *farḍ kifāya* [collective duty] on the other. Roughly explained, when jihad is *farḍ ‘ayn*, the obligation

⁸⁸ “Asma,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Maryam,” “Layla,” and “Asma,” group interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁹¹ Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hasan Abu Hanieh, *The “Islamic Solution” in Jordan: Islamists, the State, and the Ventures of Democracy and Security*, trans. Mona Abu Rayyan and Banan Malkawi (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq, 2013), 398.

⁹² Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Salafi jihadi ideologue, interview with author, Jordan, January 2019.

of jihad is “upon each and every one of the members of the Muslim community.”⁹³ When jihad is *farḍ kifāya*, the obligation of jihad is only upon parts of the members of the Muslim community, and thus there is no need for women to fight.⁹⁴ Statements such as “[y]ou are supposed to defend yourself, not attack,”; “Invading is ok, but fighting back is not allowed?; and “No woman with a brain would ever go to a war zone by herself,” during the interviews, indicate that also the women are aware of and follow this distinction of jihad. Layla’s view in particular seems to be that the situation in Syria, the jihad her husband joined, is *farḍ kifāya*:

Like in Syria, what Assad did, it is not Islamically right and the people cannot protect themselves, so why shouldn’t we go and help them? They are our sisters and brothers. But only the men should go. Not all of them, only the ones who can. Why should the Syrians go through this all by themselves? If nobody goes to help there is not going to be any Muslims left.”

My interviewees conform with what Katharina von Knop refers to as “the female jihad,” namely that women seem to follow a “gender-specific interpretation of the radical ideology.”⁹⁵ Von Knop argues that by supporting their male relatives, educating their children in the ideology, and by facilitating operations, the female jihadi is no less dangerous as women have a strong impact on both current and the future generations. Consequently, women are more important for the survival of jihadi groups when following the gendered interpretation, especially since the men could end up getting arrested, get severely hurt, or die in an attack.⁹⁶

“A woman’s jihad is supporting her husband and helping with difficulties, but she is not asked to fight,” Layla explains. Her husband left to join Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013. At the time of the interview, he was still alive and situated somewhere along the border between Syria and Turkey. She is hoping to go to meet up with him in Turkey and continue their life there, as she does not want him to return to Jordan and end up spending several years in prison. Although she is not allowed to travel outside the country at the moment, she remains hopeful:

It is hard that we are not together, but I knew he was leaving, and I was fine with it. I am still fine with it. We reached this decision together and we will get through it together. He went there because he wanted to help, and if other Muslims need help, it is the man’s duty to help them – he has to! Men are asked for jihad, and he will be rewarded for it later.

⁹³ Cook, “Women Fighting,” 379.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 397.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Layla clearly supports a gender-specific interpretation of jihad. Women have two options in her opinion: “You could either wait patiently and then hopefully get reunited with your husband, or you could divorce him and get remarried. There are different levels of patience,” she claims. “I know some women who have chosen to get divorced, and it is their choice. I respect that, but I don’t want to. I never want to divorce him. If you are willing to wait you will get rewarded.” What is unclear, however, is what kinds of rewards she has in mind.

One possible reward could be for her to be reunited with her husband in real life, for him not having to face charges for going to Syria, and for them to be able to continue their life together somewhere suitable. Another possible reward could be the two of them meeting in the hereafter, in Paradise. Both Asma and Maryam hold a similar view. Asma has not seen her husband for sixteen years, but she would never consider divorcing him: “I have waited this long, and I know I will see him again, if not in this life then in paradise. Besides, what is sixteen years compared to eternity?” Her husband was one of many who were caught conspiring with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, in the early 2000s. Maryam’s husband left for Syria in 2012 to work as a nurse:

Even though he is a nurse he functioned as a doctor over there, they really needed him. I knew he was going; he told me, and I agreed. It was a huge sacrifice, of course. A lot of people say “oh, we want to help,” but very few are really making sacrifices to help. If nobody acted on their thoughts, nobody would actually help. So why not me and my family? I cannot imagine my children dying or being hurt and not finding anyone to help them!

Maryam claims that he did not like the fighting and that he was not using weapons. A family friend of Maryam, who was not a part of the interview and whom I only spoke with briefly, claim that he left with a group of friends to join Jabhat al-Nusra. No matter the truth, there is no reason to believe that the one ultimately excludes the other, as he might possibly been working as a nurse within the ranks of Jabhat al-Nusra. Even though he was killed in 2016, Maryam does not regret him leaving, although she felt like she lost him too soon. “I had been prepared for it to happen since the day he left. He would have died on the same day anyway, so better dying for the sake of God instead of being hit by a car in Jordan. Dying for the sake of God is the greatest gift.” This clearly indicates that she believes her husband achieved martyrdom through helping the Syrian people.

What is harder for her to grasp is how her husband died/who killed her husband: “He was shot in the head by another Muslim. Can you believe it? At least I thought it would be a non-Muslim.” At least she seemed to take pride in the way her husband died, much like al-Maqdisi’s view on the death of his son. Left without a husband, Maryam found herself a “single” mother with two young children. “I tell them that their father went to Syria to help Muslims, not to kill the infidels. Now we just have to be just as good as he was so we can meet in paradise.” Although her family made a major sacrifice, Maryam states that not *all* men should leave:

Some people leave, and some people stay to take care of the women and children; it is either or. Not all people can go, and some don’t have the courage. If you choose not to go, you have to take care of the ones remaining. Whoever takes care of the family of one who left, does the same good deed as the one who left and will receive the same reward.

When it comes to the future generations of fighters, Asma emphasizes her role as a mother: “I would never try to stop them. My responsibility is to ensure that they leave with proper intention. They need to make sure that they are fighting in the right path. Leaving for jihad is not an easy choice, they have to be aware of that.”⁹⁷ She is especially concerned about what she describes as a split amongst the Muslim community: “Muslims in Jordan are divided because of the war in Syria. A lot of people do no longer wish to be associated with people they used to be associated with,” Asma says. Layla agrees. As already mentioned, adherents of the Salafi jihadi movement do not see themselves as followers of a certain group, or even belonging to a movement as such, they simply believe that their interpretation of Islam is the correct one. It is therefore likely that the divisions Asma and Layla were pointing to, are the divisions that grew amongst the Jordanian Salafi jihadis as they began siding with different groups in the Syrian conflict.⁹⁸ With the rise of IS, the local support shifted from the al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra to favoring IS.⁹⁹ Both Marwan Shehadeh and Abu Hanieh suggest that 80 per cent of the Jordanian movement support IS, while the remaining supports Jabhat al-

⁹⁷ “Asma” and “Layla,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

⁹⁸ Joas Wagemakers, “Jihadi-Salafism in Jordan and the Syrian Conflict: Divisions Overcome Unity,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 3 (2018): 198-199; Taylor Luck, “ISIL ‘attacks’ Jordanian Al Qaeda supporter,” *The Jordan Times*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/isil-attacks%E2%80%99-jordanian-al-qaeda-supporter>.

⁹⁹ Wagemakers, “Jihadi-Salafism,” 198-199.

Nusra (now mostly part of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) and its affiliates.¹⁰⁰ Abu Qatada al-Filastini thinks the support for IS is even bigger, and estimates the number to be as high as 90 per cent.¹⁰¹

“Islam is the perfect religion,” according to Layla. “There are good and bad Muslims, and not everyone practices Islam as they should.”¹⁰² We are talking about IS and whether or not it is a righteous *khilāfa* [caliphate]. “You cannot just stand up and claim to be a caliph, that is not how it works,” Asma comments. Maryam follows up by saying that none of them has ever referred to IS as a *khilāfa*, nor would they: “We do not follow someone because of their name. You have to look at their actions and see if they can be traced back to the Prophet. IS did a lot of wrong things, but that does not mean that they are not Muslims. They have just implemented things in the wrong way.” That does not mean that the women would not wish for a *khilāfa* in the future. “I will happen one day, but we do not know how and we do not know when,” Maryam says before adding: “You just need to be sure that you are on the right path; that we are taking care of our family and be patient when God is testing us – it is just as important as jihad.”

When questioned if they consider the al-Qaida affiliate their husbands joined to be legitimate, the answer is that “they did a lot of wrong things, but at least they did better than IS.”¹⁰³ Although somewhat ambiguous, their answer may mean many things. Perhaps is declaring support for a jihadi group sharing too much in case of repercussions.¹⁰⁴ Or it could be that even though they do not agree with everything Jabhat al-Nusra do and stands for, they stay silent on the matter and support it because their husbands are part of it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to answer what personal reasons causes women to not participate in armed action, whether or not they feel left out of the battlefield, and how they relate to the

¹⁰⁰ Marwan Shehadeh, researcher, interview with author, Jordan, February 2019; Hasan Abu Hanieh, researcher, interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹⁰¹ Abu Qatada al-Filastini, jihadi theorist, interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹⁰² “Layla,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

¹⁰³ “Layla,” and “Maryam,” interview with author, February 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Rumman and Shteivi, *Sociology of Extremism*, 70; Ian Black, “Courts kept busy as Jordan works to crush support for Isis,” *The Guardian*, November 27, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/27/sp-courts-jordan-crush-support-isis>.

possibility that their husbands' waging jihad might result in him never coming back. I also explored how the women experience their roles as wives and mothers.

As we have seen, the personal reasons given for not participating in armed action are predominantly related to the women's understanding of gender, based on the notion that men and women are created as two separate parts that ultimately completes each other. In short, men are asked to fight, women are not. That does not mean, however, that they feel excluded or left out of the battlefield. On the contrary, the women have their own battlefield: their home. As shown, the women appeared to take great pride in preserving jihadi ideology by supporting their husbands and ensuring that their children grow up to be righteous Muslims, so that when the day comes for their sons to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, they are doing so with the proper intention. Thus, while the man is outside protecting the community, the woman is inside protecting the family nucleus. A task the women deem to be equally important.

That being said, the women do not rule out armed action altogether. There were indicators that they were aware of and support the idea that in case of a foreign invasion or occupation, armed jihad becomes *farḍ 'ayn* also upon them. When jihad is *farḍ kifāya*, as in the case of Syria, only men should leave, even though there is a possibility that their husbands may never return. I think we can safely assume that the women believe that their husbands' leaving, whether resulting in death, imprisonment or him not being able to return, is a test from God that was meant to hit them. And as long as they wait patiently and continue to strive to keep themselves and their family on the right path, they will be rewarded. If not in this life, then certainly in the hereafter. Thus, the women do not see their jihad as performing the hajj. Rather, patience, striving to keep on the right track, as well as raising their families to the best of their abilities, is considered their jihad. And instead of seeing themselves as subjugated victims lacking agency, they see themselves as holding a high position as guardians of what they consider to be the cornerstone in society: their family.

Yet, we have so far not addressed the issue of what structural causes can explain why some women choose to join their husbands in jihad. This is where we turn in the next chapter.

4. Growing up with the Salafi jihadis

For the past few years, scholarly attention has turned to the high number of Western women joining the IS and the variety of roles, from housewives to tactical operatives, in the so-called caliphate.¹⁰⁵ Very little attention has been given to women from the Muslim world who left for Syria and Iraq. What was so surprising about the female migrants from the West was that many left alone or with other women, and not in the company of their husbands or other male family members. Out of the five hundred women leaving Jordan for Syria, only five went without their husband or another male *mahram*.¹⁰⁶

“Noor” is one of the five hundred women and went to Syria with her husband in 2012. Her story is important because it provides a detailed insight into the experiences of the women in the Jordanian Salafi jihadi community. After all, there were quite few women traveling. Although all life stories are different, we can assume that many experienced much of the same as Noor. This chapter seeks to elucidate what makes a Jordanian woman join her husband to Syria. In short, why did she leave? What structural causes can explain her decision? Based on the case of Noor, I will discuss the importance of network and family as a possible motivation for female Salafi jihadis from Jordan.

The case of Noor and the importance of kinship

According to jihadism expert Abu Hanieh, “there are jihadi *families* [in Jordan]. Almost no women join the movement by themselves.”¹⁰⁷ Research suggests that there are particularly two main differences when it comes to men and women and why they engage in jihadism and/or join jihadi groups. First, women seem to need a group structure, as they are more unlikely to commence in jihadism by themselves.¹⁰⁸ As Davis points out, there are very few isolated examples of women carrying out an act alone.¹⁰⁹ Secondly, gaining access to jihadi groups is not only challenging but women rarely seek out “a group of unknown men in a secluded location” on a voluntary basis.¹¹⁰ Thus, women seem to be far more likely to join groups where they have personal connections.

¹⁰⁵ Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett, *Becoming Mulan?*; Eggert, “Women Fighters,”; Winter and Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma,”; Winter, *ISIS, Women and Jihad*.

¹⁰⁶ Hasan Abu Hanieh, researcher, interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

This hypothesis is also applicable to the Jordanian Jihadi movement. Instead of “joining” the movement in the literal sense, however, women became part of it through either marriage or birth, or other forms of kinship ties. It is common that members of the movement marry their daughters off to sons of other jihadis, or for men to marry the sister of another jihadi friend. In an interview with BBC journalist Murad Batal al-Shishani, a quoted jihadi veteran said he married his daughter to the son of another Salafi jihadi in Jordan instead of marrying her off to a cousin who was working as a policeman, and thus working for the state. The man argued that “the “brotherhood” between the movement’s members is stronger than family or tribal ties.”¹¹¹ This corroborates Von Knop’s findings that it would be a mistake to assume that the marriages in the global Salafi jihadi world happen by accident, as arranged marriages are a strong tradition in the Muslim world.¹¹² Not only does intermarriages nourish the already strong bonds between the movements’ members, but it also guarantees that “the rearing of the children to love jihad is protected against external influences.”¹¹³ Noor is a case in point, as she did not only marry a man from the Salafi jihadi community, she also grew up in one:

My father has embraced the ideas of jihad since I was a kid. From the early stages of my life he used to tell me stories about the *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, about the wars during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and he showed me movies about Islam and the Qur’an. I watched them and was convinced by everything I saw and heard.¹¹⁴

Various sources confirm,¹¹⁵ including Noor herself, that her father is a jihadi veteran and highly respected in their community. He also held a high rank in Jabhat al-Nusra, Noor says. Perhaps it is not that surprising that when Noor got married, it was to the son of a close acquaintance of her father. “I loved him because we shared the same ideas and we both wanted to live according to the Qur’an and the sunna.”¹¹⁶ According to Noor, her husband had always been committed to the idea of armed jihad, and told her from the very beginning that he would go and fight when the first opportunity presented itself: “He wanted to help Muslims, and he wanted to become a *mujāhid* [fighter], and he promised he would take me with him when he

¹¹¹ Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Jihadist way of life in Jordan,” *BBC News*, February 18, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25924689>.

¹¹² Von Knop, “The Female Jihad,” 410.

¹¹³ Lahoud, “Neglected Sex,” 794.

¹¹⁴ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹¹⁵ Two of my intermediaries knew him personally.

¹¹⁶ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

left.” One and a half year into their marriage, the young couple headed for Syria as Noor’s husband had just gotten a contract with Jabhat al-Nusra.

He started “washing my brain” and I was convinced that I wanted to help after watching clips on TV of the Syrian people, especially women and children, who were dying and being killed and screaming for help. I started to get excited to become a *mujāhida* in Syria. So, when he asked me if I wanted to come to Syria with him and be involved in jihad, I said yes.¹¹⁷

Interestingly, Noor explicitly refers to herself as a fighter. It is nevertheless uncertain if her actual initial intention was to fight alongside her husband, if it was her leaving that made her a *mujāhida*, or if it was simply because she was married to a *mujāhid*. If fighting was indeed her aim, it stands in sharp contrast to the recommendations of al-Maqdisi:

I always recommend women not to go [to jihad]. It is war, and war is not a good place for a woman to be. It is very dangerous. If there is danger, we do not send women. Some listen and some do not, and now some of those who tried are in jail. If it is risky for her to be in this war, she should not go. If it is not too risky it is fine for women to go to support the fighters and helping them, but as I said earlier, Syria and Iraq is too dangerous for women now.¹¹⁸

One of my intermediaries agrees with al-Maqdisi: “We were shocked by how many women left with their husbands, regardless what groups they joined. We are not in favor of them going, what will be their future? They will be doomed to death or serve long prison sentences. It is not worth it.”¹¹⁹ If Noor think it was worth it will be discussed later in this chapter. First, some of Noor’s statements need to be assessed as they are somewhat contradictory. First of all, she implies that her husband “brainwashed” her into believing that going to Syria was a good idea and something she actually wanted. However, it is not clear whether it was her husband that showed her or made her watch the footage from Syria, if she was watching the normal media coverage or if it was footage sought out by herself. Noor also says that she fell in love with her husband *because* they shared the same ideas, and that she knew from the beginning that he would leave for jihad and bring her. Could it be that she was ready for it in theory, but that it looked different once it actually became real? As we will see later on, she did support her

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Salafi jihadi ideologue, interview with author, Jordan, January 2019.

¹¹⁹ “Zayd,” intermediary, conversation with author, Jordan, October 2018.

husband all the way, but is now “trying to forget all of it.”¹²⁰ One could also assume that even though she has grown up to believe in the purpose of jihad, she would never have left if it were not for her husband. From what she is telling it seems that her husband was the one encouraging her to go, and not the other way around. Thus, she represents the majority of Jordanian women who left for Syria, whom Abu Hanieh claims are largely followers of their husbands rather than deciding to go on their own/lone actors/the other way around.¹²¹

Preliminary findings from research based on interviews with Jordanian foreign fighters and their families, suggests that hardly any of those who left to join jihadi groups in Syria, either man or woman, went by themselves.¹²² It also suggests that the support for one or another jihadi group hinges on family and community ties. As such, social networks play a crucial role when it comes to what group one supports, who ultimately leaves, and the group they eventually join, “as the desire to join an extremist group develops among a small social circle; a tight group of friends or a family.”¹²³ One of the informants in the report put it like this: “You want to be with people who know you.”¹²⁴

Three years in Syria for the protection of Islam

Noor describes their purpose of going to Syria as waging defensive jihad, which she understands as the duty of every Muslim to fight for the protection of Islam. Her view of defensive jihad is similar to that of the other women I met, but where the others see defensive jihad as *fard ‘ayn* for women to protect themselves if they are attacked or if there is an invasion, Noor seems to think that defensive jihad is *fard kifaya*, also upon her, in the case of Syria. According to Noor, “it is enough that just part of society goes to protect Islam and help the Syrian people. If just a part of society does this, there is no need for others to go. We help each other and there is no need for every Muslim to do this.”¹²⁵

As already noted, Noor eventually became excited “to become a fighter in Syria.” Upon arrival, however, she ended up doing domestic work such as cooking and cleaning, as well as doing charity work with and for other women and children in the community. Because she was so

¹²⁰ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹²¹ Hasan Abu Hanieh, researcher, interview with author, Jordan, December 8, 2018.

¹²² Mercy Corps, *From Jordan to Jihad: The Lure of Syria’s Violent Extremist Groups*, Policy brief (Portland: Mercy Corps, 2015), 4.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

well versed in the Qur'an, she also taught a girls-only Qur'an class. The life she lived with Jabhat al-Nusra was thus not very different from the lives of women who had joined the IS. As reported by Brynjar Lia, the enforcement of gender segregation created a limited sphere for women in areas such as education and health. Nevertheless, women of IS were encouraged to find their main role in the private sphere.¹²⁶

Her life changed drastically when her husband was killed during a battle. They had been there for less than a year, and Noor was six months pregnant. Up until the baby was born and a few months after, the community took care of her. This is a normal, albeit not an exclusive trait, amongst Salafi jihadis, according to Marwan Shehadeh. He writes that:

(...) dwellers of the same neighborhood or those who belong to the same tribe take individual initiatives and care of [...] those in need. [...] The ideas of solidarity and cooperation are transmitted to the community of Jihadis as they seek to be ideal and chaste. The dwellers of the same neighborhood – not to mention those who carry the same ideology – take care of the families of the killed (...)¹²⁷

The financial donations, he continues, “are offered secretly and directly to each family.”¹²⁸ This is how Maryam, the jihadi widow with two children we know from the previous chapter, survives. She told me that an anonymous man sends her money and provide her children with whatever they must need. “If it had not been for him, I do not know how we would survive. I am now both a father and a mother, I do not have time to work.”¹²⁹ In Noor's case it was slightly different. Instead of receiving anonymous aid, she was taken into other people's houses where she could continue to work like before, and also had help taking care of her son.

After a while, the other members of the community began pressuring her to remarry. She refused. All she wanted was to go back to Jordan and be with her family. She was tired of the “bad situation, the sound of rockets and Russian airplanes and the fear of getting hit.”¹³⁰ The only thing that kept her going was her son, and that if anything happened, she would become a martyr just like her husband. It was not until she received a phone call from her father, who was also with Jabhat al-Nusra but stationed elsewhere, that she changed her mind about marrying:

¹²⁶ Brynjar Lia, “The Jihādī Movement and Rebel Governance: A Reassertion of a Patriarchal Order?,” in *Die Welt des Islams* 57, no. 3-4 (2017): 463.

¹²⁷ Shehadeh, “The Effectiveness of Social Networks,” 20.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ “Maryam,” “Layla” and “Asma,” group interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

¹³⁰ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

He advised me to stay in Syria with my son and not go back to Jordan. “There are so many problems in Jordan, it is better to stay where you are,” he told me. He also said that it would be difficult to go home because of closely monitored Jordanian-Syrian border. Instead, he told me to get remarried to a man he knew that lived in the same area as me: “He is a good person and he knows the right *manhaj*¹³¹. He will take care of you and your son like he was his father. Maybe he is even better than your first husband.”

Noor accepted her father’s wish and became the second wife of this man. According to one of my intermediaries, it is normal in jihadi circles to marry more than one woman.¹³² In fact, some see it as a good deed for a man to marry a widow. As “Zahra,” who was the fourth wife of a prominent Salafi jihadi for five years until he left for Syria, said: “In Islam you should marry the divorced one or the widow with kids to take care of them all. It is not nice to stay alone for a woman. Also, there are more women than men in today’s society, and especially during times of war it is even more important. It is so beautiful, and sociologically the society will be much healthier too.”¹³³ But Noor’s second marriage was far from beautiful. Instead, a series of events followed that would leave Noor questioning her belief in jihad.

This was about the same time that IS emerged and gained territory. Noor saw a change in her new husband as he would frequently lose his temper: “He became more and more angry for little things and started beating my son. When I tried to protect him [the son], he beat me too. He made me quit my teaching job and forced me to stay at home.”¹³⁴ Half a year into their marriage, the wife of another fighter came to visit Noor and told her that she had seen her husband leave the community several times on his motorbike at odd hours. When Noor confronted him, he had said that he was “hanging out with friends.” It did not take long, however, until she found out he was working with IS: “He was a hypocrite! He told IS that he was with them and that he would spy on Jabhat al-Nusra for them, and when I found out he told me he was spying on IS for Jabhat al-Nusra. He was a big liar.”¹³⁵

Her second marriage would ultimately become her gateway ticket back home. When Noor told the local leader about her husband’s activities, he contacted her father who immediately began dealing with his contacts in Jordan. “My father told me not to be too

¹³¹ The method in which Muslims apply their religion.

¹³² “Zayd,” intermediary, conversation with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹³³ “Zahra,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

¹³⁴ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

optimistic as they were arresting everyone who tried to cross the Syrian-Jordanian border,” Noor says. During the same time, it was reported that several wives of Jordanian fighters who died fighting in Syria, had been arrested or were kept from entering the kingdom.¹³⁶ While she was waiting to go back home, the war intensified, according to Noor: “There were always problems between IS and the Salafis and the Syrian army. And then the Russians came. Everybody killed each other, they even killed women, children and non-Muslims living in the area.”¹³⁷ When Noor’s father eventually connected her to a group of Jordanian women who were also looking to go home, it had been three years since she arrived. “Thank God for my father’s *wasta*¹³⁸! If not, I would never have made it home.”

Ambivalence towards jihad

When I asked Noor what jihad meant to her in our last meeting, she replied: “I do not encourage jihad anymore. Back then it was about defending women and children, and I thought I did the right thing by going.”¹³⁹ She is not alone. Protecting women and children was the most common reason given amongst families of Jordanian fighters and returned jihadis.¹⁴⁰ It is evident, however, that the reality implemented on the ground in Syria was not what Noor had expected, despite the horrific images she had seen before leaving:

I supported my [first] husband all the way and I thought we would live in a safe place. But it was a very bad situation and I felt a bad pain because of what I saw while I was there. I will not say I regret it, but I will never go back. I am convinced that there is no real jihad, it is only creating more conflicts. There are just a lot of hypocrites that use jihad for their own benefit. They say it is real jihad, but they are liars. I want to forget it, I tried. I will never go back and do jihad again.¹⁴¹

What happened in Syria is not the only reason for Noor’s disappointment. Previous to her departure, she was of the perception that everybody followed the same interpretation of Islam as her. She was surprised that Muslims were labeling each other infidels and killing each other, especially after IS became a part of the mosaic. Her awareness of divisions among Muslims became even stronger after coming back to Jordan:

¹³⁶ Wagemakers, “Divisions Overcome Unity,” 196.

¹³⁷ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹³⁸ In Jordan the term *wasta* is used by people who has a big network which often includes influential people.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Mercy Corps, *From Jordan to Jihad*, 5-6.

¹⁴¹ “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

Things have changed in Jordan, and not many are supporting the jihadi way of living now. Because of the strict laws in I cannot support the idea anymore, I cannot even be in contact with all my friends, we are all in the same situation. Even those who did not leave. I have to practice my religion on their [the government's] terms.

What hurts the most, according to Noor, is that she is being forced to live as a “normal Muslim,” which she described as being a Muslim “according to the authorities.”¹⁴² The law Noor is referring to is the new anti-terrorism law adopted in 2014 that criminalizes not only “the intent or act of joining, recruiting, funding or arming” groups like the Salafi jihadi factions in Syria, but also the ones in Jordan.¹⁴³ With the high number of Jordanians leaving for Syria, the regime increased its crack down on the country's jihadi movement through heavier surveillance, arrests, and by closing the border Syrian-Jordanian border to keep people from leaving and returning from Syria. As we know, the Salafi jihadis has never enjoyed a tight relationship with the Jordanian regime as the latter try to limit the movement's freedom and opportunity structures through state institutions such as the *mukhābarāt* [intelligence services], the State Security Court, and the national police, mentioning some.¹⁴⁴ This has also created difficulties conducting research on the movement, as the heavy surveillance have pressured its adherents to operate in enclosed, secretive networks based on individual relationships and high level of trust between members of the various jihadi communities.¹⁴⁵

Noor is not the only one that feels compromised by the regime: “They think badly about us before they think good,” Asma says about the Jordanian government, “and they want to control the way people are practicing their religion. They do not want a too religious society, but not non-religious either.”¹⁴⁶ “You cannot say what you want in public, you have to choose your words carefully,” Layla adds.¹⁴⁷ They know several women who have had encounters with the *mukhābarāt*, but have not been approached themselves, as “they usually leave women alone,” according to Layla. According to Abu Hanieh, Jordanian Salafi jihadis try to avoid encounters with the *mukhābarāt*, at least for the movement's women:

¹⁴² “Noor,” interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹⁴³ Wagemakers, “Divisions Overcome Unity,” 196-197.

¹⁴⁴ Beverley Milton-Edwards, *Grappling with Islamism: Assessing Jordan's Evolving Approach*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper no. 19 (Doha: The Brookings Institution, 2017): 17-18.

¹⁴⁵ Rumman and Hanieh, *The “Islamic Solution,”* 395-398.

¹⁴⁶ “Asma,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

¹⁴⁷ “Layla,” interview with author, Jordan, February 2019.

Salafi jihadis in Jordan are very protective of their women, especially regarding her honor. It was easier to meet Salafi jihadis in general up until 2015. Now they will face serious charges for spreading their ideas. There is a silent agreement between the movement and the security services that the latter will not touch their women. In turn, the jihadis will keep their ideas to themselves. If women start sharing their views and spreading their ideas, and it gets out, there will be repercussions. They will not risk their women ending up in jail.¹⁴⁸

Although Noor's personal encouragement for jihad has taken a strong hit, her belief in it still prevails, although slightly amended: "I do believe that men should still go. They can handle the bad situation in the battlefield. But women should stay home or in a safe place. Jihad is the duty of our religion, one of the five pillars, so the men have to go. If the women are needed and if it is safe, they can go."¹⁴⁹ She will also do her utmost to raise her son to become a *mujāhid* like his father: "That was my [first] husband's wish. But I will make sure that he is on the right path, and not waging jihad like they did in Syria."

Abu Qatada and al-Maqdisi are personally experiencing the excelled surveillance on the movement: "If I so much as Tweet something, the *mukhābarāt* will call and ask what I am doing," Abu Qatada says.¹⁵⁰ Al-Maqdisi was slightly more direct: "If you were a journalist, I would not meet with you as I am not allowed to talk to journalists. But since you are doing research I agreed."¹⁵¹ They both highlight the frail conditions of the movement, much in accordance with what the women themselves have expressed. Because the movement is weak, al-Maqdisi explains, there is no room for armed jihad in Jordan: "One of the main goals of waging jihad is to bring about *tawhīd*. You can achieve *tawhīd* with swords and you can achieve *tawhīd* with words. You have to look at the society you are in and consider the best method. In Jordan we are weak, so here we need to use our speech."¹⁵²

Abu Hanieh also points out that the local cause of the Salafi jihadi movement is less revolutionary: "Perceiving themselves as the followers of the right Islam, the movements' local jihad is more concerned about helping people onto the right path and for people to practice their religion right."¹⁵³ Being on the right path will always, according former al-Qaida member Ahmad, lead to jihad:

¹⁴⁸ Hasan Abu Hanieh, researcher, interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹⁴⁹ "Noor," interview with author, Jordan, December 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Abu Qatada al-Filastini, jihadi theorist, interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹⁵¹ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Salafi jihadi ideologue, interview with author, Jordan, January 2019.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Hasan Abu Hanieh, researcher, interview with author, December 2018.

Jihad is found in the Qur'an and jihad is found in the sunna, so any group or any Muslim that go back to the Qur'an and the sunna will make jihad. Where evilness and corruption exist, there is no other way to change it. But you have to make sure that the jihad changes things for the better. Only then the jihad is right. There is no way that what you call "Salafi jihadi" will come to an end, because it is our Qur'an and our Islam.¹⁵⁴

On differences and similarities

As we have seen, all the women seem to embrace the idea of jihad being *fard 'ayn* upon them if they are being attacked or invaded by a foreign force on their own land. Most of them also believed that waging jihad in Syria was *fard kifaya* upon the male members of their community, as long as some stayed behind to take care of the remaining women and children. Noor seemed to have had a less gender-specific view on jihad as *fard kifaya* prior to leaving for Syria. Zahra, whom has been the least prominent of the women through this thesis, also mentions this in our conversation, although in a different manner than the others: "If somebody came to your country and attacked you, tried to kill you and your family, would you not protect yourself?"¹⁵⁵ In sharp contrast to the others, however, she does only see armed action as legitimate in one's own home. Going to another country, no matter what cause is "madness," according to her.

There might be an obvious reason for that. Zahra was only married to her husband, whom one of my intermediaries describe as a very well respected jihadi,¹⁵⁶ for five years. Zahra, who comes from a liberal family and had never worn a niqab all her life, were forced to start wearing it in order for them to get married. When the war in Syria broke out and he told her he was leaving, she divorced him and immediately took her niqab off. Thus, I will not label Zahra as a Salafi jihadi, although she was affiliated with the man for five years. The reason she married him was not because of his ideology, she said, but because she was lonely.¹⁵⁷ The reason I have included her is that she is an example of a woman where jihadi ideology did not manage to turn roots, although she was married to a Salafi jihadi. I dare argue that it is due to her having spent forty years in a liberal family, and due to her short exposure to such ideas. She was one of four wives after all.

¹⁵⁴ "Ahmad," former member of al-Qaida, interview with author, Jordan, October 2018.

¹⁵⁵ "Zahra," interview with author, March 2019.

¹⁵⁶ "Zayd," intermediary, conversation with author, February 2019.

¹⁵⁷ "Zahra," interview with author, March 2019.

Just like Noor, both Layla and Maryam are daughters of Salafi jihadis. We know that Noor grew up in a home where jihadi thought flourished. She also spoke briefly of women she knew that, just like her, had joined their husbands to Syria, indicating that it might have been normal to join the husband in the community where she is from. Neither Layla nor Maryam ever mentions such a community. Although they are both daughters of jihadis, their fathers never returned from armed jihad in Iraq in the early 2000s. Still, they are both married to members of the movement, which means they are also part of a jihadi community whose networks might not have been as tight as the one Noor speaks of. They do however mention friends of theirs who are in the same situation as them, either having lost their husbands or him being stuck in Syria, much like their husbands. In their community, leaving might not have been an option. Of course, this is just an assumption.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the aim was to understand why some women decided to join their husbands in jihad through the case of Noor, and what structural causes can explain her motivation. Namely networks and family. Although we can never be sure about Noor's exact motivations other than what we know from the interviews, it seems safely to suggest that she is greatly affected by the environment she grew up in. For that there are several indicators.

First of all, Noor described growing up in a home where she had been exposed to jihadi thought from a young age. She also got married to the son of another jihadi and explicitly said she loved him because they shared the same ideas and had the same outlook on life. The fact that she was surprised to find out that there were Muslims who did not follow the same interpretation as her, also indicates that she grew up in an enclosed environment. She also mentions that she is no longer allowed to keep in contact with friends that are in the same situation as her.

As we saw, her reasons given for leaving has been similar to that of other Jordanians who left for Syria: She wanted to protect the Syrian women and children. What she meant by "protecting" is however somewhat unclear, as she both claimed that she was looking forward to becoming a *mujāhida* and that she thought they would live in a safe place, despite what she had seen on TV. The one might not exclude the other, but if you are prepared to take up arms in a war zone, you will most certainly expose yourself to dangerous situations. What is clear, on the other hand, is that the importance of network and family as a possible motivation for Jordanian female Salafi jihadis is not to be underestimated.

5. Conclusion

The overall goal of this study has been to explore what jihad means to women who are born or married into the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement. My main findings is that, first and foremost, jihad means family, friends and network. A female Salafi jihadi is a woman who's entrance into jihadi circles are due to coincidences such as birth, the surrounding community, or due to marriage between members of the movement. The women remain part of the jihadi movement because of lack of exposure and contacts with other networks rather than becoming ideologically attracted to jihad.

The jihadi ideology is by all means what most of the female Salafi jihadis I have studied are born into, it is their universe, the only one they have ever known. The five women I have met are obviously not a representative sample in terms of generalizations. But as far as I am aware, there are no other studies of female Salafi jihadis in Jordan, and this is hopefully a contribution to research on the dynamics of the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement and their opportunity for recruitment: through enclosed networks and through family ties. Hence the importance of networks. My conclusion on the case of the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement and its female adherents is thus, to reiterate, that the social aspect is more important than the ideological. Rather, the ideological comes with it due to exposition through birth or through marriage.

Marriage is of especial importance. The movement's members marry their daughters off to sons of other jihadis, and men marry the sisters of another jihadi friend. That way marriage is a constitution that helps strengthen the bonds between members as well as protecting the families from outside influences. Thus, tight networks built on intermarriages help the movement sustain. I am not rejecting the possibility that there are women who have married because of ideological conviction, but in the case of my informants, it is the surrounding networks and the social conditions that determine that they are a part of the community, that they are jihadis.

Let us look at the case of Noor. She grew up in a home where she was exposed to jihadi ideology from a very young age and was "convinced in everything she saw and heard." She also ended up marrying the son of a close acquaintance of her father, whom she loved because he shared the same ideas as her and wanted to wage jihad in his life. When the door opened for jihad in Syria, they went together. I think there is reason to believe that her decision was not

only affected by that of her husband, but is also a result of the community and home she grew up in. As an example: As the war intensifies in Syria, Noor was shocked to see that Muslims were labeling each other infidels and killing each other. Up until then, she had thought that all Muslims followed the same interpretation as she did. The only interpretation she knew, and therefore the only one that was right. In the community Noor grew up in she was simply not exposed to outside influences.

As for the other cases, although there are differences, the importance of network remains. Maryam and Layla are daughters of Salafi jihadis. Unlike Noor's father, their did not come back from Iraq. The fact that they both married Salafi jihadis indicate that they remain part of a jihadi network, albeit not as tight as that of Noor. But they had one thing in common making their network more important than anything else for them; they were all mothers. This made for the road to any alternative social environment all but closed.

As part of this inquiry was to explore whether there are gender-specific interpretations of Salafi jihadi ideology in Jordan. Indeed, it is. That is not only evident through my informants, but also through the views of prominent Salafi jihadis in the country, as well as local researchers with expertise on the topic. It may well be that not all the women agree with their husband's view or deem their actions as legitimate, or that every daughter of a Salafi jihadi agree with her father. However, by participating in the environment and by not fronting dissent or talk loudly about disagreeing, they are contributing to uphold the social structures and norms of the movement. Shared by all the women except Zahra, was the importance of raising their children in the right path, and for their sons to grow up to be jihadis just like their fathers. As such, the women in the Salafi jihadi movement in Jordan are actors whose interpretation of Islam helps jihadi ideology spread and take root in society.

Marnia Lazreg writes: "What we need is the expression of reality by those who live it and on their terms."¹⁵⁸ Thus, I argue that we must broaden our conception of what being a female Salafi jihadi entails, by including the low-key, grassroots woman who, by following a gender-specific interpretation of the radical ideology, is crucial to the future of the movement.

¹⁵⁸ Marnia Lazreg, "The Triumphant Discourse on Global Feminism: Should Other Women Be Known?," *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Routledge, 2012), 38.

Lastly, this thesis is not without its shortcomings. When conducting research on members of a very enclosed community, who on top of that are treated with suspicion by the regime, six months is suddenly not all that much time. Although I knew from the beginning that gaining access would be hard, it proved to be even harder than I thought. Especially regarding the women. In all, I have met twice as many men as I have women and none of them would let me meet their wives. That I had not expected. I later learned that is was mostly due to the fear of repercussions. The five women are not a representative sample, but they do however give an insight on how female members of jihadi movements think and reflect upon jihadism. Due to the limited scope of this paper, there are still several aspects of the women's lives that I did not get to elucidate. As for future research on female jihadism, I argue that grassroot female jihadis must be taken into consideration.

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