

# **Hijrah: Answering To The Call Of The Caliphate**

## **Analysis of European Muslim women's migration to Syria to join ISIS**



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## Abstract

This thesis examines why European Muslim women have left their home countries to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq, as well as the process of radicalization that they have undergone before taking the decision of making *hijrah*, migration. The unprecedented number of European women that have joined the terrorist organization has attracted the attention of the scholars towards an under-researched field. In order to contribute to this vacuum of knowledge, the research has compiled a theoretical framework that explains the radicalization process and the motives for migration in a coherent and comprehensive way.

The Frame Theory applied to the Social Movement Theory is a cornerstone in this study that is also anchored in the sociological concept of dual cultural alterity and pull and push factors. This theoretical framework is the backbone of the quantitative and qualitative content analysis conducted in this study. The posts of European Muslim women living in Syria have been analyzed in order to understand their motives to migrate and the process of radicalization.

The results of the analysis showed the women claim to go to Syria because it is a religious obligation and because of the opportunity to live under the Sharia law. They also identified other incentives that the so-called Caliphate offered them as financial security or the belonging to a community. The grievances from the West such as the discrimination or the persecution of the Muslim community were less mentioned. Despite migration is not the only theme in the posts; the majority of those related with migration were aimed at recruiting other women. The results also indicated the existence of a recruitment network where some women are available to give information and help and a discourse focused on other Muslim women and Muslims in general.

Therefore, European Muslim women who have gone to Syria to join ISIS underwent a process of violent radicalization in a social environment, most probably through the social media, before taking the decision. This radicalization process led them to believe that going to Syria was mandatory and the only way to be able to practice ‘real’ Islam and be blessed with a place in heaven.

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# 1 Introduction

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and the subsequent rise of ISIS a year later attracted the attention of hundreds of Westerners, which was later reinforced by the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate in the summer of 2014. The phenomenon of foreign fighters is far from being new, however, this time there is an unprecedented high number of Westerners and especially females.

The exact number of Western foreign fighters remains ambiguous owing to the lack of accurate information from European States. It is estimated that more than 5,000 Europeans have gone to Syria or Iraq to become foreign fighters, most of them coming from just four countries: UK, France, Belgium and Germany (Barrett 2015, p. 12). The vast majority have enlisted in the ISIS contingent and according to a recent study from the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) there are between 3,922 and 4,294 European foreign fighters (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, p. 3).

But what has attracted the most media attention is the more than 550 young Western females, at least 70 German, 60 British and between 63 and 70 French, that have reportedly gone to Syria to join ISIS (Baker and De Leede 2015; Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 8). Females have always been involved in foreign conflicts and terrorism, including jihadist groups such as the Black Widows, a Chechen female suicide squad that committed terrorist attacks in Russia between 2000 and 2005 (Baker and De Leede 2015, p. 2).

Conversely, these women are not joining the terrorist group to commit a suicide attack or fight in the battlefield; their role is strictly restricted to the household. These women, usually known as 'jihadi brides' by the media, have been depicted in a simplistic and stereotypical way, where they are portrayed as naïve victims of jihadists that have been seduced into going to Syria to find love and a romanticized jihad (Ibid. p. 5). However, the motives behind their decision to leave their families in the West to join ISIS, a terrorist organization, are far more complex than a simple romantic story or a fascination for jihad.

Western female migration to Syria to join ISIS has until recently been an un-researched topic, in part because of the limited number of female foreign fighters. Consequently,

all the studies focused on this new phenomenon agree about the limited information available regarding female migration. It is necessary to have a better understanding of the motivations of these women because their role in Syria and Iraq is not to fight, but to assist the jihadists in their state-building initiatives by raising their children (Baker and De Leede 2015, p. 8; Al 2012). The differences with male foreign fighters and the reduced number of studies about women in ISIS, makes it necessary to specifically focus on women. In order to contribute to this niche of knowledge, this research aims at answering the following thesis statement:

*“Why European women decide to leave their home countries and move to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS?”*

This study focuses on European women, who, despite being born into the European values of freedom, gender equality and liberal rights, decide to leave their comfortable and stable life in their home countries to move to Syria and Iraq, a war-torn territory, to join ISIS, a terrorist misogynist organization ruled by the strictest interpretation of the Sharia law. In order to prevent women from joining a terrorist organization such as ISIS, it is first necessary to understand their grievances, the incentives offered by ISIS, and the role that the social media play in the violent radicalization process, so that an accurate counter-narrative for countering violent extremism can be developed.

Along these lines, this research identifies and analyzes the different pull and push factors that influenced European female Muslims to take the decision of making *hijrah*, migrating to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS (Saltman and Smith 2015). In addition, this paper analyzes the role of the social media in their radicalization process. This research uses the content analysis methodology as the approach to answer the above-mentioned question. The analysis is structured around three hypotheses that are defined in the methodology chapter, and later tested with the results from the analysis in the discussion chapter.

This research does not use the term ‘female foreign fighters’ because women do not participate in the fight in Syria. They are referred to as ‘female migrants’ or simply European female Muslims. In addition, it is necessary to clarify that when Syria is mentioned in the text, it refers to all the territory controlled by ISIS, including the Iraqi territory. In some cases both countries will be also mentioned.

## **2 Literature Review**

This chapter offers a holistic understanding of the theories and concepts that are necessary to conduct this research, focused on European Muslim women's willingness to join the terrorist organization ISIS. Firstly, a contextual framework is provided in order to understand the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the role of western women in ISIS territories and the situation of Muslim women in Europe.

Secondly, the radicalization process is explained from a group and an individual perspective, anchoring the research on the framing theory proposed by Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004), which is part of the theoretical framework of the social movement theory; and the concept of dual cultural alterity of Akil N. Awan (2015), whose principles are also shared by some authors of the French sociological tradition, such as Olivier Roy (2007).

Finally, several grievances and motives are identified based on the studies by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which will be used in the formation of the methodological framework.

### **2.1 Historical Background**

#### **2.1.1 The Rise of ISIS and the Syrian Civil War**

Since 2014, ISIS has become the terrorist organization par excellence, surpassing the well-known al Qaeda. However, the beginnings of this ruthless Salafi organization date from 2006, after the death of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), who could be considered ISIS mastermind because of his "brutal and sectarian approach to the understanding of jihad" (Stern and Berger 2015, p. 13).

Despite Bin Laden opposed the extreme violence against Sunni Muslims, after the death of Zarqawi in an air strike, Zawahiri, the second in command of al Qaeda Central, eulogized his commitment and services, and called for the establishment of an Islamic State in Iraq (Ibid. p. 22-26). This plea was heard by a coalition of jihadists from the Mujahideen Advisory Council who a few months later created the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Zarqawi's successor in AQI pledge allegiance to this new organization and his

appointed leader, Abu Omar al Baghdadi (Weiss and Hassan 2015). However, during the following years al Qaeda in Iraq lost the population's support to the Sons of Iraq, also known as the Sunni Awakening Movement, a coalition between different religious and ethnic communities that, in cooperation with the Iraqi Government and with US support, were able to considerably diminish violence in Iraq for some years (Stern and Berger 2015, p. 27-28).

Nevertheless, 2010 would mark a turning point in the fate of Iraq. That year, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq was killed and its successor, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, began to rebuild the organization with loyal allies from Camp Bucca, where he had been detained. Many of them were Ba'athists leaders from the former regime of Saddam Hussein who provided ISI with the military and organizational knowledge that previously lacked (Ibid. p. 33-38). At the same time, Maliki's Shia coalition in the Government was losing support and he turned to Iran to preserve its position in power, but that came at the expense of urging the US forces to leave the country in 2011 (Ibid. p. 27-28). According to Ryan Crocker, US ambassador to Iraq from 2007 to 2009, US "disengagement brought them all back to zero-sum thinking" (Crocker in Stern and Berger 2015, p. 29).

ISIS had escalated its violence and Maliki, fearing that the Sunni militias could overthrow him, prevented Sunni members of the Awakening Movement from obtaining the jobs in the administration and the military that had been promised. Maliki's dictatorial and sectarian rule provoked protests against his regime, which were brutally repressed, and radicalized Sunni Muslims who turned to ISIS (Weiss and Hassan 2015).

Meanwhile in Syria a series of protests and the violent repression of the regime brought the country into a civil war in 2011. Thousands of foreign fighters from the West and from other Arab countries came to Syria to join one of the groups in the battlefield, although the vast majority were Sunni Muslims who joined the opposition. By September 2015, it was estimated that 30,000 foreign fighters had travelled to Syria and Iraq from 104 different countries, more than 6,000 of them from the West (Barrett 2015, p. 12; Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016, p. 3).

In the face of the instability in Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq took advantage of its porous borders and expanded its power by sending operatives to the neighboring



country. After al Qaeda Central disavowed ISI in 2014, due to its savage violence, its presence in Syria increased and the organization adopted the name ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Sham) (Ibid, p. 29-44). ISIS was really successful in his campaign and by the summer of 2014 the terrorist organization consolidated its control of Raqqa in Syria and captured Mosul in Iraq, catching by surprise the United States that had spent billions training and equipping the Iraqi army, which fled in the face of the ISIS attack (Ibid, p. 44-45).

ISIS rapidly straddled large parts of Syria and Iraq and became infamously known worldwide for its violence and its tortures and executions of hostages, especially for the beheadings of Western prisoners that were posted online (Peresin 2015, p. 21). On 29 June 2014, the terrorist organization proclaimed the creation of the Caliphate and changed its name to the Islamic State. After its proclamation, the number of Western foreign fighters considerably increased, especially amongst women who were lured by the idea of living in the Caliphate (Bakker and de Leede 2015, p. 1). ISIS brutal military campaign based on indiscriminate killings and enslavement of all the ethnic and religious groups who were not Sunni, such as the Yazidis, forced the US to take military action in the shape of air strikes in order to prevent an impending genocide and to destroy ISIS (Stern and Berger 2015, p. 46-49).

US formed a coalition with dozens of countries to conduct air strikes against ISIS strongholds that have been partially effective. However, ISIS still counts with the support of thousands of foreign fighters and with the endorsement of the Syrian population, at least the Sunni Muslims, because the terrorist organization has brought security and normality to the lawless zones under its control (Weiss and Hassan 2015). Nevertheless, along with securing the territory, the new local governments have enforced an extremist Salafi interpretation of Sharia law based on hard punishments, tortures and even killings of all those who do not obey the new rules. This attitude may eventually raise the population against ISIS as it has happened before in other dictatorial regimes.

### **2.1.2 Western Women in ISIS**

It is estimated that more than 6,000 Westerners have travelled to Syria or Iraq to become foreign fighters, surpassing the number of western foreign fighters in previous

conflicts. The vast majority have come from just four European countries: UK (760), France (1,800), Belgium (470) and Germany (760) (Barrett 2015, p. 12). Nevertheless, what has attracted the most international attention has been the surprisingly high number of women that have travelled to Syria or Iraq with their husbands, with friends or on their own to join ISIS; especially when the terrorist organization emphatically opposes that the women take part in the fight. At least 550 young women have reportedly gone to Syria and Iraq (Baker and De Leede 2015; Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 8).

There have always been women involved in violent conflicts, as is the case of the Black Widows, a Chechen female suicide squad that committed terrorist attacks in Russia between 2000 and 2005. And there have previously been Western females that have travelled to a conflict zone, such as the Belgian citizen Malika El-Aroud, who moved with her husband to Afghanistan and helped al Qaeda to conduct attacks in Europe (Baker and De Leede 2015; Kollárová 2015).

These examples prove that even though jihadist organizations prohibit women to participate in jihad in order to maintain patriarchal structures, there is evidence that women have assisted in logistics and as suicide bombers because, based on gendered expectations, they can easily pass the security checks and create less suspicion (Pearson 2015)

However, ISIS clearly prohibits women from participating in the battlefield and restricts them to their household and to marital roles. Even then, hundreds of western females have responded to al Baghdadi's call for *hijrah* [migration] and have gone to Syria and Iraq (Peresin 2015, p. 23; Al 2012). ISIS aspires to create a legitimate and functioning state and that is the reason why it's necessary for the terrorist organization to attract loyal women to populate the territories under its control and to breed the future generations (Jacoby 2015, p. 535). So who are these Western women who leave their comfortable lives in the West to join ISIS? What do they have in common?

According to previous studies by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, it is impossible to create just one profile based on age, geography, ethnicity, education, family relations or socioeconomic and religious background of these young women (Bakker and de Leede 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015; Hoyle et al. 2015).

Therefore, the portrayal of these women based on the stereotypes of naïve victims or violent extremists underestimates the different backgrounds of these girls and their motivations to leave their western life and travel to a war-torn territory.

According to the studies, most of these young women are between 16 and 24 years old, although there are cases of younger and older women, some of them with family and children (Peresin and Cervone 2015). As male foreign fighters, most of them come from large metropolitan areas or peripheral suburbs, some from the same neighborhoods, which can indicate pre-existing recruiting networks or that friends have radicalized together as a group before leaving (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016). However, while some young women become from low-income families, others belong to well-off families and are well educated and with a prosperous future ahead (Peresin 2015, p. 22). Along these lines, some of the girls are highly educated and they have obtained excellent grades at school, whereas others have an IQ below average and have difficulties at school, therefore this is something that can affect everybody under determined circumstances (Ibid. p. 23).

Most of these young women are second or third generation Muslim migrants that come from Muslim families that practice moderate Islam, yet some of them belong to conservative families or have converted to Islam during their adolescence or adulthood (Ibid. p. 22). Therefore, when these women radicalize, they break with their families' traditions and interpretation of Islam. Most of them dress conservatively, wearing a *niqab*, a veil that covers the face, and consider that the only right path in Islam is through Salafism (Bakker and de Leede 2015). It must be noted that Salafism is a fundamentalist approach to Islam based on the literal interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah, and that supports the implementation of the Sharia law. However, there are three different approaches to Salafism and only jihadism supports violence, which indicates that fundamentalism, as in other religions, can be peaceful (Pearson 2015). Therefore, these Muslim women embrace the jihadist branch of Salafism and think that, in order to follow the right path of Islam, they have to travel to Syria to support in the creation of the so-called Caliphate.

Some of these Western women travel with their husbands or family, as is the case of 20 Bosnian women who went to Syria with their husbands or in order to join them; yet others make the journey on their own or with friends. European women have benefited

from the possibility to reach Syria through Turkey since European citizens do not need a visa to travel to the country and, once there, they just go to the border and cross it. In case they face any difficulties along the way, ISIS provides them with operational and logistic support such as contact persons and lawyers (Peresin 2015, p. 26). Nowadays, after the high number of foreign fighters that have gone to Syria through Turkey, member states security agencies have reinforced their surveillance in order to prevent more people to go. Some have been arrested at the airports or even before, as is the case of a 22-year-old convert woman in Spain who was arrested at Madrid airport when she was about to take a flight to Turkey, but there is still an important number of women who manage to reach Syria (El País 2015).

### **Women's Role in ISIS**

ISIS ambition to establish a functional state wouldn't be possible without the presence of women to create households and bring up the next generation of jihadists (Peresin and Cervone 2015). Consequently, when the leader of ISIS proclaimed the so-called Caliphate in the summer of 2014, he called for women to make *hijrah* and travel to Syria and Iraq to help build the so-called Caliphate. At least 550 Europeans have heard his call and have left their home countries in Europe (Baker and De Leede 2015; Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 8).

There is evidence that some Western women, who have joined ISIS or intend to do so, deploy violent narrative in the social media and some even voice their willingness to become fighters in Syria. However, regardless of what their intentions are before travelling to Syria and Iraq; once they settle in, their main role is to be a wife and a mother (Peresin 2015). Islamic principles argue that women and men support each other and thereby women's role is complementary and cooperative with the men's role, instead of equal and competitive. A fundamentalist interpretation of this principle leads to gender segregation and role division; positioning women within family and home and men as breadwinners and fighters (Zakaria 2015; Pearson 2015). ISIS has established gender segregation in every sphere of women's life and it has made clear what Western female Muslims can expect to do when they arrive.

In two documents, one of the Al-Khansaa brigade and the other by a woman called Al, ISIS explains that women's main responsibility is to support their husbands and raise

their children in the path of jihad by encouraging their love ones to join the fight (Winter 2015; Al 2012). Additionally, women should be educated in Islam and trained in self-defense to be able to instruct their children in both fields. Certain women are allowed to leave their homes to serve society as doctors or teachers, and a reduced number are reportedly trained to be part of the Al-Khansaa or the Umm Al-Rayan brigades who are in charge of policing women's compliance of Sharia law and disciplining those who don't follow the guidelines by using brutal methods (Jacoby 2015, p. 535-536; Peresin 2015, p. 31; Winter 2015; Al 2012). However, not all of them can expect to have these types of jobs because they don't know the local language. The only additional role to be a good mother and wife is to become a recruiter of other Western foreign fighters and female companions in the social media.

Life in the so-called Caliphate is not as wonderful as Western women think before leaving their countries, and as it is portray in social media. Women cannot leave the house without a male escort, hairdressers are forbidden, drinking, smoking and gambling are not allowed and all businesses have to close during prayers (Weiss and Hassan 2015, p. 217-218). Moving around without being married is practically impossible and unmarried women have to reside in all-female hostels that they cannot abandon without a chaperone. Consequently, most Western female Muslims are advised to arrange a marriage upon arrival in order to make life easier when they reach Syria or Iraq, and they are also encouraged to accept the death of their husbands as an honor (Peresin 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 16).

Western women receive a monthly allowance and free housing when they come to the so-called Caliphate and they obtain extra money for each child they have, promoting pregnancies and deliveries in really bad conditions. ISIS pays Westerners and foreign fighters with the hidden intention of preventing them from leaving the territory. However, this situation is unsustainable in the long term and has unleashed resentment within the local communities (Peresin 2015, p. 29).

Marital life is not easy either, a former member of the Al-Khansaa brigade confirmed in an interview on CNN that some Western women suffer sexual violence at the hands of their husbands (Ibid. p. 28). In addition, Western females become witnesses and accomplices of the savage ISIS campaign of sexual enslavement and mass rape of enemy women, of the systematic beheadings of hostages and enemies, and of other

customary brutalities of war (Binetti 2015). When they become widows, they are supposed to be remarried again after the period of mourning and despite some women praise to be treated perfectly while they are widows, others claim to be abandoned and forgotten (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 39; Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 24)

Leaving ISIS has been harder than joining the terrorist group since all the Western women had to hand over their western passports upon arrival. In addition, those willing to leave will be deterred and threaten by ISIS members and will be discouraged by the probability of being arrested and prosecuted when they return to their home country (Peresin and Cervone 2015, p. 496; Zakaria 2015). According to some families, some young women have become disappointed and disillusioned and claim to have made the biggest mistake of their life. However, others have rejected their families' help assuring that they are happier than ever in the so-called Caliphate (Peresin 2015).

### **2.1.3 Female Muslims in Europe**

In the past years there has been an increase of racially motivated crimes in Europe that have been reinforced by an anti-migrant rhetoric in the media and in the political arena, triggered to some extent by the economic crisis in Europe (Nwabuzo 2014). There are different ethnic and religious groups suffering from racial discrimination and violence around Europe, yet Muslims are the ones facing a major threat, especially after the jihadist terrorist attacks in France and Belgium in 2015 and early 2016 (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France 2016). In France, social cohesion has been damaged by the fear of suffering other terrorist attacks, the exploitation of this fear for political purposes, and the impact of this situation on the Muslims citizens who are being held directly or indirectly accountable for it (Ibid. p. 8). This climate of anxiety and discrimination against Muslims is also widely spread in Europe to a greater or lesser extent and it is based in a political discourse that defends a "lack of compatibility between some expressions of Islam with 'European values', i.e. fundamental rights, the rule of law and women's rights in particular" (Seta 2016, p. 3).

The Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) considers Islamophobia as:

*A dual definition that includes, the trivialization and accumulation of discourses and prejudices that demonize Islam and Muslims [and] all acts of*

*rejection, discrimination or violence against institutions or individuals on the basis of their real or perceived belonging to the Muslim faith.*

(Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France 2016, p. 16).

Female Muslims in Europe suffer Islamophobic acts in different areas of their life because of their religion, ethnic origin and gender, which can result into low self-esteem, isolation, exclusion, and in some cases into radicalization (Seta 2016, p. 11). Muslim women are victims of gender inequality as other women, but they face other inequalities based on ethnicity and perceived religion as well. Consequently, they account for 75% of the victims of Islamophobic acts in France (Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France, 2016, p. 24). However, between 53% and 98% of these women, depending on the European state of residence, did not fill a complaint at the police station (Seta 2016, p. 11). In France, only 20% of the victims of Islamophobia reported it, mainly because there is a “lack of an institutional acknowledgement of Islamophobia, [which] contributes indirectly to the trivialization and normalization of this racism” (Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France, 2016, p. 18-19).

According to a survey of CCIF, only 26% of French citizens admitted having a positive opinion about Islam and close to half of the interviewees declared Islamic practices to be a barrier for the unity in France. Muslim women are perceived even worse since 79% of French citizens consider the veil to be an obstacle for living cordially in France (Ibid. p. 18-24). The same happens in other countries such as the UK, where a Gallup research shows that 30% of the participants consider the hijab a threat, although 41% associated it with confidence and 37% thought it was an enrichment of European culture (Seta 2016, p. 15). The discourse around the use of the female dress code in the public sphere has reinforced the exclusion of Muslim women who are depicted as oppressed victims instead of as agents, maintaining in this way the patriarchal views. For instance, 64% of Swedish citizens consider Muslim women to be oppressed (Seta 2016, p. 13-15).

Discrimination based on religion, gender, ethnicity or a combination of all is also visible in the labor market. According to a report of the European Network Against Racism (Seta 2016), a research in France shows that a woman perceived to be Muslim because of the name has 2.5 times less chance to obtain a job interview than other women, and when they are wearing a headscarf, they have to send an average of 71%

more applications. In a research in the UK the results are similar; a Muslim woman has to send 74% more applications than a white woman to be accepted in a job. In Belgium or Italy the likelihood of receiving an affirmative answer is 50% less if the woman's name is Arabic. And in the Netherlands, a survey showed that only 11% of Afghani-Dutch Muslim women suffer discrimination, whereas a 73% did if they were wearing a headscarf (Ibid. p. 17-18). Results around Europe show that Muslim women suffer from discrimination based on ethnicity and religion, and that the chance to get a job is even harder if the women wear the Islamic veil, even if it is a hijab. EU legislations for employment equality guarantees a framework that prohibits any kind of direct or indirect discrimination, harassment or violence on the grounds of religion or race, however these episodes prevail.

Racist violence happens mainly offline, however online hate speech is increasing in social media such as Facebook or Twitter, especially against those Muslims that can be perceived as fundamentalist or ISIS supporters (Ibid. p. 27). Western countries and social media have double standards when it comes to suspending people because of the use of hate speech. While the accounts of ISIS supporters are constantly deleted due to hate speech and terrorism exaltation, it is easy to find verbal abuse and hate speech against female Muslims who support ISIS and whose accounts have been deleted.

Suffering from discrimination in your own home country can have a detrimental effect for young female Muslims who face identity problems and who can become radicalized with narratives that highlight Islamophobia in Europe. However, it cannot be assumed that female Muslims' violent radicalization happens because of the discrimination that they suffer in their countries, since only a small number of Muslim women have joined ISIS.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework of Violent Radicalization**

In this section of the literature review the theoretical framework will be explained. This study is anchored on two main theories of violent radicalization that complement each other. The main one is framing theory, which belongs to the Social Movement Theory (SMT), and has been postulated by scholars such as Quintan Wiktorowicz. The second theory is anchored in the French sociological tradition, to which Gilles Kepel, Farhad Khosrokhavar, Olivier Roy and Akil N. Awan belong. In addition, this paper is based



on the study “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon” of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, where several push and pull factors are identified (Saltman and Smith 2015).

There is little consensus among scholars and governments about the definition of radicalization, as well as of other concepts such as terrorism or extremism. These concepts are sometimes conflated, misleading the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon of violent radicalization (Sedgwick 2010, p. 483–484). Acknowledging these differences, this research employs the concept of ‘Radicalization into Violent Extremism’ (RVE) postulated by Randy Borum (2011). This concept refers to the progressive adoption of beliefs that justify and compel violence, as well as the process undergone from thinking to action (Ibid. p. 8). The author explains that having radical ideas does not imply supporting the use of violence and accepting violence and terrorism does not mean having deep radical beliefs. Therefore, adopting extremist ideas that justify violence is a radicalization process, but not the only path to terrorism (Ibid. p. 8).

This research focuses on the violent radicalization process of Western female Muslims that have joined ISIS, using the term ‘violent radicalization’ as synonym of Borum’s concept ‘Radicalization into Violent Extremism’ (Ibid.). Violent radicalization is understood as a dynamic process, the product of several decisions and factors that push an individual towards the acceptance of determined beliefs and the commitment to violence over time. This pathway and the mechanisms that push someone to commit to violence can be different for each person. Thus, it is difficult to find one single theoretical model that explains this process and the best approach is to combine several theories to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of violent radicalism (Ibid. p. 15).

### **2.2.1 Social Movement Theory and Framing Theory**

Social Movement Theories can be useful to understand violent radicalization because they conceive it as a group process, focusing on broader dynamics and not on socio-demographic variables (Borum 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008). Among the different approaches to Social Movement Theory, Framing Theory provides a coherent framework for this research by combining structural, meso- and individual levels of

analysis (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008). The key principle of Framing Theory is that reality is a social construction where various frames, understood as values and beliefs, compete to establish themselves as the interpretation of this socially constructed reality. Therefore, the success of a social movement resides in his ability to create and disseminate coherent and convincing frames to attract potential recruits. When an individual's values, beliefs and interest are congruent, scholars refer to this process as 'frame alignment' (Borum 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 2008).

*Framing Theory explains violent radicalization through the distinct constructed reality, shared by members of violent groups – a constructed reality or world view, which frames problems as not just misfortunes, but injustices, attributes responsibility for these “injustices”, and constructs an argument for the efficacy and/or moral justification of using violence against civilians to right the perceive wrong.*

(Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008, p. 7)

Thus, framing theory is useful to explain how ISIS has been able to attract thousands of people by creating a framed narrative, or propaganda, that justifies attacking its enemies, especially the West. In addition, its strong propaganda machinery and active recruitment through social media can also be explained by Quintan Wiktorowicz model of social violent radicalization, where the process is done socially within a small group of people (Ibid.). Social media have facilitated the radicalization among users and despite seeming to be an individual process; these people maintain direct or indirect communications through their postings, making this radicalization a social process.

Wiktorowicz has established a four-stage model of violent radicalization, which concurs with empirical researches about Western Islamist movements. (Wiktorowicz in Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008, p.7) First, the individual goes through a process of cognitive opening, showing openness to a new worldview. In this phase the discussions are focused on mainstream themes such as Muslims discrimination or Arab conflicts. Secondly, the individual chooses the path of religion to find meaning and understanding, entering into the phase of religious seeking where the individual is progressively presented with the violent narrative. Thirdly, the individual aligns its ideas, beliefs and interests with the social movement, which is referred as frame

alignment. Finally, once the individual shares the same frames, he goes through a process of socialization where he moves from thinking to action and actively join the group (Borum 2011, p.18-19; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 2008).

Therefore, violent radicalization is understood as a social process that results from the interaction with a radical group that supports violence. According to Neumman and Rogers, social bonding within a small group or with peers can ease the adoption of violent radical views (Neumman and Rogers in Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 803). Young women are befriended online by other women or in some cases men, and are treated with kind words and affection to create that bond (Binetti 2015).

However, Framing Theory has too little focus on the individual level of analysis to explain why only a minority of all those exposed to the same frames align with the movement, in this case ISIS (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008). The coherence of ISIS's narrative is not sufficient to account for the huge number of foreign fighters and *muhajirat*, women that have migrated to Syria and Iraq; and the role of individual agency must be taken also into account (Awan 2015, p. 59)

### **2.2.2 Dual Cultural Alterity**

In order to shed light on why only some people are lured by ISIS's narrative, this research relies on the French sociology tradition and the concept of *dual cultural alterity* introduced by Akil N. Awan (Awan 2015).

Gilles Kepel, Olivier Roy and Farhad Khosrokhavar, scholars in French sociological, distance themselves from classical socio-demographic conditions and contribute to explain why violent radicalization attracts both Europeans from lower social strata and well-off members of society (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 799-800).

Their main tenet is that the conditions of modernity, individualization and value relativism in Western countries draw some individuals into a search for identity, meaning, and community belonging (Ibid. p. 799). This is especially true in the case of second or third generation Muslims in Europe who have been raised in Western values and have embraced its lifestyle to the extent of no longer feeling part of their parents' culture and Islamic tradition. At the same time, however, they can experience

discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantages based on their religion, ethnicity and gender, especially in the case of women (Roy 2007, p. 52-53; Khosrokhavar 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 800). Wiktorowicz also shares this conceptualization of ‘grievances’, considering them a precursor of radicalization; which shows a connection between these two theories (Pearson 2015).

Therefore, European female Muslims can experience a double sense of non-belonging, of otherness, and of alienation both from their parents’ culture and the mainstream Western culture, that Akil Awan labels ‘*dual cultural alterity*’ (Awan 2015, p. 62) Muslim women constantly renegotiate a variety of identities imposed on them by their families and communities, and the wider society (Person 2015, p. 14). Their inability or unwillingness to fulfill the expectations of these groups and vice versa, generates a feeling of uprooting and disenchantment that leads them to search for identity, meaning and community belonging. In this process, some resort to religion as their principal anchor of identity and they can encounter ISIS narrative as a solution. This seems to be the only psychological trait commonly shared by Western Muslims who joined ISIS (Awan 2015, p. 62-63; Roy 2015).

According to Roy and Khosrokhavar, the two main approaches of migrant integration, which are the British multiculturalism, where Muslims are defined by their ethno-cultural identities, and the French ‘*assimilationnisme*’, where Muslims are supposed to be part of society without the interference of any community, have failed because both consider religion to be embedded in culture, instead of considering it as a mere faith (Roy 2007, p. 56; Khosrokhavar 2008). Nevertheless, Roy does not consider the poor integration to be the reason why Western Muslims travel to Syria, but it prompts receptiveness in lost Muslims who are reconstructing their identity, and is the excuse used by ISIS to justify violence against the West (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 800).

### **2.2.3 Framing *Hijrah***

After explaining how the violent radicalization process develops, and why only some people are lured by ISIS narrative, this paper focuses on which are the frames used by ISIS to attract women to Syria and Iraq. This part of the literature review uses the study “‘Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon” of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue as a cornerstone to identify women’s reasons to do *hijrah*, migration,

to join ISIS. They differentiate between ‘push factors’, which are the reasons why Western women see their own home countries as a hostile enemy, and ‘pull factors’, which are those aspects that attract them from the Caliphate. In addition, other articles and studies are included to have a wider spectrum of motives. These ‘reasons’ are framed narratives disseminated by ISIS recruiters and embraced by Western women who have become radicalized and, some of whom have already made the journey to the so-called Caliphate.

Some of ISIS frames are based on pre-existing narratives widely supported by the Muslim community; the difference is that the terrorist group legitimizes the use of violence to change the world and to support their fundamentalist views (Jacoby 2015). ISIS propaganda is produced in detail and the terrorist organization has increased its female-tailored narrative by, for example, including them in the production and dissemination of the frames, as recruiters, and even allowing them to write a section called ‘to our sisters’ in the official ISIS magazine, *Dabiq* (Saltman and Smith 2015). ISIS’s use of social media is extremely effective in helping people redefine their identity and adopt a binary narrative of ‘us versus them’, common in the Salafist discourse, where all those who do not support ISIS are considered the enemy. Their discourse is also characterized by the use of belligerent language. The lack of neutral sources in Syria has benefited ISIS in the depiction of the so-called ‘Caliphate’ as an ideal place to live. Western women already living in Syria or Iraq post pictures showing how good their lives are there, and write blogs about it (Peresin and Cervone 2015).

## **Push Factors**

### Self-identity in Europe

It is widely agreed in the academic field that young people experience an identity formation during their adolescence and early adulthood, and in the case of European Muslim women the process can be more difficult since they are exposed to a variety of identities that are imposed to them by the mainstream society, the patriarchal norms of Muslim communities and the cultural traditions of their families (Pearson 2015, p. 14). The different values and interpretations of female roles could lead Muslim women to experience a process of ‘*dual cultural alterity*’, a sense of non-belonging to both the mainstream Western culture and the culture of their parents, that makes them more

vulnerable to extremist narratives as an alternative to the previous ones (Awan 2015). The lack of belonging to neither of the communities and the search for a new identity has led some of the women to find that alternative in the extremist narrative of Salafism.

ISIS ideology has become this third path that offers them a new identity clearly defined, a sense of belonging to a global cause, the *Ummah*, and a feeling of acceptance within the new group that they could previously lack because of discrimination (Peresin 2015, p. 25). ISIS is aware of the tribulations that some Muslims may face and encourage them to make *hijrah* because as one sister explains in *Dabiq* magazine, “getting used to seeing kufr [infidel] and shirk without changing it could lead to death of the heart, to the point that the person does not recognize Islam and its people” (Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah 2015, p. 32-37). ISIS takes advantage of the vulnerability and the confronting identities that European Muslim women are expected to adopt, and it attributes these feelings to the fact of living in a country with non-believers morally corrupted where the principles of Islam are not respected. Consequently, ISIS claims that the only way Muslims can profess their faith is by leaving the land of “infidels”.

#### Discrimination in Europe

In correlation with the feelings of non-belonging based on identity alienation, Muslims immigrants have suffered an increase of xenophobia and discrimination, especially after the economic crisis and the several terrorist attacks occurred in Europe. Discrimination has fed the pre-existing feelings of cultural and social isolation and it has boosted the aspirations of some Muslims to travel to Syria, where they perceive that they can live their faith without being discriminated (Peresin and Cervone 2015, p. 500). Consequently, ISIS and jihadist Salafism have taken advantage of the wrongdoings of European societies to blame them for all the situations of exclusion, without considering the possibility of personal failing of integration (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 800).

Furthermore, Muslim women are more vulnerable to discrimination because they experience it based on their ethnicity and religion, as well as on their gender, accounting for 74% of the victims of discrimination (Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France, 2016). As previously explained, the use of the veil as a symbol of faith has caused them even more discrimination in their jobs and in the public sphere where they have suffered verbal and physical violence (Seta 2016, p. 17-18). The restrictions on conservative

dressing code, such as the full veil, make them feel unable to express their faith and themselves in their own country, fostering the alienation from Western society.

### The *Ummah* under attack

The concept of *Ummah* is a constructed imaginary that comprises all the Muslim community around the world, eliminating identities based on culture, ethnicity or nationalism and adopting a meta-identity based on the faith; creating in this way a global community of belief (Saltman and Smith 2015).

Jihadist narrative claims that the *Ummah* is currently being attacked worldwide by portraying the contemporary conflicts as part of a wider historical global attack against Islam. ISIS and its supporters employ historical terms such as ‘Zionist’ or ‘Cruzader’ to refer to Israel and Western countries and release violent videos and photos of women and children to reinforce the narrative and create a coherent and consistent discourse that can be maintained over time. The imaginary of the *Ummah* is one of the main cornerstones of ISIS propaganda since it justifies the extremist interpretation of global conflicts and promotes the violent radicalization and polarization of society (Awan 2015, p. 57-69; Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 11). Therefore, the so-called Islamic State is depicted as a safe haven where Muslims can freely live their faith, without suffering discrimination based on their ethnicity or religion.

According to some studies, Muslim suffering and the complicity that is believed to exist among Western powers to perpetuate these conflicts are two major keystones in the decision of Western female Muslims to leave the West and join ISIS, in order to help those in need (Hoyle et al. 2015).

### **Pull factors**

#### Sisterhood belonging

The promotion of the female community that women have created in the so-called Caliphate is another major keystone in ISIS propaganda. As Akil Awan explains, some people, especially women from minority ethnicities and religions, can experience a *dual cultural alterity*, a double sense of otherness and lack of belonging to the society or their families’ traditions that make them more vulnerable to extremist narratives that

offer them a feeling of belonging, unity and community in ISIS (Awan 2015, p. 63; Saltman and Smith 2015).

Some European Muslim women have created very strong relationships with others who have already joined ISIS or have the intention to do so, and in some cases this violent radicalization process occurs in a group. According to Pearson, group dynamics can intensify radicalization processes and in the real world, as in the Internet, women have created strong bonds among them and a community of sisters where ISIS's ideology is reinforced and supported (Pearson 2015).

European Muslim women are more encouraged to take the decision of abandoning their families in the West because they know that there are true friends waiting for them when they make *hijrah* to Syria. They have such a strong relationship with them that they become like sisters and in the process of violent radicalization, they reject other friendships with Westerners because are considered fake and frivolous (Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 15).

#### Religious duty and state building

After the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate, ISIS claimed that it was incumbent on all Muslims to make *hijrah* to help defend and restore the 'state of Allah' (Awan 2015, p.59). Consequently, hundreds of Western women, both married and unmarried, decided to travel to Syria believing that making *hijrah* was a religious duty and therefore crucial to secure their place in heaven in the afterlife (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 13). Thus, following ISIS' dichotomous thinking, both men and women have no option but to travel to Syria if they have the capacity to do so, in order to be considered good Muslims in the face of Allah.

The binary discourse employed in ISIS propaganda makes it easier for sympathizers to radicalize and embrace its principles. As an example, Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, author of the articles addressed to women in the official ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*, depicts the Caliphate as a green land of light and life and the rest of the world as a place full of darkness and death (Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah 2015). Therefore, radicalized European Muslim women believe that the only way of being a good Muslim and earning a place in Paradise is by travelling to the so-called Caliphate.



Travelling to the purported Caliphate is not only a religious duty, but it also offers Muslims the possibility of living their faith under a strict interpretation of the Sharia law, which is not allowed in European countries where democratic values prevail (Peresin 2015, p. 24). The possibility of living in an Islamic state and taking part in the state building process has attracted many people, especially those who have gone through a process of identity search and community engagement, and that have subscribed to the extremist narratives of ISIS. The so-called Caliphate offers them a community that accepts them and a purpose in life where their identity and job-role are clearly defined.

Western women already living in the territory try to lure others by sharing their personal life experiences in the purported Caliphate through their social media, offering a positive and attractive depiction of the life under ISIS' rule (Ibid.). These views are distorted and life in the Syria is not as perfect as they portray, however many seem to believe that life is better there and decide to migrate.

#### Financial Security

According to Barbara F. Walter, women may join ISIS in order to obtain the financial security that may be difficult to have in Europe. The monthly salary they receive and the incentives for having children could be an important factor to migrate to Syria and marry a foreign fighter, because it guarantees them that they will be well taken care of (Walter 2015). After the economic crisis, many people have experienced financial insecurity because of their economic situation, and this is especially true in Western female Muslims who experience discrimination and have fewer chances to obtain a job than white Christian people. According to a survey of Muslim women, the more anxious they were about their economic future, the more likely they would support religious fundamentalism (Walter 2015). Therefore, the economic security offered by a marriage in the so-called Caliphate could be an option for those who fear that marriage in the West will not offer them better economic prospects.

#### Marriage

Arranged marriage is a rooted tradition in Islam and it symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Consequently, some women decide to go to Syria to get

married, not because of the financial security it may offer, but in order to escape from their parental control and to start a new life on their own (Bakker and de Leede 2015; Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 16). Getting married with a jihadist is considered by ISIS supporters as a blessing and is glorified in the social media with pictures of lions and lioness, symbolizing strength and support (Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 16). For Western female Muslims who have gone through a violent radicalization process and praise jihadists and their bravery fighting for the Caliphate, getting married to one of them is an honor and a privilege.

The marriage with a jihadist also includes the possibility of becoming a widow at a young age, however, ISIS recruiters encourage women to embrace the martyrdom of their husbands as a privilege since it will guarantee both of them a better place in heaven (Ibid. p. 16). Therefore, martyrdom gives an added value to getting married, which is what is expected from a devout Muslim woman according to the extremist narratives of ISIS.

Marriage is one of the pillars of ISIS' state-building ambitions because it perpetuates the traditional social forms and their supporters use marriage to promote the procreation and the breeding of children as future muhajideen (fighters). Consequently, ISIS recruiters advise women to arrange their marriage before they travel to Syria because it will make their lives easier since unmarried women have more restrictions (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 13; Peresin 2015, p. 29; Saltman and Smith 2015, p. 16). Thus, women's main role in the purported Caliphate is to be mothers and some women may be lured by this opportunity of motherhood.

### Adventure

Another motive that women have to make *hijrah* is the adventurous and heroic experience that they believe ISIS offers them. Despite not being allowed to fight or take part in the battlefield, some women are drawn by the allure of being part of an organization that claims to be changing the world. They believe that joining ISIS will grant them empowerment and exciting and meaningful lives (Peresin 2015). However, they are not aware that the idealized depiction of the life in the so-called Caliphate is completely biased and some may gradually become disenchanted over time.

Western Muslim women have adhered to these frames to a great extent and they use them to explain why they made *hijrah* and joined ISIS. However, there are also some discrepancies and those able to contact their families or even escape, claim to have made the biggest mistake of their lives (Ibid.).

### **3 Methodological Framework**

This research aims at investigating “*Why European women decide to leave their home countries and move to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS?*” The unprecedented high number of European and Western females that have travelled to join ISIS, a terrorist group, has become a new phenomenon that has drawn the attention of scholars who has previously focused on men when investigating violent radicalization and foreign fighters. Thus, this particular field of study has until recently been under-researched and the main goal of this thesis is to expand upon the existing studies that focus on the paradox of Western female Muslims’ migration to join ISIS by proposing a consistent theoretical framework and contributing to the analysis of the social media profiles of some ISIS members.

The study is anchored in the theory of science termed social constructivism, which states that reality is socially constructed and is based on the interpretation of the individuals. The theories employed in this research are delimited within constructivism and further substantiate that Western female Muslims interpret reality in a way in which travelling to Syria to join ISIS is not only accepted but utterly desired. Similarly, the methodology used in this research is bounded within the framework of social constructivism.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

In order to answer the above-mentioned thesis statement, this research aims at analyzing a small sample of European Muslim women who have travelled to Syria to join ISIS. The theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter is the backbone of the analysis and it has been used in the definition of three hypotheses, which are going to be used to create a coherent analytical strategy. Consequently, the results from the analysis that is explained in this chapter will be utilized to shed light on this new phenomenon, and on the role that the social media as a radicalization tool, which will be explained in the discussion chapter.

The analysis examines the motives that women have to join ISIS and travel to Syria to live in the so-called Caliphate, as well as the relationships between them in order to understand the radicalization process. The analysis will be focused on the social media

accounts of these women, but it will also take into consideration several articles about women who have returned or were stopped before leaving. The reason why this research uses their posts in the social media is based on their refusal to give interviews to journalists or researchers, which makes more complicated to understand the phenomenon.

To analyze this case, the research employs the methodology termed mixed methods, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to capitalize the strengths in data-collection and data-analysis of each method and offset their weaknesses (Bryman 2012, p. 628). Thus, the qualitative study intends to provide a broader understanding of the context where the results of the quantitative study have been obtained (Ibid. p. 654).

Consequently, the research combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis in order to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278). The quantitative content analysis systematically quantifies data while the qualitative approach offers a subjective interpretation of that content that has been classified and coded according to previously defined themes and categories (Ibid. p. 1278). Thus, this analysis establishes several categories in order to identify and interpret the patterns and themes in the posts, as well as the language used by the women.

The quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the posts is used to confirm or reject the three hypotheses that have been deduced from the theoretical framework explained in the previous chapter.

The concepts and precepts from the theoretical framework have been operationalized to produce three hypotheses that help answering the question posed in the research. All the hypotheses depart from the assumption that the women who travel to Syria have experienced feelings of non-belonging that led them to reshape their identity; and, in the process of doing so, they became radicalized as is posited by authors such as Roy, Kepel, Khosrokhavar and Awan. However, this research does not aim at analyzing how the feeling of non-belonging and the identity search work since it would require a psychological approach and that would deviate the research from its original intention. Therefore, this paper embraces the theory and precepts of these authors, which have

been underpinned by qualitative interviews with small samples of individuals (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 799).

**Hypothesis 1: European female Muslims make *hijrah* because they have perceived grievances against Europe**

The hypothesis one is based on the Framing Theory posited by Wiktorowicz and explained by Dalgaard-Nielsen (2008) and the ‘push factors’ identified by Saltman and Smith (2015). These perceived grievances are the frames disseminated by ISIS that identify and justify the reasons why the home countries are considered hostile.

To examine hypothesis number one, the study pays attention to the categories related to women’s grievances such as the feeling of non-belonging, discrimination or the perceived persecution of the Muslim community, in other words, the posts that mention the negative perceptions about the West that may have driven European women to leave their home countries. Through a quantitative and qualitative approach, this research identifies if there is a salient reason among the different grievances and how ISIS frames are embraced and used by European Muslim women in their social media.

**Hypothesis 2: European female Muslims make *hijrah* because they believe it is a religious duty and ISIS offers them community belonging, security and a purpose in life.**

Hypothesis two is also based on the Framing Theory, but in this case it refers to the ‘pull factors’, a concept used by Saltman and Smith (2015).

As in the previous hypothesis, in order to confirm or reject hypothesis two the content analysis will examine which are the reasons that seduced them to join the so-called Caliphate. Thus, it includes motives such as the religious duty, the state building ambitions, marriage, the feeling of sisterhood belonging, the financial security or the adventure. Combining the quantitative and qualitative approach of the content analysis, this research identifies if there are salient reasons and examines how women portray the purported Caliphate, aligning their frames about it with ISIS propaganda.

### **Hypothesis 3: Group radicalization in the social media fosters European women's migration to the so-called Caliphate**

Hypothesis three is based on both the Social Movement Theory and the Framing Theory since it departs from the assumption that the radicalization process in the social media through group or peer-to-peer interaction encourages and facilitates the violent radicalization of these women and the migration to the so-called Caliphate.

To confirm or reject the hypothesis number three the communications between these women and other people, as well as the content and the language used in the posts are identified and examined. This research pays special attention to the posts where the women are actively recruiting someone else or giving important information about how to migrate. Shedding light into the communication dynamics is important because some of them are acting as recruiters of other women who are considering the option of making *hijrah*. Several news articles about women who made *hijrah* and have returned, or who were stopped before doing so by their family further back the results of the analysis in relation to the hypothesis number three. These interviews contain an important insight on the secret relations and contacts between these women and their recruiters, as well as an explanation of how their process of violent radicalization happened. Due to the small sample of cases and the impossibility to analyze their interviews with the same analytical strategy, this information is only used to back the results obtained from the analysis.

These three hypotheses have been deduced from the theory and, in combination, they give a coherent and holistic answer to the research question, “*Why European women decide to leave their home countries and move to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS?*” The first two hypotheses aim at understanding the motives why women make *hijrah*, whereas the hypothesis three aims at explaining the role of the social media, which is a cornerstone in the violent radicalization process of these women, especially of young girls or converts. The hypothesis three is necessary in order to understand the broad picture of radicalization and how the group or peer-to-peer pressure can affect the decision to make *hijrah*.

## 3.2 Method

As previously mentioned, the method employed in the research is the quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Each of the approaches will offer a different perspective that combined will enable to have a holistic image of the motives that European Muslim women had to join ISIS. It is necessary to understand these motives and reasons in order to be able to create an efficient counter-narrative. Likewise, is necessary to examine the role of the social media since it is an efficient tool for violent radicalization, and therefore for countering it.

### 3.2.1 Data collection

The data collection process is divided into three different phases due to the difficulty of finding information directly on the social media after Twitter shut down more than 125,000 jihadists' accounts (Broomfield 2016) and other platforms followed suit. Consequently, this research examines different platforms such as newspapers, online articles, studies, and the social media in order to get as much information and posts as possible. The period of investigation goes from January 2012 to the end of May 2016 in order to cover the period of occurrence of the phenomenon widely.

The first phase consists in a systematic search in the selected newspapers of the keywords 'Islamic State', 'État Islamique' in French, in order to identify articles about European females who have left their home country to join ISIS. Considering that most of the women come from the United Kingdom, France and Belgium, the selected newspapers are the most prominent ones in each country: The Guardian (UK), Le Monde (France) and Le Soir (Belgium). In this phase, the names, usernames and other relevant information of these women is collected, as well as all their social media posts, which are the unit of analysis of this research.

Only original content produced by these women in the form of text, original photos or non-original photos with comments are used in the analysis. This includes their statements and those religious passages that contain personal comments. In reference to the non-original photos, shared or uploaded ones are not taken into account, unless they have a comment from the woman posting them. Furthermore, only complete quotes or screenshots of the posts have been retrieved from the newspaper articles to guarantee



that there are not taken out of context. Posts that are not literally transcribed have not been used as a unit of analysis. In the case of Twitter, the posts that are a continuation of previous ones have been considered all together as just one post since the only reason why they are separated is the 140 characters restriction in this social media.

Once that information is collected, the second phase that consists in searching for more posts through the web by typing the women's names and usernames in the search engine. Due to the media shut down, is really difficult to find any posts on Tumblr, Ask.fm or Twitter. Therefore, previous studies about the same topic will be examined in order to collect more posts and quotes for the analysis. As in the previous phase, only literal quotes or screenshots will be taken into consideration.

Finally, on the third phase the snowfall sampling technique has been employed in the social media in order to finding these women by association with others. It is an effective technique to identify a small group among the large amount of accounts, and it is helpful to find the new profiles of these women, who normally create new ones and try to recover their followers and friends. However, it must be pointed out that the presence of these women on the social media has largely reduced because of the continuous deletion of their accounts, the fact that they live in a war-torn territory where internet connection fails and, especially, because ISIS has banned the use of Wi-Fi or internet connection at home for security reasons (Aljazeera 2015).

By taking this approach, the research has collected a total of 586 posts from the different social media. As previously mentioned, some Twitter posts have been combined when they are the continuation of a previous one. Therefore, the analysis will consist on the examination of 586 units of analysis.

In addition, several cases of girls that have returned from Syria or Iraq, or that had been about to migrate before their family stopped them have been selected. They consist in a French documentary "Cycle: young people facing radical Islam" (Engrenage: Les jeunes face a l'Islam radical) (France 5 2015) and several newspaper articles about a Belgian girl who was stopped by the family and two French women that returned from ISIS (Burke 2015; Madame Figaro and AFP; Willsher 2016). This content will be used in order to confirm or reject hypothesis three/ but it will not be analyzed in depth. The main reason for utilizing this content is that it provides a different insight that is not

possible to have from the women’s social media posts because it reinforces the argument that female women go through a process of violent radicalization in the social media.

### 3.2.2 Analytical Strategy

The method termed content analysis essentially consists on the categorization of the phenomenon under research in order to confirm or reject the proposed hypotheses. To conduct the analysis, both quantitatively and qualitatively, a coding schedule and coding manual have been created to bring reliability and validity to the research. Each of the collected posts, both images and texts, conform a unit of analysis that will be coded according to the different variables and categories identified after conducting a beta-test with a small sample of posts.

**Figure 1 Coding Schedule**

Variable	Question	Categories
Name	What’s the name or nickname of the author of the post?	(1) Umm Ubaydah (2) Aqsa Mahmood (3) Khadijah Dare (4) Sally Jones (5) Lena Mamoun Abdel Gabir (6) Umm Khattab (7) Amira Abase (8) Shamima Begum (9) Zawjatu Abou Mujahid (10) Zahra Halane (11) Salma Halane (12) Umm Muthanna

		<p>(13) Umm Irhab</p> <p>(14) Umm Usama</p> <p>(15) Muhajirah Amatullah</p> <p>(16) Umm Mu'awiyah</p> <p>(17) Umm Awar</p> <p>(18) UkhtiB</p> <p>(19) Umm Abbass</p> <p>(20) Umm Dujana Britaniya</p> <p>(21) Muhajira umm Hamza</p> <p>(22) GreenBirds22</p>
<b>Social media</b>	In which social media has been posted?	<p>Twitter (1)</p> <p>Tumblr (2)</p> <p>Ask.fm (3)</p>
<b>Theme</b>	What is the most predominant topic in the post?	<p>Identity (1)</p> <p>Discrimination (2)</p> <p><i>Ummah</i> under attack (3)</p> <p>Sisterhood (4)</p> <p>Religion (5)</p> <p><i>Hijrah</i> (6)</p> <p>State-building in the “Caliphate” (7)</p> <p>Financial Security (8)</p> <p>Marriage/Family (9)</p> <p>Adventure (10)</p>

		<p>War (11)</p> <p>Martyrdom (12)</p> <p>Use of violence (13)</p> <p>Daily life in Syria/Iraq (14)</p> <p>The West (15)</p> <p>Social Media (16)</p> <p>Others (17)</p>
<b>Migration relation</b>	Is the post related to women's migration?	<p>Yes (1)</p> <p>No (2)</p>
	If yes, are they talking about their own experience?	<p>Yes (1)</p> <p>No (2)</p>
<b>Reason for migration</b>	Which of these categories do women relate to <i>hijrah</i> ?	<p>Self-identity (1)</p> <p>Discrimination (2)</p> <p><i>Ummah</i> under attack (3)</p> <p>Sisterhood belonging (4)</p> <p>Religious duty (5)</p> <p>State-building (6)</p> <p>Financial Security (7)</p> <p>Marriage (8)</p> <p>Adventure (9)</p> <p>Not specified (10)</p>
<b>Audience</b>	Who is the post directed to?	<p>Specific person (1)</p> <p>Muslim sisters (2)</p> <p>Muslims in general (3)</p>

		Non-Muslims (4) Not specified (5)
<b>Audience perception</b>	How is the receptor of the post considered according to the dichotomy 'us versus them'?	Enemy (1) Ally (2) Not specified (3)
<b>Recruitment</b>	Are women helping to recruit someone with the post?	Yes (1) No (2)
<b>Tone of the discourse</b>	What is the tone of the woman in this post?	Aggressive (1) Neutral (2) Affective (3)
<b>Discourse (relation to violence)</b>	How do women relate to violence?	Support (1) Against (2) Not specified (3)
<b>Discourse (ISIS propaganda)</b>	Are certain words or discourses used in the post?	<i>Kuffar/Kaffir</i> (1) <i>Mujahid</i> (2) <i>Muhajirah</i> (3) <i>Ukhti/Akhawat/ Sister</i> (4) <i>Khilafah / Dawla/ Dar al-Islam</i> (5) <i>Dar al-kufr</i> (6) <i>Shaheed/Martyr</i> (7) Kill (8) <i>Dunya</i> (9) <i>Jannah</i> (10)

		<i>Hijrah</i> (11) Jihad (12) Sharia (13) <i>Ummah</i> (14)
<b>Frame</b>	Is the post related to ISIS?	Yes (1) No (2)
	If yes (1), how is ISIS portrayed?	Positive (1) Neutral (2) Negative (3)

### **Coding Manual**

Each article is firstly coded according to the name of the person who wrote the post and where it was posted. All the women have adopted a *kunya* or nickname composed by *umm* (mother of) and an Arab name. Those women who have been identified are named after their birth name in this analysis and not their *kunya*. These two variables are not used to answer any of the hypotheses and only give information about who wrote the post and in which social media in order to be tracked easily.

The main theme of the posts is further examined in order to identify what are the interests and concerns of these women. Some of the options are very similar so it is necessary to explain them in order to maintain the validity and reliability of the analysis. For example, all the posts related to attacks or the battlefield will be classified as ‘war’ whereas the posts about the support of violence, beheadings and other acts of violence that are not strictly related to the battlefield will be classified as ‘use of violence’. Other category to look into is ‘sisterhood’. In this category are included both posts about sisterhood and all the displays of affection between the women. Another category that needs to be specified is ‘social media’, where all the post related to the social media are included, such as petitions of contact through secure and encrypted applications like Kik. Likewise, it must be explained the difference between the category of ‘state-building in the Caliphate’ and ‘religion’ when it comes to Sharia law. The category of

‘religion’ includes posts about the Islam and women’s religious aspects whereas the category of ‘state-building in the “Caliphate”’ include both state-building attempts and all that the purported Islamic State encompass, such as the implementation of the Sharia law.

Finally, it must be pointed out that even though a post may not be classified as ‘*hijrah*’, the topic can still influence in the reader’s perceptions and frames. For example, a post about how wonderful is the family you get in the so-called caliphate or a description of the life there has no direct relation to make *hijrah* if the woman does not call for women to join. However, it is spreading ISIS propaganda by portraying the territory as an ideal place for family, which could therefore motivate women to go. This variable helps answering hypotheses one and two by shedding some light to the concerns of the women.

In order to better identify the reasons women had to leave Europe and join ISIS in Syria or Iraq, three variables have been created. First, is necessary to establish if the post is somehow related to the migration, *hijrah*. A post will be considered related to *hijrah* when women talk about their own migration or when they directly or indirectly encourage their audience to travel to the so-called Caliphate. It must be noticed that, even though the only reason a woman can narrate her life in Syria or Iraq is because she made *hijrah*, the post is not considered as related to *hijrah* unless the woman is calling for it or giving advice and information to other women to help them migrate.

The following variable aims at identifying those posts strictly related to women’s own migration. After knowing their relation to migration, the reasons that influence in the decision of migrating to the so-called Caliphate will be coded in order to confirm or reject hypotheses one and two. The categories have been selected following the categorization in the literature review chapter and conducting the previously mentioned beta-test of a sample of posts. This variable has non-exclusive categories since more than one motive can be mentioned, especially in posts on Tumblr. However, it is true that sometimes women call to perform *hijrah*, or give advice to other women, but do not give any explanation of why they have to migrate. In order to avoid confusion, the category ‘State building’ refers not only to the opportunity to participate in the state-building efforts in the so-called Caliphate, but also the opportunity of living in a territory under the Sharia Law. These two variables have to be combined with the

previous one about themes and with the variable of ‘recruitment’, explained later on, in order to get a better understanding of the situation.

The following three variables aim at answering the hypothesis number three by examining who is the post directed to, how is that person perceived by the women and if there is a clear intention to recruit with it. In the variable of the audience, the category ‘Muslim sisters’ refers to female Muslims who may or may not be in the purported Caliphate, thus they can be considered allies or enemies depending on whom they are referring to. This category aims at identifying the frequency of posts intentionally directed only to women. The second variable, which focuses on the perception of the audience, is useful to understand the binary imaginary of ‘us versus them’ of ISIS. Finally, the variable about the intentions of the post explores if the women are helping to recruit somebody with their posts or not. It is considered that women are helping recruit when they give information or advice about the migration, or they actively call for it.

This research also examines different aspects of the discourse. First, it focuses on the attitude they have in their posts towards the audience and whether or not they support violence. Generally, a more aggressive tone in the post will be related to a higher support of violence. These variables examine the degree of radicalization of the women and relate to the variables focused on the audience since the tone of their discourse is directly related to the receptor of the message.

In addition, the specific language used in the discourse is coded in order to identify ISIS propaganda in the women’s posts, as well as the dichotomy of ‘us versus them’. In each category there is one or more words that refer to the same term. Consequently, if the post includes a different spelling of the word or a similar word to the one in the category, it will also be counted in the analysis.

An example of this dichotomy is the comparison between the categories ‘*Dar al-kufr*’ and ‘*Dar al-Islam*’. The terms ‘*Khilafah*, *Dawla* or *Dar al-Islam*’, from the fifth category, are those used to refer to the purported Islamic State, whereas the category ‘*Dar al-kufr*’ is used to refer to countries that are not ruled by the ‘Sharia’ (Islamic law). Likewise, the first category, ‘*kuffar*’ (disbeliever), contrasts with the second and the third categories, ‘*mujahid* (fighter)’ and ‘*muhajirah* (female migrant)’. ISIS has created



a binary classification of the people, who can only be with or against them. Similarly, other contrasted terms are '*dunya*', which refers to the material world, and '*jannah*', which means paradise, the hereafter. And the term '*shaheed*', which means martyrdom, is compared with the category 'kill' to analyze how they use the term depending on who is the person. The rest of the categories are Arabic terms largely used by the women. This variable has non-exclusive categories since more than one word could be used in the post. This variable gives more information about the frames of ISIS and how they are used both to recruit and to justify the motives of their migration.

The last two variables are correlated and aim at identifying how is ISIS portrayed in the social media in order to corroborate that it exists a frame alignment between the girls and ISIS, which is always portrayed in a positive way. In the first variable, all the posts that mention ISIS or make a reference to the territory under its control are considered related to the terrorist organization even if they do not mention ISIS in the post.

### **Statistical significance and correlation of contingency tables**

In order to guarantee that the results from the analysis are statistically significant and that there is an interdependence between some of the variables, a Chi-squared and a Cramér's V test have been conducted with the statistical software SPSS, which has been used for the analysis. The combination of both tests gives the possibility to know if there is a relationship between the different variables compared in the contingency tables, or crosstabs, and thereby that results can be generalizable to the population from which the sample has been taken (Bryman 2012, p. 347-348). The maximum level of statistical significance that is acceptable in this analysis is  $p \leq 0.05$ , in other words, that there are less than 5 chances in 100 that the relationship between the two variables has happened by chance. In addition, the Cramér's V test helps identify how strong is the relation between the two variables (Ibid. p. 344). However, this research will not make emphasis on the strength of the relation between variables since in the hypotheses do not primarily aim at showing relationships between variables.

The results from the tests are posted beneath the contingency tables in appendix A.

### 3.2.3 Reliability and validity

The reliability of a social research consists in whether the measurement in the study is consistent over time, thus producing the same results if the research was done by other researchers or in a different period of time (Bryman 2012, p. 169). In order to guarantee the reliability of this research, the author has conducted a pilot test or beta-test of the coding scheme in order to amend possible difficulties or inconsistencies in the coding schedule (Ibid. p. 304).

Validity, on the other hand, refers to the integrity of the results, whether the indicator used to measure a concept really measures that concept (Ibid. p. 171). The internal validity, which refers to the causal relation between variables, is secured by the correlation between the independent variable, making *hijrah*, and the dependent variables used on the analysis (Ibid. p. 47). The results from the Chi-squared test and the Cramér's V test show a correlation between some of the variables. The external validity of this research is applicable to other European women who have presence on the social media; however, is difficult to guarantee it to other samples because it is an under-researched field.

## 3.3 Limitations

This research is grounded in the under-researched field of western female migration to join a terrorism organization. Until recently, the study of western participation in terrorism has focused on male foreign fighters, who have joined violent groups in conflicts around the world. However, after the rise of ISIS, Europe has witnessed the unprecedented phenomenon of European women leaving their home countries to join this terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, this research departs from an under-researched topic and similar studies are limited.

One of the limitations that this research has faced when conducting this research is the impossibility to directly contact these women, who refuse to talk with journalists or researchers. Therefore, the only way of understanding why they have left their home countries to join ISIS is by analyzing their social media posts. The researcher is aware of the fact that people may not express all their thoughts in their social media profiles. In addition, not all women who have travelled to Syria are active in the social media;

therefore the results obtained in previous analyses could be different if the sample included the women without social media profiles. Nevertheless, that option is not possible since there is not direct communication with the researchers at the moment. Luckily, those European women who travelled to Syria and have social media profiles were very active and explicit when talking about their experiences and thoughts.

Another obstacle is that since 2015 thousands of ISIS supporters' accounts have been blocked or deleted, eliminating all the material used by previous researchers. Therefore, the amount of posts from these women that still remain on the web is limited. In order to mitigate this problem, the researcher contacted the Institute for Strategic Dialogue to request access to a database of the women's posts but she did not receive any answer. Consequently, this study has conducted a search of these posts in a different way, as it has been explained in the section of data collection, cf. chapter 3.2.1. It is acknowledged that only some posts, the most relevant ones from a journalistic point of view, will be recovered, and this could damage the validity of the research. However, with a systematic and rule-bounded analysis of the recovered material, the validity of the study is guaranteed. In addition, this study aims to include other women that do not appear in previous researches in order to cover as many people as possible.

## 4 Results

In this section the results obtained from the analysis are presented with the help of tables. They will be later examined and interpreted in the discussion chapter in order to corroborate or reject the hypotheses introduced in the methodology chapter.

The analysis was composed of 586 posts from Twitter, Tumblr and Ask.fm, which belonged to twenty-two different women. A video and several articles about three French-speaking teenagers who returned from Syria or were stopped by their family have also been taken into consideration. This content will be included in the following chapter to support the results presented below.

All the frequency tables and contingency tables from this analysis can be found in the appendix A.

The results from the analysis show that half of the posts belong to only two of the twenty-two women, precisely to Aqsa Mahmood, a Scottish 21-years-old woman who is known for recruiting other women; and an unknown woman that uses the name of Umm Ubaydah in the social media and is believed to be European. They were two of the most known Europeans in Syria because they were very active on Twitter and Tumblr. Therefore, it has been easier to find past posts from them than others in archive webs. As it has already been mentioned, all accounts of this study were suspended before the beginning of this study.

All the women in this research mainly used Twitter as the propaganda tool par excellence, and some of them also used Tumblr to talk about their migration experience and to give information and advice to other girls. However, all the conversations with other women who aimed at migrating to Syria were through encrypted message applications such as Kik.

**Table 1. Theme**

Theme	F	%
Identity	13	2.2
Discrimination	8	1.4
<i>Ummah</i> under attack	13	2.2
Sisterhood	36	6.1
Religion	49	8.4
<i>Hijrah</i>	89	15.2
State-building in the Caliphate	30	5.1
Financial security	7	1.2
Marriage and family	33	5.6
Adventure	2	.3
War	62	10.6
Martyrdom	47	8.0
Use of violence	27	4.6
Daily life in Syria/Iraq	60	10.2
The West	44	7.5
Social media	47	8.0
Others	19	3.2
Total	586	100.0

All the data collected shows that these women have other interests apart from trying to lure others to join ISIS. In addition to talking about *hijrah* in 15% of the articles, the main topics were the war and their daily lives in Syria, in other words what affected them day-to-day. Although the interests of these women vary, religion and martyrdom were also an important part of their lives, which were present in around 8% of the articles. Some of these topics were further analyzed in cf. table 4 where the motives or benefits from migrating to Syria were identified.

**Table 2. Migration Related**

Migration Related	F	%
Yes	129	22.2
No	457	77.8
Total	586	100.0

As previously mentioned, this research analyzed all the posts found, not just those related to *hijrah*, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of these women. Therefore, as table 2 shows, only 22% of the posts were related to the migration. The difference between Table 1, where *hijrah* as a topic was only present in 15% of the articles, is due to the existence of other posts where the main theme is not the migration. For example, some posts about the convenience of arranging a marriage upon arrival were classified as part of the marriage and family category but they were also related to migration.

**Table 3. Own Experience of Migration**

Own Experience	F	%
Yes	37	30.8
No	83	69.2
Total	129	100.0

The analysis also shows that most of the posts that are related to migration are not focused on explaining the migration of the women who are writing them, which means that, instead, most of the posts either encourage women to make *hijrah* or provide them with information.

**Table 4. Migration Reasons – Multiple Responses**

Migration Reasons	Responses		Percent of Cases	
	N	Percent		
Migration reasons <sup>a</sup>	Self-Identity	1	1.1%	1.6%
	Discrimination	6	6.9%	9.7%
	<i>Ummah</i> under attack	4	4.6%	6.5%
	Sisterhood belonging	7	8.0%	11.3%
	Religious Duty	33	37.9%	53.2%
	State-Building	20	23.0%	32.3%
	Financial Security	8	9.2%	12.9%
	Marriage	7	8.0%	11.3%
	Adventure	1	1.1%	1.6%
Total	87	100.0%	140.3%	

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1 = yes.

Table 4 shows the motives that women have considered in order to migrate to Syria or Iraq to join ISIS. From the data reflected in this table and the qualitative observations of all the posts, it can be stated that the main reason they identified as a motive to migrate was their religious duty. The categories of religious duty and State-building, which includes the opportunity to live under the Sharia law and the state building opportunities, represented a 51 % of the total. The rest of the reasons mentioned by the women were not considered as motives by them, but as benefits or grievances that contributed to their decision to migrate, since they consider migration as a religious obligation. This will be further discussed in the next chapter with extracts from the posts and in relation with the theoretical framework of this research.

**Table 5. Contingency Table of Migration Related and Recruitment**

		Recruitment		Total	
		Yes	No		
<b>Migration Related</b>	Yes	Count	89	40	129
		% within Migration related	69.0%	31.0%	100.0%
	No	Count	19	438	457
		% within Migration related	4.2%	95.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	108	478	586
		% within Migration related	18.4%	81.6%	100.0%

Table 5 displays the correlation between the migration and recruitment and shows that only an 18% of the overall posts have the intention to recruit others. It is remarkable that not all the posts aimed at recruiting were related to migration, only a 70%, which can be explained by cases where women were intentionally recruiting others to support their ideology but did not mention *hijrah*.

The small number of recruitment posts needs to be understood within the context of the analysis. The results from recruitment refer only to those posts where the women explicitly were calling for migration and support or insinuating it in the text. Discerning whether a post aimed at recruiting can be subjective since some of the texts or images seem to not have an alluring effect but they do for radicalized women. Therefore, photos of sunsets in Syria or texts about martyrdom, for example, were not considered

to being recruiting unless it was clearly explicit, even though someone could have, as a matter of fact, lured some women into migrating to Syria and Iraq.

**Table 6. Audience**

<b>Audience</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Specific person	95	16.2
Muslim sisters	46	7.8
Muslims in general	66	11.3
Non-Muslims	18	3.1
Not specified	361	61.6
Total	586	100.0

After knowing the recruiting intentions that these women may have, it is necessary to understand who the audience of the posts is in order to better comprehend how social media recruitment works. Despite the majority of posts (62%) were not directed to anyone in particular, it is remarkable that 16% of the posts were directed to a specific person, the vast majority of which were answers to anonymous requests about migration on Tumblr. This indicates that there are two main channels for radicalization that function concurrently in the radicalization process: the consumption of post form women in Syria, and the interaction with them.

**Table 7. Contingency Table of Audience Perception and Discourse Tone**

			<b>Discourse Tone</b>			<b>Total</b>
			<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Affective</b>	
<b>Audience Perception</b>	Enemy	Count % within Aud. Perception	18 56.3%	13 40.6%	1 3.1%	32 100.0%
	Ally	Count % within Aud. Perception	4 2.9%	78 56.9%	55 40.1%	137 100.0%
	Not Specified	Count % within Aud. Perception	37 8.9%	281 67.4%	99 23.7%	417 100.0%
<b>Total</b>		Count % within Aud. perception	59 10.1%	372 63.5%	155 26.5%	586 100.0%



As explained before, analyzing the audience has contributed to better understand these women and Table 7 shows how the audience perception is related to the tone they use in the texts. As in Table 6, the perception of the audience was mainly not specified since there were not indicators of being allies or enemies and the same happened with the discourse tone of the posts, which were mainly neutral. However, the overall data shows that the posts had a neutral or affective tone and that the audience perceived as an enemy was limited, which indicates that they probably avoided interacting with those considered enemies, as well as, using hateful speech in general. This statement will be further discussed in the following chapter because of its implications in violent radicalization and recruitment.

**Table 8. Contingency Table of Relation to Violence and Discourse Tone**

			Discourse tone			Total
			Aggressive	Neutral	Affective	
<b>Relation to violence</b>	Support	Count % within Rel. to Violence	45 40.2%	53 47.3%	14 12.5%	112 100.0%
	Against	Count % within Rel. to Violence	0 0.0%	1 25.0%	3 75.0%	4 100.0%
	Not specified	Count % within Relation to violence	14 3.0%	318 67.7%	138 29.4%	470 100.0%
Total		Count % within Relation to violence	59 10.1%	372 63.5%	155 26.5%	586 100.0%

The results in Table 8, obtained from the interrelation of the relation to violence and the discourse tone, display that as in previous cases the majority of the posts were not related to violence. However, those that did were overall supporting it, except for four posts. What stands out from the results is that not all the posts that supported violence were aggressive, as it could have been expected. 47% of the posts that supported violence had a neutral tone, which indicates the normalization of violence. In addition,

13% of them were classified as affective, which implies that violence was considered as something good. This will also be further analyzed in the following chapter.

**Table 9. ISIS relation**

ISIS relation	F	%
Yes	207	35.3
No	379	64.7
Total	586	100.0

The results obtained from the analysis, display a surprising data, which is that only 35% of the posts are related to ISIS. This is surprising taking into account that these women live in the so-called Islamic State and they support its ideology as is shown in the next table. The fact that only one out of three posts refer to ISIS can be understood as a propaganda strategy as it will be explained in the discussion chapter.

**Table 10. ISIS portrayal**

ISIS portrayal	F	%
Positive	193	93.2
Neutral	11	5.3
Negative	3	1.4
Total	207	100.0

As it was expected, those posts that referred to ISIS were overall considered as positive except for three cases where two women complained about the treatment in the so-called Islamic State by the Syrians or the male fighters.

**Table 11. Discourse - Multiple responses**

Discourse	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Discourse <sup>a</sup> <i>Kuffar/Kaffir</i>	39	8.5%	13.7%
<i>Mujahid</i>	33	7.2%	11.6%
<i>Muhajirah</i>	14	3.1%	4.9%
<i>Ukthi/Akhawat/Sister (s)</i>	68	14.8%	23.9%
<i>Khilafah/Dawla/Dar al-Islam</i>	98	21.4%	34.4%
<i>Dar al-kufr</i>	14	3.1%	4.9%
<i>Shaheed/Martyr</i>	49	10.7%	17.2%
<i>Kill</i>	22	4.8%	7.7%
<i>Dunya</i>	9	2.0%	3.2%
<i>Jannah</i>	21	4.6%	7.4%
<i>Hijrah</i>	40	8.7%	14.0%
<i>Jihad</i>	24	5.2%	8.4%
<i>Sharia</i>	20	4.4%	7.0%
<i>Ummah</i>	7	1.5%	2.5%
Total	458	100.0%	160.7%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Finally, the last table displays a list of concepts and terms used, amongst others, by ISIS and that were reflected in the women's posts. Some of these words aimed at analyzing ISIS dichotomy of 'us versus them'. The results show that 20% of the articles included words such as *Dawla* or *Khilafah* to refer to the territory under ISIS control, being this category the most used in all the posts. The word Syria was not taken into account, which reflects how rooted is this concept in these women's discourse. It is also remarkable that the concept of martyrdom was mentioned the double than the concept of killing, which indicates a dichotomy between 'our dead' who are considered martyrs and 'their dead' which are considered as killed. This dichotomy will be further explained in the following chapter.

In conclusion, the results of the analysis show that these women talked about different things in their social media, especially the migration and the life in Syria or Iraq, which also includes the war they are suffering. Moreover, almost one out of four posts was related to migration, although the vast majority of women did not mention their experiences, on the contrary, they focused on giving advice and calling for joining,

which can be considered as a recruitment attempt. The main reason they gave to join ISIS was the religious obligation that according to them has been imposed by Allah. In addition, they highlighted discrimination as the main grievance in the West and the state-building opportunities and the financial security offered by the so-called Islamic State.

As mentioned above, only 1 out of 5 posts had the intention to actively recruit others. On the other hand, there is evidence that women had contact with specific people, most of which was about *hijrah* and to continuing the conversation on more secure platforms. Without taking into account those unspecified, the majority of the audience was considered an ally and the overall discourse was neutral or affective. Moreover, ISIS was mentioned in one out three posts and its portrayal was considered almost completely positive. Furthermore, ISIS discourse and dichotomy of “us vs. them” is evident in the use of concepts such as *kuffar* or referring to Syria as *Dawla*.

## 5 Discussion

This research aimed at shedding some light into the paradox of why Western female Muslims had decided to migrate to Syria or Iraq to join the terrorist organization ISIS. This new phenomenon has been under-researched until recently because there have not been previous cases of western female migration to join a terrorist group in such a high number. This study attempts to contribute to the existing knowledge with a more theoretical and comprehensive approach. As previously stated in this paper, the analysis has aimed at answering the following research question: “*Why European women decide to leave their home countries and move to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS?*”

This question has been operationalized to produce three hypotheses that have been examined by conducting a content analysis. The results were displayed in the previous chapter and here they will be interpreted in relation to the theory of the research and the literature review in order to give the reader a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and answer the question posited on the research. It must be noted that the results from the analysis consist on the interpretation of 22 females who have migrated to ISIS. Therefore, when answering the hypotheses mentioned below, it is necessary to understand that the way they interpret reality may not be the same as the way scholars do.

### **Hypothesis 1: European female Muslims make *hijrah* because they have perceived grievances against Europe**

As previously mentioned in the literature review chapter, there is evidence that female Muslims are the main targets of Islamophobic violence, which has increased in the past years and it's based on the assumption that there is a lack of compatibility between some interpretations of Islam and European values (Seta 2016, p. 3; Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France 2016). Oliver Roy and other French scholars identify discrimination as a factor in the process of violent radicalization because, as they explain, European Muslims have been raised in Western values and no longer relate to their parents' cultural, national and Islamic traditions (Roy 2007, p. 52-53; Khosrokhavar 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 800). Therefore, suffering discrimination based on religion, ethnicity and gender can have an impact in the way

they identify themselves, and create a feeling of non-belonging and alienation that Akil Awan labels ‘dual cultural alterity’ (Awan 2015, p. 62).

Western values of relativism and individualism have made the search for identity, community belonging and a meaningful life a common trend among individuals in society (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 799). Consequently, ISIS has taken advantage of this situation and has created an alternative narrative to lure these women by exploiting their perceived grievances, known as push factors, and offering them an alternative way of life or pull factors. These women have experienced a process of identity search where they have aligned their values, beliefs and interests with ISIS coherent and convincing frames (Borum 2011; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 2008).

Using a research from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue this paper has identified self-identity, discrimination and the prosecution of the Muslim community as push factors (Saltman and Smith 2015).

The overall results of the analysis show that women do not talk only about migration on their social media. Despite that, *hijrah* is the topic most mentioned (15%) along with the war and how their daily lives are in the territory. Therefore, the results that are needed to confirm or reject the hypothesis one will contain small percentages.

That is reflected in the results about the themes of the posts, where these women rarely talk about discrimination, identity problems or the persecution of the Muslim community in Europe. This does not mean that these perceived problems do not exist in society or that they are not concerned about them. It must be understood that an analysis of the social media is the best way to know how these women think when it is not possible to conduct personal interviews with them. However, this approach has limitations that have been overcome by having a strong theoretical framework and adopting a comprehensive approach towards the phenomenon. The study has included the stories of some women who returned from Syria or were stopped before being able to flee in order to avoid limiting the analysis.

Identity and identity formation is a common process among individuals and it can be redefined, sometimes in a drastic way. These women have experience a search for identity and have ended up identifying themselves with an extremist interpretation of

Islam and rejecting the Western values of the countries they were raised in. Even though they do not mention to be searching for their identity, probably because they do not use the social media to expose all their thoughts and fears, it is possible to see these changes in some of the profiles.

For example, the Twitter of Amira Abase, one of the group of three girls that left the United Kingdom to join ISIS, shows that before becoming radicalized she used to go shopping, was interested in football matches and she even asked about whether getting a piercing was *Haram* (forbidden) (Saltman and Smith 2015). This happened three months before leaving for Syria, which shows that she went through a fast radicalization process that will be further explained when trying to confirm hypothesis three. Another example is Aqsa Mahmood, who expressed being confused and having feelings of not belonging in her Tumblr account (Internet Archive 2015b). These examples show that, in spite of not mentioning it on the social media, there is some evidence that they experience a process of non-belonging and search for a new identity.

The following cases, even though they are not statistically significant, are used as examples to support the results from the analysis and to show a different side of this phenomenon that is not possible to perceive by analyzing the social media. In the first case, a French woman, using the pseudonym of Sophie Kasiki, relates how she converted to Islam to fill the gap left by the death of her mother and the recruiters, a group of young men she knew, took advantage of her naivety, weakness and insecurity to recruit her (Willsher 2016). In the second case, which is a fragment of a documentary, a French girl using the pseudonym of Cathy explains that she became radicalized because she had a feeling of hate towards what surrounded her and what was happening in the world (France 5 2015). These examples support the assumption that these women go through a process of identity search and non-belonging.

Discrimination is also a theme that does not interest them in particular, however, when talking about what influences their migration, discrimination is the most mentioned among the three, as shown in Table 4. Discrimination is a broad term, yet it is remarkable that in the few posts where they mention discrimination, they do not refer to physical or verbal discrimination, but to the oppression they perceive to be suffering in the West because of the impossibility to practice Islam. It is not possible to prove that these women suffered any type of discrimination before becoming radicalized.

Regardless, they do suffer it once they go to Syria or are known as ISIS supporters on the social media, as Umm Ubaydah tweets, “Wht I get the weirdest abuse in my mentions. Lol idc [I don’t care]...After Hardship surely comes ease.” (Archive.is 2014). They become the target of hate speech and discrimination, which only creates a stronger revulsion towards the West and reduces the possibility to change their minds.

Finally, the repression of the Muslim community, known as *Ummah*, around the world is the last factor identified in this hypothesis. As in the previous cases, the results of the analysis show that women do not have an interest in this factor and is barely mentioned as a reason to join ISIS. However, there is an interest about the war in Syria, not only because they are living there, but also because they consider themselves to be helping the real Muslims. A woman using the *kunya* Muhajirah Amatullah complains that “Scholars condemn the killing of Kuffar “children” in Pakistan, Whilst [*sic*] not a word of the genocide against ACTUAL Muslim children [is said]” (Smith 2015). Moreover, most of the posts about the West, which represent a 7.5% (see Table 1), criticize the participation of Western countries in the Syrian war or attack and threaten them. This is an indicator of the revulsion they have towards the countries where they were born.

Taking everything into account, it is evident that European female Muslims who have joined ISIS have gone through a radicalization process where they have created a new identity around a conservative interpretation of Islam, no matter if they were Muslims before or not, and that has led them to eventually embrace ISIS frames, which is based on the tenets of the jihadist Salafism doctrine. This support of violence is reflected in the results of the analysis, as shown in chapter 4. This new identity search has been cause for different reasons and it is impossible to determine a salient motive taking into account that there is not just one profile of female migrant. Islamophobic discrimination in Europe is evident and has had an effect on this new phenomenon, but it cannot be blamed for it since only a small minority of the Muslim female population has moved to Syria and there is no evidence that the women who have migrated suffered discrimination in Europe.

Therefore, the hypothesis one can be validated since Muslim female migrants are aware of these grievances. Even though, they do not consider them as the major reason to leave, since most of their posts focus on the pull factors, these women believe that they must leave because they cannot be practice Islam in the West. Therefore, by exalting the



benefits of the so-called Islamic State, as it will be analyzed in the next section, they indirectly show that they have grievances towards Europe.

**Hypothesis 2: European female Muslims make *hijrah* because they believe it is a religious duty and ISIS offers them community belonging, security and a purpose in life**

Hypothesis two is directly related to the first one because both of them analyze the motives these women have to make *hijrah*. Consequently, this hypothesis is also anchored on the framing theory and the theories of identity explained in the literature review chapter.

Alienation and feelings of non-belonging lead women to search for an identity and ISIS has taken advantage of it by offering them what they yearn the most, a community (Awan 2015, p. 63; Saltman and Smith 2015). The terrorist organization offers them a comprehensive and complete interpretation of reality where problems are considered injustices that are produced by a specific group of people, who are considered accountable. In addition, ISIS constructs an argument to morally justify violence in order to do what is believed to be right (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008, p. 7). Dichotomous discourse is widely embraced worldwide because the interpretation of the world in a binary way is easier to comprehend than a system where different values and beliefs coexist and where everything is relative.

This paper identifies five motives, or pull factors, that lured women into migrating to the so-called Islamic State based on the research by Saltman and Smith (2015) and a paper by Barbara Walter (2015). In order to obtain a better operationalization, the religion and state building factor was separated in two in the analysis.

The results show that the religious duty and State-building combined represent 51% of the motives of migration given by the women (see Table 4). As previously mentioned these women have clearly stated that the only reason to migrate to the so-called Caliphate is because it is compulsory. Umm Irhab tweeted, “I have never personally met a sister i [*sic*] Sham who came here because of a “romantic thought abt [*sic*] war or bcos [*sic*] of a man” We all come bcos[*sic*] Allah” (Hall 2015b). These women happily encourage others and even pressure them using religion. For example, by claiming that

Muslims can only live under the Sharia law and that the only way to enter into *jannah* (paradise) is by making *hijrah* to the Islamic State (Internet Archive 2015b).

Nadia (pseudonym), a young girl from France who managed to leave ISIS, corroborates that religion was her main motive. She told the media that the recruiter convinced her arguing that she was living in a country without Islam and she would go to hell. After radicalizing and becoming isolated from everybody, *hijrah* seemed as the best option so she fled to Syria with the money facilitated by ISIS (Madame Figaro and AFP 2015).

State-building intentions and migration are therefore considered compulsory as Umm Ubaydah explains, “Trying to build an ‘Islamic state’ is a Must [fardh ayn] upon all Muslims” (Internet Archive 2015a). Along these lines, Aqsa Mahmood explains, “Every Muslim women deserves [*sic*] to live under the law of Sharia, to have her honour [*sic*] preserved and her rights given. It’s beautiful wallahi [by Allah]” (Archive 2014). Therefore, it is evident that by appealing to religion and regarding *hijrah* as compulsory ISIS has created a binary thinking that pushes women, who have internalized the organization’s frames, to migrate to the so-called Islamic State. It is all reduced to the dichotomy of making *hijrah* or not being a good Muslim.

For them, being a good Muslim in the Islamic State means to become a “righteous wife and to raise righteous children” (Umm Ubaydah in Hoyle et al. 2015, p.22). Therefore, having a job is largely impossible and all of them have assumed and embrace their role as housewives.

Financial security is surprisingly considered by these women as another motive, or at least as a benefit, of living in the so-called Islamic State. In their posts, they praise how many things they receive for free, such as a houses, appliances and amenities. Zahra Halane, one of the twin sisters that left Britain, twitted, “Food free....House free....Ya3ni [like] we established the sharia...Allah has blessed Islamic State. Don't delay this blessing and Make hijra!!!” (Hall 2015b). European Muslim females living in Syria and Iraq continuously tweet about how wonderful their lives are in the so-called Islamic State and use Western decoys to lure younger girls, especially food, as in this tweet from Aqsa Mahmood (Archive.is 2014):

**Figure 2. Aqsa Mahmood tweet**



(Source: Archive.is 2014)

In addition to the financial security, women also identify sisterhood belonging as a benefit of making *hijrah*. Other *muhajirat* (female migrants) become family for them, especially because their husbands are fighting in the battlefield during weeks and these women spend most of their time together. Muhajirah Amatullah tweets, “When ur called “ukhti” (my sister) Its just beautiful. U feel like u belong to a family, U feel protected + safe. Alhamdulillah [praise God] for #IS” (Pooley 2015, p. 72). These friendships may have even started before arriving in Syria since some of these women use their social media to recruit others, as it will be analyzed in Hypothesis three.

The factor of marriage is also mentioned in the posts, but not as a reason to migrate to Syria. Indeed, many of the posts focus on the necessity of getting married in Syria to be able to move around, since unmarried women live in *makars* (hostels), which cannot leave without a male companion. Umm Ubaydah tweets that “...being single in sham [Syria] is extremely difficult...” and adds that “Sisters who are thinking of coming here and not marrying, by Allah I’ve never known of a single sister unless she was going to marry soon” (Hall 2015a). Aqsa Mahmood also states that, “I have stressed this before on Twitter but I really need sisters to stop dreaming about coming to Shaam [Syria] and not getting married” (Internet Archive 2015b). However, that does not mean they do not love their husbands. From the observations of the posts it can be stated that these women praise marriage and express their love and devotion towards their husbands, but the majority of them did not come to Syria because they had fallen in love with an ISIS fighter.

Finally, the adventure factor was only mentioned in one post where Muhajirah Amatullah calls for people to join “the State which shook the world off its feet!” (Pooley 2015, p. 64). Despite photos of women practicing shooting, like the following pictures from Zahra Halane (Hall 2015a), there is no evidence that women are allowed in the fight.

**Figure 3. Zahra Halane tweet**



(Source: Hall 2015a)

Since this type of photos may lead to unrealistic expectations, Aqsa Mahmood clearly explains in Tumblr that there is not jihad for women, “I will be straight up and blunt with you all, there is absolutely nothing for sisters to participate in Qitaal [fighting]” (Internet Archive 2015b). Therefore, adventure is not considered to be a pull factor in this case.

In conclusion, using religion and the state-building opportunities as the main reason to migrate to the so-called Caliphate is a smart strategy because these women see it as a good deed for Allah and they believe to be part of something bigger than them. In reality, they are joining a terrorist group that exploits and manipulates the religion of Islam to justify its acts and lures Muslims into joining their war against the West. In

addition, ISIS propaganda about the life in Syria can be tempting when it is portrayed as having fun with your friends, getting monthly stipends, eating Western food and having a lovely husband that will sadly attain martyrdom soon and intercede for you before Allah. However, the reality is grimmer but that is not reported in the social media. One of French women, Nadia, explains that the jihadists fantasized more about the “kalach” [Kalashnikov] than about the Quran (Madame Figaro and AFP 2015). She explains that she got married to get out of the women’s hostel, but got divorced the following day and a few days later was arrested by ISIS under suspicions of being a collaborator of the French police. She recalls the pressures and death threats received during her time in Syria (Ibid.).

Therefore, the results from the analysis confirm Hypothesis two since the women clearly state that making *hijrah* is a divine commandment as well as the construction of an Islamic State. In addition, the benefits that these women reflect on their social media can have an allure for other women that is not perceived by those who do not support ISIS. Certainly, the depiction of the purported Islamic State in the social media is far from reality but is hard to convince them because ISIS strictly controls the communications in the area.

### **Hypothesis 3: Group radicalization in the social media fosters European women’s migration to the so-called Caliphate.**

According to the Social Movement Theories, violent radicalization in groups or peer-to-peer can ease the adoption of extremist frames (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010). Thus, social media have become the perfect platform to spread propaganda and recruit people since it makes contact easier and it has broken many communication barriers.

The theory of the six degrees of separation, which argues that everybody is separated from the rest of the world in a maximum of six people, in other words, that if someone wants to get in contact with the President of the United States, he has to contact the right person who will give the contact of someone else and so on until a maximum of six people. However, this has shrunk to an average of three and a half people, according to a study from Cornell, the Università degli Studi di Milano and Facebook (Edunov et al. 2016).

In the case of ISIS' recruiting, this number can be reduced to only one person since some women are openly available in the social media to help others make *hijrah*. The results from this research show that 69% of the posts related to migration were actively aiming at recruiting (see Table 5). In addition, 16% of the audience is a specific person, many of which are anonymous messages on Tumblr asking for advice about *hijrah* (see Table 6). And others give information about encrypted platforms where these women can be contacted privately.

Umm Ubaydah tweets "... if I can help you in any way pls kik me inshaAllah [if God wills]. My kik is: \_axa" (James and Hall 2015). But she's not the only one, Umm Mu'awiyah, also known as Umm Usamah, also tweeted "...Sisters who need any help regarding *hijrah* can message me on Kik – UmmUsamahh" (Hall 2015b). These posts illustrate how radicalization is, indeed, a social process even if it happens online. The case of Laurie (pseudonym) shows that she believed that going to the so-called Caliphate was a mission of Allah and that she would find paradise there. She explains that she was talking with an average of 50 people (France 5 2015). Even though the previous example is not statistically significant, it has been selected to support this analysis by offering the point of view and experiences of those who are going through a process of de-radicalization after being prevented to go to Syria by their family. This case also confirms the assumption that radicalization is mainly a social process even if it happens in the strictest secrecy.

Some of these women are dedicated recruiters responsible for giving information to their audiences about their own migration and offering useful advice. There is evidence that Aqsa Mahmood may have helped with the logistics of the migration of three schoolgirls from Britain who left together at the end of February 2015. Just some days before one of the girls, Shamima Begum, tweeted Aqsa Mahmood saying "@Muhajirah\_ follow me so i can dm [direct message] you back" (James and Hall 2015). This evidence proves the existence of a recruiting strategy inside ISIS. This post from Aqsa Mahmood confirms her duty as a recruiter "Wallahi [by God] I had no intention of coming back to any social networks but it has become Fardh [mandatory] upon I to share the Haqq [truth] on sisters coming to Shaam [Syria]" (Archive.is 2014).

As previously explained in the literature review chapter, Wiktorowicz has identified a four-staged model of violent radicalization where the individual goes through a process

of cognitive opening, adopts religion as a source of meaning and aligns its ideas and beliefs with the social movement to finally join them actively (Borum 2011, p. 18-19; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 2008).

It has been difficult to observe this process in the analysis since the majority of posts were published once the girls were in the so-called Islamic State and therefore were in the last stage of this model. Nevertheless, some posts have been found to support this theory. Aqsa Mahmood mentions in a Tumblr post “The more and more I read up on the Islamic veil the more I realize how the niqab is actually fardh [obligatory]” (Bradford 2015). This indicates a change in values and the adoption of a more conservative interpretation of Islam, which is what ISIS promotes.

The frame alignment consists in the adoption of the same values and beliefs, but also in the embracement of ISIS binary thinking and dichotomous discourse. Women refer to the enemy as *kuffar*, disbeliever, which is a term that has not been used in other conflicts, whereas those considered allies are referred to as *mujahid* [male fighters] or *muhajirah* [female migrant]. In addition, they contrast the term *Dar-al Islam* [land of Islam] with *Dar-al Kufr* [land of disbelievers], as Sally Jones does in this tweet: “Exactly a year ago today I left dar-al-kufr [land of disbelievers] and made *hijrah* to dar-al-Islam [land of Islam]..Allhamdulillah [praise be to God]” (McCarty 2015).

Finally, those who die in the so-called Islamic State are always considered as *shaheed* [martyr] whereas enemies are just killed. The concept of martyrdom is a keystone in ISIS propaganda because it implies that the person has suffered persecution and has died defending Islam, reinforcing the discourse that the West is waging a war against Muslims. This dichotomous discourse comes down to what Umm Irhab tweets, “My advise to Muslims all over the world, make *hijrah* before its too late. This is a war against Islam, so you are either with us or against us” (Pooley 2015, p. 59).

All the women in this analysis find themselves in the fourth stage of Wiktorowicz model (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008) and they support ISIS’ ideology in a 93% of the cases (see Table 10). They have completely aligned their frames with ISIS up to the point of embracing violence against others as something good. The results of the analysis show that 47% (see Table 8) of the times when violence is mentioned, these women have a neutral tone, which indicates the normalization of violence in their lives.

Moreover, another 12% of the cases had an affective tone either because they were related to martyrdom, which is considered a blessing, or because they were cheerful about somebody's dead, dehumanizing the enemy as a way to be able to support violence. Umm Ubaydah celebrates the ISIS violence saying: "So many beheadings at the same time, Allahu Akbar [God is the greatest], this video is beautiful #DawlaMediaTeamDoingItRight" (Hoyle et al. 2015, p. 29).

Furthermore, women's recruitment strategy is characterized by ignoring those verbally abusing them on the social media and using a neutral or even affective language in order to portray themselves as kind-hearted Muslims, which surprisingly contrast with some posts waging jihad. This attitude helps creating stronger bonds with prospective recruits and depicting these women as victims of the West, which is what they attempt to increase their recruits. Naturally, not all behave in the same way and some are more aggressive than others in their speech.

All these features from the radicalization process can be observed in the story of Maysa (pseudonym), a Belgian 18-year-old girl who was about to flee her country to join the Islamic State (Burke 2015). She told the media how one day, after posting a photo wearing a *jilbab* (long, loose-fit garment) to hide some weight, she was contacted by another girl who quickly introduces her to a group of friends. They first talked about clothes and Islam, but the conversations turned more politicized and at some point the only theme was ISIS and the life in the so-called Caliphate, which was portrayed in a positive way. There was little discussion of other issues that were not ISIS. They gave her a prepaid phone to be able to contact each other secretly. Within months Maysa changed and was seeing her new friends more frequently and the pressure to go to Syria grew. She explains, "I just got to the point where going [to Syria] was all I wanted to do. I believed what I heard" (Ibid.). When the time came, she tried to get her passport, but her parents had hidden it for fear, she asked her friends for some time but they responded with threats if she didn't manage to leave. She decided to destroy her prepaid phone and over time realized what had happened, "I was totally radicalized. I was not thinking my thoughts. I was not who I am" (Ibid.).

This story, although not statistically significant, is an example of what has been extracted from the results of the analysis. Social media is a cornerstone of violent radicalization and recruitment nowadays. Therefore, hypothesis three can be validated



because the results from the analysis prove that social media enables to get in contact easily with ISIS recruiters and vice versa, and it also hastens the radicalization process since people are constantly online. In some cases, the radicalization of these women has happened within a couple of months. In addition, as the results indicate, women actively work as recruiters and try to allure as many women as possible.

It must be noted that social media only show the surface of this problem and that the real radicalization happens in secrecy both offline and online in encrypted applications such as Kik. Therefore, in order to overcome this limitation, this research has included the reports of several girls, which have concurred with the results obtained in the analysis.

In conclusion, the results from the analysis have confirmed the three hypotheses stated above in a greater or a lesser extent and they have contributed to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Western *muhajirat*, or female migrants. Consequently, it can be suggested that European women have perceived grievances against Europe in the moment of departure, which influence their decision to make *hijrah*. However, the main motive for them is the perception of migration as a religious duty imposed by Allah, and the belonging to a cause that is bigger than them where their role is to be a righteous wife and the mother of the future *mujahideen* (fighters). The rest of pull factors, are seen as incentives to make *hijrah* except for the adventure factor, which is practically absent in their posts. These perceptions and motives are the result of a radicalization process that, as the results have shown, is social and happens with greater frequency online.

This research concurs with the results of previous studies about western female migration to join ISIS, which have been taken as a reference. But it offers a deeper and more comprehensive theoretical understanding of how the radicalization process works in this specific phenomenon. These results were based on European women, but they can also be extrapolated to all the women around the world since the first phase of the radicalization consist on the rejection of the person's society, therefore it is not only applicable to Europe or the West. The use of the social media as a tool for radicalization can be applied to other types of extremism and violent extremism; however, the motives to join the group or to commit a violent act in the second case will be different.

This paper does not aim at proposing recommendations for prevention and de-radicalization, but it considers that further research should be conducted in order to improve the understanding of this phenomenon by conducting in-depth interviews with returnees or radicalized women, which is still an under-researched approach due to the difficulty to contact these women. In addition, another investigation path that should be taken in parallel with the previous one is the analysis of the plans for de-radicalization and radicalization prevention in order to improve the countries' strategies. Two models that should be taken into consideration would be the work done by Dounia Bouzar and the Centre for Prevention, Deradicalization and Individual Monitoring (Centre de Prévention, de Déradicalisation et de Suivi Individuel – CPDSI) in France and the Aarhus model of de-radicalization in Denmark, which prioritize the inclusion of the foreign fighters that have returned (Henley 2014).

## 6 Conclusion

At the beginning of this research, it was questioned “*Why European women decide to leave their home countries and move to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS?*”

Now, it can be asserted that the main reason why European women flee Europe is because they have been radicalized up to the point of considering *hijrah* as a divine commandment that must be fulfilled in order to attain paradise in the afterlife. These women have firstly got involved in a process of identity change that has been developed around a manipulated violent version of Islam and where ISIS recruiters have influenced them to accept its violent doctrine. Along this process, which has happened both online and offline, but where the social media is a cornerstone, the perceived grievances against the West have become unbearable and going to Syria or Iraq becomes the only solution for these women, who believe to be part of something bigger than them. In addition, the distorted perception of the so-called Caliphate as the only place where Muslims can freely live and practice Islam, as well as the wonders that it supposedly offers both in material and spiritual terms, have reinforced the assumption that they must perform *hijrah*.

This research has contributed to the pre-existing studies by offering a more comprehensive and theoretical approach. In addition, the results encompass both the motives and the radicalization process and propose a clearly defined explanation of the phenomenon. In other words, this analysis and its results offer a valuable insight on the motives, or perceived motives, that these women have to leave Europe, and on how this radicalization through the social media has developed.

Therefore, in order to prevent radicalization and implement a successful de-radicalization plan in Europe it is first necessary to understand this phenomenon. Consequently, the final objective of this research is to contribute in this first stage of problem definition in order to increase the effectiveness of the de-radicalization and violent radicalization prevention plans, especially on the strategies focused on European females that support ISIS.

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## 8 Appendix

### 8.1 Results from the content analysis

Name				
Name	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Umm Ubaydah	167	28.5	28.5	28.5
Aqsa Mahmood	162	27.6	27.6	56.1
Khadijah Dare	9	1.5	1.5	57.7
Sally Jones	35	6.0	6.0	63.7
Lena Mamoun Abdel Gabir	4	.7	.7	64.3
Umm Khattab	31	5.3	5.3	69.6
Amira Abase	9	1.5	1.5	71.2
Shamima Begum	1	.2	.2	71.3
Zawjatu Abou Mujahid	10	1.7	1.7	73.0
Zahra Halane	21	3.6	3.6	76.6
Salma Halane	5	.9	.9	77.5
Umm Muthanna	22	3.8	3.8	81.2
Umm Irhab	19	3.2	3.2	84.5
Umm Usama	7	1.2	1.2	85.7
Muhajirah Amatullah	54	9.2	9.2	94.9
Umm Mu'awiyah	8	1.4	1.4	96.2
Umm Awar	8	1.4	1.4	97.6
UkhtiB	2	.3	.3	98.0
Umm Abbass	1	.2	.2	98.1
Umm Dujana Britaniya	5	.9	.9	99.0
Muhajira umm Hamza	5	.9	.9	99.8
GreenBirds22	1	.2	.2	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Social Media**

<b>Social Media</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Twitter	459	78.3	78.3	78.3
Tumblr	124	21.2	21.2	99.5
Ask.fm	3	.5	.5	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Theme**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Identity	13	2.2	2.2	2.2
Discrimination	8	1.4	1.4	3.6
Ummah under attack	13	2.2	2.2	5.8
Sisterhood	36	6.1	6.1	11.9
Religion	49	8.4	8.4	20.3
<i>Hijrah</i>	89	15.2	15.2	35.5
State-building in the Caliphate	30	5.1	5.1	40.6
Financial security	7	1.2	1.2	41.8
Marriage	33	5.6	5.6	47.4
Adventure	2	.3	.3	47.8
War	62	10.6	10.6	58.4
Martyrdom	47	8.0	8.0	66.4
Use of violence	27	4.6	4.6	71.0
Daily life in Syria/Iraq	60	10.2	10.2	81.2
The West	44	7.5	7.5	88.7
Social media	47	8.0	8.0	96.8
Others	19	3.2	3.2	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Migration Related**

<b>Migration Related</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Yes	129	22.0	22.0	22.0
No	457	78.0	78.0	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Own Experience of Migration**

<b>Own Experience</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Yes	37	6.3	28.7	28.7
No	92	15.7	71.3	100.0
Total	129	22.0	100.0	
Missing -1	457	78.0		
Total	586	100.0		

**Migration Relation – Multiple Response**

<b>Migration Relation</b>		<b>Responses</b>		<b>Percent of Cases</b>
		<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>	
Migration Relation <sup>a</sup>	Self-Identity	1	1.1%	1.6%
	Discrimination	6	6.9%	9.7%
	<i>Ummah</i> under attack	4	4.6%	6.5%
	Sisterhood belonging	7	8.0%	11.3%
	Religious Duty	33	37.9%	53.2%
	State-Building	20	23.0%	32.3%
	Financial Security	8	9.2%	12.9%
	Marriage	7	8.0%	11.3%
	Adventure	1	1.1%	1.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>140.3%</b>	

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

**Audience**

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Specific person	95	16.2	16.2	16.2
Muslim sisters	41	7.0	7.0	23.2
Muslims in general	71	12.1	12.1	35.3
Non-Muslims	18	3.1	3.1	38.4
Not specified	361	61.6	61.6	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Audience Perception**

<b>Audience Perception</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Enemy	32	5.5	5.5	5.5
Ally	137	23.4	23.4	28.8
Not specified	417	71.2	71.2	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Recruitment**

<b>Recruitment</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Yes	108	18.4	18.4	18.4
No	478	81.6	81.6	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

**Discourse Tone**

<b>Discourse Tone</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Aggressive	59	10.1	10.1	10.1
Neutral	372	63.5	63.5	73.5
Affective	155	26.5	26.5	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

### Relation to Violence

Relation to Violence	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Support	112	19.1	19.1	19.1
Against	4	.7	.7	19.8
Not specified	470	80.2	80.2	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

### Discourse – Multiple Responses

Discourse	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Discourse <sup>a</sup> <i>Kuffar/Kaffir</i>	39	8.5%	13.7%
<i>Mujahid</i>	33	7.2%	11.6%
<i>Muhajirah</i>	14	3.1%	4.9%
<i>Ukthi/Akhawat/Sister</i>	68	14.8%	23.9%
<i>Khilafah/Dawla/Dar al-Islam</i>	98	21.4%	34.4%
<i>Dar al-kufr</i>	14	3.1%	4.9%
<i>Shaheed/Martyr</i>	49	10.7%	17.2%
Kill	22	4.8%	7.7%
<i>Dunya</i>	9	2.0%	3.2%
<i>Jannah</i>	21	4.6%	7.4%
<i>Hijrah</i>	40	8.7%	14.0%
Jihad	24	5.2%	8.4%
Sharia	20	4.4%	7.0%
<i>Ummah</i>	7	1.5%	2.5%
Total	458	100.0%	160.7%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1 = yes.

### ISIS Relation

ISIS Relation	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	207	35.3	35.3	35.3
No	379	64.7	64.7	100.0
Total	586	100.0	100.0	

### ISIS Portrayal

ISIS Portrayal		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Positive	193	32.9	93.2	93.2
	Neutral	11	1.9	5.3	98.6
	Negative	3	.5	1.4	100.0
	Total	207	35.3	100.0	
Missing	-1	379	64.7		
	Total	586	100.0		

### Contingency Table of Migration Related and Recruitment

			Recruitment		Total
			Yes	No	
<b>Migration Related</b>	Yes	Count	89	40	129
		% within Migration Related	69.0%	31.0%	100.0%
		% within Recruitment	82.4%	8.4%	22.0%
	No	Count	19	438	457
		% within Migration Related	4.2%	95.8%	100.0%
		% within Recruitment	17.6%	91.6%	78.0%
Total	Count	108	478	586	
	% within Migration Related	18.4%	81.6%	100.0%	
	% within Recruitment	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

$\chi^2 (1, N = 586) = 281.298, p < .001 \phi$  Cramer = .693

**Contingency Table of Audience Perception and Discourse Tone**

			Discourse tone			Total
			Aggressive	Neutral	Affective	
<b>Audience Perception</b>	Enemy	Count	18	13	1	32
		% within Audience Perception	56.3%	40.6%	3.1%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	30.5%	3.5%	0.6%	5.5%
	Ally	Count	4	78	55	137
		% within Audience Perception	2.9%	56.9%	40.1%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	6.8%	21.0%	35.5%	23.4%
	Not Specified	Count	37	281	99	417
		% within Audience Perception	8.9%	67.4%	23.7%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	62.7%	75.5%	63.9%	71.2%
Total	Count	59	372	155	586	
	% within Audience Perception	10.1%	63.5%	26.5%	100.0%	
	% within Discourse Tone	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

$\chi^2 (4, N = 586) = 97.345, p < .001 \phi$  Cramer = .288

**Contingency Table of Relation to Violence and Discourse Tone**

			Discourse Tone			Total
			Aggressive	Neutral	Affective	
<b>Relation to Violence</b>	Support	Count	45	53	14	112
		% within Relation to Violence	40.2%	47.3%	12.5%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	76.3%	14.2%	9.0%	19.1%
	Against	Count	0	1	3	4
		% within Relation to Violence	0.0%	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	0.0%	0.3%	1.9%	0.7%
	Not specified	Count	14	318	138	470
		% within Relation to Violence	3.0%	67.7%	29.4%	100.0%
		% within Discourse Tone	23.7%	85.5%	89.0%	80.2%
Total	Count	59	372	155	586	
	% within Relation to Violence	10.1%	63.5%	26.5%	100.0%	
	% within Discourse Tone	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

$\chi^2 (4, N = 586) = 144.864, p < .001 \phi$  Cramer = .352



## 8.2 Appendix B: Glossary

**Akhawat:** sisters.

**Alhamdulillah:** Arabic expression that means “praise be to God”.

**Allahu Akbar:** Arabic expression that usually means “Allah is the greatest”.

**Dabiq:** ISIS propaganda magazine.

**Dar al-kufr:** Land of disbelief. A term used by ISIS to refer to all the countries that are not ruled by Sharia law.

**Dar al-Islam:** Land of Islam governed by Sharia law. Term used by ISIS to refer to the territory under its control.

**Dawla:** In Arabic is the word for state. ISIS supporters use it to refer to ISIS and its territory.

**Dunya:** This world of life, as opposed to the Hereafter.

**Fardh:** Religious duty commanded by Allah.

**Fardh ayn:** Individual duty. It refers to tasks that every Muslim has to perform.

**Haqq:** Arabic word for truth. Also known as Al-Haqq.

**Haram:** Refers to an act that is forbidden by Allah.

**Hijrah:** Migration, emigration. Also known as hijra. It refers to the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina and it refers to the act of leaving a place to seek sanctuary or freedom from persecution. Nowadays, ISIS members use the term to refer to their migration from a non-Islamic country to the purported Islamic State.

**InshaAllah:** Arabic expression that means, “If God wills”. Also written Inshallah.

**Jannah:** Paradise, heaven.

**Jihad:** Arab word that means ‘struggle’ or ‘strive’. It is divided between the inner spiritual struggle, also known as ‘greater jihad’ and the outer physical struggle to protect Islam, or ‘lesser jihad’. The lesser jihad can take a violent or a non-violent form. Therefore, using Jihad as a synonym of ‘holy war’ is incorrect. However, both the West and ISIS employ the term as a synonym of war.

**Jilbab:** long and loose-fit robe that covers the entire body except for the face, the hands and the head.

**Kafir:** (plural kuffar) a person who refuses to submit himself to Allah (God), a disbeliever in God. ISIS uses the term to refer to all those who are considered disbelievers. Also known as kaffir or kufr.

**Khilafah:** Arab word for caliphate. ISIS uses it to refer to the territory under its control. In the summer of 2014 ISIS proclaimed the creation of a Caliphate in the Syria and Iraq.

**Kik:** Encrypted message application.

**Kunya:** A type of surname or proper name common in Arabic, which means ‘father of’ or ‘mother of’.

**Makar:** Women’s hostel for unmarried women in ISIS. Also known as maqqar.

**Mujahid:** (plural mujahideen) A Muslim fighter waging military jihad against the enemies of Islam.

**Muhajirah:** (plural muhajirat) Female migrant.

**Niqab:** Cloth that covers the head and the face, but not the eyes.

**Qitaal:** fighting. This word is used in the Quran to refer to the actual fight, whereas jihad refers to struggle in general. These terms have been confused in some interpretations of the Quran.

**Quran:** Holy book of Islam, it is believed to be the revelations from God.

**Salafism:** Ultraconservative movement within Sunni Islam that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and supports the old traditions such as the implementation of the Sharia law.

**Shaheed:** A martyr, someone who dies in the name of Allah. Also known as Shahid.

**Sham:** Arabic name for the territory of Syria in the Middle Ages.

**Sharia:** The Islamic moral code and religious law. ISIS embraces a very strict interpretation of Sharia and it has been established in the territories under their control.

**Sunnah:** Book of the deeds, teachings and sayings of the prophet Muhammad.

**Takfir:** The pronouncement of a Muslim as an apostate or non-believer. It is a legal categorization for which the sentence has traditionally been the death. Therefore, it is usually understood by jihadist as a religious authorization to kill the subject.

**Ukhti:** Sister.

**Ummah:** The worldwide Muslim community.

**Wallahi:** by God.

**Ya3ni:** Arabic word that means like.