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"Support for sisters please": Comparing the Online Roles of al-Qaeda Women and their Islamic State Counterparts

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Abstract

This study evaluates female roles in pro-jihadist terrorism by examining online content. Data was collected from 36 Twitter accounts of women associated with al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliated groups for a period of six months. The purpose for collecting this data was to: 1) compare how traditional female roles, as constructed within a jihadi-Salafist ideology, are reproduced and challenged on social media; 2) and determine the extent that AQ-affiliated women conform to roles outlined in Huey's classification of females in pro-Islamic State (IS) Twitter networks. The results of this study reveal that women's traditional roles in pro-jihadist activities are reproduced on Twitter. Although the women appear to be empowered by the anonymity that Twitter provides, their roles remain largely constrained to those in supportive positions. AQ women mainly use Twitter to share the ideological beliefs of AQ and provide emotional support for fellow AQ members. In comparison with IS, AQ females subscribe to only a portion of the roles outlined in Huey's classification.

Keywords

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Hillary Peladeau

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"I have a weapon. It's to write. It's to speak out. That's my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb." – Malika El Aroud, 2008[1]

The 'holy warrior of al-Qaeda', Malika El Aroud, confronts traditional gender boundaries within pro-jihadist organizations by using the Internet to inspire fellow AQ sisters and brothers. Married to a convicted AQ member responsible for operating pro-AQ websites, Malika learned the skill of maneuvering cyberspace to support jihad. She advocates for women's ability to participate in jihad without defying or compromising religious restraints, or abandoning wifely or motherly responsibilities. AQ women are conventionally limited to supportive positions within the organization, serving predominantly in an emotional, ideological and logistical capacity. In the real world they do not generally perform operational functions, such as direct combat or martyrdom operations[2]. As indicated by Malika's statement and actions, the Internet opens up a domain where women are able to extend their support by communicating with people all over the world and sharing AQ ideologies and goals, thus undertaking their commitment to radical jihad.

Social media sites provide a space within which like-minded people can interact, with fewer spatial or temporal constraints. Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet (2016) define social media as:

> a group of web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible. (p.4)

Pro-jihadist organizations have tactically used the Internet since its establishment to share propaganda and gain support (Seib & Janbek, 2011). Their use of social media sites (e.g.,

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[1] As cited in the *New York Times* article by Sciolino and Mekhennet (2008).
[2] With the exception of the 2005 emergence of female suicide bombers concentrated to 'AQ in Iraq' (Stone & Patillo, 2011).

Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr) is an extension of this tactic, generating considerable discussion and concern in recent news and research. Jihadist organizations have gone from using static websites for simple group exposure, to "*Jihad 2.0*"[3], in which social media sites are used to advertise, educate, radicalize, and recruit new members. Terrorists are now able to do more than blindly advertise to potential sympathizers; new technologies also allow for direct communication among leaders and sympathizers.

Although counter-terrorist agencies are generally aware of how terrorist groups use social media, the specific ways in which *women* use these sites to support and engage in terrorist activities remains greatly understudied. While pro-jihadist women's roles are mainly within the private realm, social media opens up an opportunity of a new public role for these women (Qazi, 2011). Aside from cases like Malika's or news reports regarding the emergence of "fan-girls" supporting IS through online media outlets (Huey & Witmer, 2015), the extent of female radicalism and the precise roles that women have in the online pro-jihadist realm is relatively unknown. To address this deficit, this study explores the relationship between gender, social media and terrorism among pro-jihadist groups. Using data collected over a six-month period, this study analyzes the Twitter content posted by female members of AQ and AQ-affiliated groups. This analysis allows me to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does content posted by pro-jihadist women on social media reproduce traditional female roles[4] within pro-jihadist networks? To what extent does this content challenge these roles?
2. To what extent do female al-Qaeda Twitter users conform to the roles found within Huey's classification of women within pro-Islamic State networks[5]?
3. Is there anything in the social media content posted by users affiliated with these groups that introduces a new understanding about *women* and *pro-jihadist terrorism*?

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[3] *Jihad 2.0* is Andre's (2014) term to describe using new media (i.e., social media) to do jihad.
[4] Women in pro-jihadist organizations customarily assume positions that are 'supportive' (Von Knop, 2007).
[5] See *Appendix A* for Huey's (2015) framework.

This thesis is divided into the following sections. Chapter 2 explores current research on the significant conflicts that fuel pro-jihadist violent extremism, with particular concentration on AQ. AQ's history offers an explanation for the group's present ideological disputes and opponents. An understanding of this history is critical to understanding the content posted by AQ members on Twitter. Further, the section investigates the relevant literature on the traditional roles of women within pro-jihadist organizations in order to compare similarities and differences in the roles they adopt in their online and offline worlds. Pro-jihadists' social media strategies are examined in pursuance of understanding how females are using the sites in relationship with the group at large and how their actions impact the organizations' goals and the operation of women within the groups. Chapter 3 outlines the specific procedures used to investigate the research questions and the ways in which the data was qualitatively collected and analyzed. Specifically, it explains how 36 women with Twitter profiles associated with AQ or an AQ-affiliate were followed for six months. The content posted on their profiles (including tweets, biographies, and pictures) was collected daily and sorted according to a number of coding strategies. The section elaborates on Huey's (2015) classification of IS women, which this study has adapted and applied to the 36 AQ women within the sample. Finally, Chapter 4 addresses the findings of the above research questions in detail. This project is intended to not only generate a greater understanding of how gender, pro-jihadist terrorism, and social media are interrelated, but also to produce ideas for future research to help establish appropriate policies that respond to the growing threat of women in online pro-jihadist terrorism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Pro-Jihadist Terrorism

Terrorism has been defined as an action that intimidates the public and/or threatens the regular functioning of a society (Ortbals & Poloni-Staudinger, 2014). Terrorist acts are intended to influence social processes, including political agendas, economic endeavours and the ways in which people interact with one another (Turk, 2004). This section specifically investigates *pro-jihadist* terrorism, with emphasis on AQ, to identify its origins, motivations, and deviations from Islam.

Pro-jihadist terrorist groups develop ideologies and goals on reinterpreted notions of Islam[6] (Gonzalez-Perez, 2011; Qazi, 2011). For example, the Islamic obligation to wage *jihad*[7] has been operated by pro-jihadists to fit within a context that serves their goals (Lahoud, 2014). Lesser jihad, also known as defensive jihad, is every Muslim's duty to defend itself and Islam. However, there is now much disagreement among Islamic scholars on what qualifies as a time when Islam needs defending, or what means are allowed to be taken (Lahoud, 2014). Jihad has been construed by extremists to justify the battles they partake in and violent measures that they may use in order to meet their military and strategic needs (Bloom, 2011; Cook, 2004)

AQ[8] is a transnational, jihadi-Salafist[9] organization founded by Osama bin Laden in 1989, following the Soviet's Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011).

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[6] The foundation of *ijtihad* within Islamic law acts as a gateway for Islamic literature to be 'radically' reinterpreted (Gonzalez-Perez, 2011; Qazi, 2011).

[7] *Jihad* – literally meaning "to strive"– is a routine duty required for every Muslim. It includes two types: the greater and lesser jihad (Cook, 2004; Gonzalez-Perez, 2011).

[8] "Al-Qaeda" means "the base" in Arabic.

[9] *Jihadi-Salafism* is a specific type of pro-jihadist ideological thinking that stems from the eighteenth century Salafi movement. It is a Sunni Islamic belief system articulating the need for a 'pure' Islam through strict interpretations of the Quran in order to recreate the romanticized 'perfection' of early Islam (Bloom, 2011; Gonzalez-Perez, 2011).

Inspired by Azzam and Qutb[10], Bin Laden formed AQ to establish a Muslim caliphate, unite

Muslims against non-believers, and defend Islam from the threat of apostates (Bloom, 2011;

Hall, 2007; Lahoud, 2014). Malka (2014) claims that at its formation, AQ's primary goal was to

wage global jihad against the West[11], and was less immediately concerned with dogmatic

questions involving the implementation of Sharia law and establishing a caliphate. The

organization emphasized constructing and preserving a relationship between 'jihadism' and the

Muslim masses, and was apprehensive about dividing Muslims through extensive violence

(Malka, 2014). Essentially, AQ intended to take a gradual approach towards its goals,

establishing short term initiatives that led to long term changes. For example, rather than forcing

all Muslims into jihadist-based ideologies, AQ would educate Muslims about pro-jihadism

before implementing Sharia law. However, there has been a gap between AQ's intentions and the

reality of its actions. For example, contrary to AQ's claims, Ibrahim (2014) argues that AQ does

not wish to unite all Muslims as it is predominately Sunni and is known to commit acts of

violence against Shias[12]. The current Syrian civil war may lend support to this as Jahbat al-Nusra

(JN) – an affiliated group of AQ in Syria (Holliday, 2013) – disputes with Bashar al-Assad, an

Alawite, which is a branch of Shia Islam[13] (Walker, 2006).

  Since AQ is a transnational organization, it contains a network of affiliated groups such

as JN, al-Shabaab (AQ in Somalia), and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)[14]. In fact,

AQ's affiliates occupy more territory than any pro-jihadist group ever has (Ibrahim, 2014). It

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[10] Abdullah Yusuf Azzam and Sayyid Qutb are prominent Islamic scholars.
[11] 'The West' refers to the Western world, generally including some parts of Europe and North America. It is in contrast to 'the Middle East'.
[12] Muslims are divided into two predominant branches: Sunni and Shia. Although both are part of Islam, they differ in laws, rituals and interpretations of the Quran, causing conflict between the two (Khurshid, 2013).
[13] However, Holliday (2013) also notes that Assad is massacring Sunni Muslims, which may explain why JN is retaliating.
[14] These are the AQ-affiliated groups that were represented in the sample for the current study.

appears, however, that AQ is more of an 'inspirational ideal' for various pro-jihadist groups rather than a formal organization (Bloom, 2011). AQ acts as an umbrella for various groups that share similar jihadist-based goals. Vertigans (2014) places AQ's use of single narratives (e.g., the rise of Islam) as the reason for its growth. It is easy for smaller groups to join AQ, or claim allegiance to AQ, due to AQ's decentralized, non-lateral leadership and vague set of rules and ideologies (Sageman, 2008).

Although affiliates go through the 'swearing in' process[15], there are differences in the objectives and day-to-day operations among the groups. For example, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was originally an affiliate of AQ. In 2004, the group was led by al-Zarqawi who was notorious for using violence and brutality (Kirdar, 2011). AQ leaders were concerned that his intense and unusual tactics (e.g., female suicide bombers) could jeopardize AQ's long term goals (Stone & Patillo, 2011). Al-Zarqawi was more focused on the sectarian war and the attacks on Sunnis, as opposed to Bin Laden who was greatly concerned with US targets (Malka, 2014). By 2010, AQI was adopted by al-Baghdadi[16] and has since rebelled against AQ, renaming itself the "Islamic State of Iraq", now known as simply the "Islamic State" (Malka, 2014).

Both AQ and IS operate within a jihadi-Salafist "radical milieu"[17] (Malthaner & Waldmann, 2014), and therefore wage violent jihad in order to articulate Salafist-oriented objectives (Malka, 2014). However, IS and AQ deviate in their individual approaches and goals. Both groups want to create caliphates; however, IS believes that a caliphate must be established immediately while AQ has chosen to wait (Malka, 2014). Ibrahim (2014) notes that IS uses more violent approaches than AQ; this may be because they pursue change more aggressively in order

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[15] Affiliates are required to swear allegiance to AQ's current leader, Al-Zawahiri (Qazi, 2011).
[16] Al-Baghdadi is the current leader of IS.
[17] They are composed of individuals who share similar perspectives as part of a collective identity based on Salafism.

to establish their caliphate sooner. It also appears that IS is not only less tolerant of Shia Muslims compared to AQ, but also more concerned with the wrongdoings of Israel, Jordan and Jewish people in general (Malka, 2014). Furthermore, while AQ's long term goal is to expel the United States from Muslim countries in order to establish an Islamic caliphate, IS's concern is with fighting all people who are not with them, even those who identify as Muslims (Stone & Patillo, 2011).

2.2. Women and Pro-Jihadist Terrorism

Traditional Islamic law is based on a patriarchal social order (Kassam, 2010). Often cited as the result of the prevailing gender relations in pre-Islamic culture (Ahmed, 1992; Kassam, 2010), conventional Muslim societies continued the practice by incorporating a gendered division of labour under male authority (Roald, 2001, p.184). Male roles were historically concentrated in the public sphere and female roles were relegated to the private sphere, where they predominantly cared for the family as wives and mothers (Lahoud, 2014). Today, countries that adopt Islamic law *may* be influenced by pre-modern gender ideals (Kassam, 2010; Schneider, 2014), but gender norms do not always apply in the same way.[18]

Since the implementation of Islamic law is a leading objective for pro-jihadists, it is no surprise that their organizations follow a patriarchal social order. Due to the constraints of normative femininity and proscribed gender norms (Parashar, 2010), women in pro-jihadist organizations almost exclusively assume positions that are *supportive* (Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2014; Von Knop, 2007). The primary objectives of these women are generally to care for the family and the destitute, and preserve the integrity of pro-jihadism by maintaining current and future triumphs for the movement (Von Knop, 2007). As outlined in "What Roles Can Sisters

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[18] There have been role changes and developments for women in some Muslim societies (e.g., female political participation in Iraq; Halper, 2010).

Play in Jihad"[19], women are to support both the family and society. Their roles are divided into the following categories: *emotionally supportive, ideologically supportive,* and *logistically supportive.*

Women provide emotional and moral support as mothers, wives, and sisters to men who are in combat (Stone & Patillo, 2011). Wives are to encourage their husbands to go and fight, remove any obstacles keeping them from battle, and ensure that the families are properly cared for during their absence (Cook, 2005; Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals 2013; Von Knop, 2007). Mothers are to give birth to children and raise them to love jihad (Lahoud, 2006; Qazi, 2011). Hoyel et al.'s (2015) investigation into IS women confirms that women predominantly play a domestic role in these organizations, "support[ing] their husbands and rais[ing] their children to be the next generation of *mujahideen*" (p.32). Aside from motherly and wifely duties, women also operate as 'sisters' of Islam by encouraging and making *duas*[20] for all those within the jihad community (Lahoud, 2014). Women commonly form "radical sisterhoods" (Von Knop, 2007, p. 406) in order discuss common themes among them such as how to encourage men to go and fight (Qazi, 2011).

Radical sisters are also responsible for sharing the radical-Salafist ideology (Von Knop, 2007, p. 406). Accordingly, women are accountable for intelligence collecting, educating, and disseminating propaganda (e.g., pro-jihadist literature) pertaining to their pro-jihadist groups (Gonzalez-Perez, 2011; Hoyle et al., 2015; Ness, 2005). The maintenance and growth of the organization is dependent on women's roles. Technological advancements such as social media have increased the scope within which women are able to broadcast propaganda as it is now easier to create and share content (Rabasa & Benard, 2014). In fact, Klausen (2015) found that IS

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[19] The article is from *al-khansaa,* an online pro-jihadist magazine for females.
[20] Prayers.

women used Twitter to spread mass messages (through tweets and videos) from frontline fighters to bring attention to the group. Aside from direct propaganda sharing, women are also responsible for educating others. The prolongation of these terrorist organizations relies on women's abilities to instruct "the next generation" of jihadists about the ideology, as well as preach to the wider masses (*al-khansaa* as cited in Brown, 2011, Gonzalez-Perez, 2011; Lahoud, 2014; Qazi, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). This could include, for example, the "moral policing"[21] of other women to uphold gender proscriptions among pro-jihadist societies (Amarasingam, 2015; Parashar, 2011).

Women further maintain their roles as supporters by proving logistical backing in pro-jihadist organizations. Generally, their responsibilities include administrative duties (e.g., managing bank accounts, translating documents, and bookkeeping), planning, fundraising, and recruiting for the organization (Lahoud, 2014; Stone & Patillo, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). For example, in the Kashmiri conflict[22], women were in charge of planning protests and organizing the logistics of events such as where and when they would take place (Parashar, 2010). Although wives are responsible for sending their husbands to fight, all women are also responsible for recruiting males to join jihad (Von Knop, 2007). Cook (2005) argues that, within a pro-jihadist ideology, women are a temptation that can keep men from doing jihad since they are a constant reminder of this world, and the point of martyrdom and jihad is to focus on the *next* world. Consequently, women are to use their abilities to catch men's attention and allure them in order to divert their energy into jihad. Malika al Aroud[23] did this by using the Internet to "bully Muslim men to go and fight and rally women to join the [AQ] cause" (Sciolino & Mekhennet,

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[21] "Moral policing" is to act as a vigilante to uphold morality within a nation or religion (Amarasingam, 2015).

[22] The Kashmiri conflict was between India and Pakistan (Stack, 2011).

[23] Malika El Aroud is the female AQ Internet warrior discussed in the 'Introduction'.

2008). Less frequently, women have been mentioned as nurses, taking care of wounded *mujahedeen* (Cook, 2005).

Although women's roles are most often 'supportive' in pro-jihadist organizations, there have been occurrences of female fighters and female suicide bombers (FSB)[24] throughout historical Islam and contemporary pro-jihadist movements. For example, women fought in battles during the time of the Prophet (Cook, 2005; Ness, 2005; Qazi, 2011). More recently, FSB were present in pro-jihadist fueled-conflicts including the Chechen-Russian conflict (Cook, 2005; Ness, 2005; Von Knop, 2007), Palestine and Hamas (Gonzalez-Perez 2010; 2011) and by AQI (Cook, 2005). Nonetheless, female fighters and FSB remain the controversial phenomenon, often referred to in literature by pro-jihadist scholars with ambiguous tones and judgments (Qazi, 2011). The debate concerns whether women are 'able' to participate, and if they 'should' participate (Cook, 2005; Lahoud, 2014; Patillo, 2011).

Some literature (Lahoud, 2014; Ness, 2005) discusses the idea of FSB and female fighters as a symbol of empowerment for women within pro-jihadist organizations. This role change has the potential to challenge social norms, presenting an opportunity to redefine the gendered power structures among pro-jihadist organizations. More commonly, however, 'active' roles performed by women are argued as mere tactical strategies by pro-jihadist organizations. Due to traditional gender stereotypes about pro-jihadist organizations such as women only working in the private realm or the framing of women as 'victims' (e.g., Chechen conflict), they are not often expected to be suicide bombers, thus adding the element of surprise (Ness, 2005; O'Rourke, 2009; Parashar, 2014; Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals, 2013; Qazi, 2011; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011; Stack, 2011). O'Rourke's (2009) comparative study of FSB and MSB supports this, ruling that females are often more successful at fulfilling attacks because they are better at

[24] Operational martyrdom and FSB are used interchangeably.

concealment. FSB also create favourable publicity for organizations (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals, 2013; Stone & Patillo, 2011). In fact, Bloom (2011) found that an attack by a woman can receive eight times more attention than a similar attack by a man.

Some have argued that even though more women are participating in religious-based terrorism, this does not mean that traditional gender norms have necessarily changed within the terrorist organizations that commit these acts (Ness, 2005). Women's involvement in direct terrorist activities has done nothing to level-out the hegemonic power structures within pro-jihadist organizations (Bloom, 2011). Gonzalez-Perez (2011) argues that there is a false "Islamization of FSB"; rather than seeing these women as 'martyrs of Islam', the organizations use them as "expendable tools and economic weapons" (p.59). Ultimately, the future of pro-jihadist groups and their use of FSB and female combatants is uncertain. Stone and Patillo (2011) doubt that FSB will become a regular occurrence though, since there are still disputes about their prohibited depiction within Islamic law.

2.2.1. Women and AQ. AQ's social values are generally similar to conventional values prescribed by other pro-jihadists: "women should serve the private, not public, sphere" (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals, 2013, p.42). In support, Bloom (2011) claims that AQ primarily consists of men and its power base is "decidedly masculine" (p.207). The patriarchal structure within AQ arranges women into positions that assist (e.g., as organizers, proselytizers, teachers, translators, and fundraisers; Bloom, 2011, p. 207) the male warriors (Qazi, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). However, these gendered social roles are not consistent throughout all AQ-affiliates, and vary by location (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals, 2013). Not only were FSB used in AQI under the command of al-Zarqawi (Lahoud, 2014; Parashar, 2011), but they have also been used by other affiliates in Morocco, Egypt, and Maghreb (Bloom, 2011; Von Knop, 2007).

Although there have been actual cases of FSB, and *fatwas*[25] supporting female participation have been made by prominent pro-jihadist leaders (al-Ayyiri, n.d., as cited in Cook, 2005), most radical Salafist scholars opine that women should only take supportive roles (Stone & Patillo, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). Although not a religious scholar, Osama bin Laden stated that women should be supporters, promoters and facilitators, and placed great importance on women due to their ability to influence and encourage men to engage in jihad (Qazi, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). The support they give is not only essential for maintaining AQ's ideological and operational functioning, but also argued to be more important and beneficial to the organization compared to engaging in acts of suicide bombing (Von Knop, 2007). This position is further supported by Umaima Hassan Ahmed Mohammed Hassan[26]. While she does not reject the idea of women participating in suicide bombing, she argues that women are a better use for the movement by "providing monetary support, collecting sensitive information, recruiting, […] maintaining the home and raising children properly" (as cited in Qazi, 2011, p.38). Although using FSB is a strategic tool and a propagandist technique, the smooth functioning of the organization depends on women.

2.3. Social Media and Pro-Jihadist Terrorism

While various media sources (e.g., print media, pictures, radio and videos) have been used by terrorist organizations in the past – such as AQ, which gained a notorious reputation for releasing videos on AQ websites following the events of 9/11 (Farewell, 2011) – the threat has evolved with the advent of social media (Thompson, 2011; Weimann, 2014). Initially, the Internet created an opportunity for pro-jihadists to share propaganda with vast numbers of people from all over the world and radicalize accordingly within a 'broadcaster-receiver' relationship

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[25] A *fatwa* is a non-binding religious ruling made by a scholar on a matter of Islamic law (*fatwa*, 2013).

[26] Umaima Hassan Ahmed Mohammed Hassan is the wife of AQ leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

(Andre, 2014; Gonzalez-Perez, 2011). The Internet offered a new sense of anonymity, an inexpensive means of communication, and a way to share sensitive information such as online manuals for making bombs (Benson, 2014). The development of *Jihad 2.0* extends these Internet advantages by blurring the distinction between 'broadcaster and recipient' (Andre, 2014). As opposed to static websites, social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube) accelerate the spread of information as leaders and sympathizers are able to directly communicate with one another (Stone & Patillo, 2011; Weimann, 2008; 2014). In fact, almost 90% of terrorist communications are now believed to occur through social media (Mielach, 2012, as cited in Marcu & Balteanu, 2014).

Social media reduces the limitations caused by spatial boundaries, and in turn enables transnational communication among those who share jihadist-based ideologies (Sageman, 2008; Thompson, 2011). For example, Bergen (2015) testified that pro-jihadist militants in the United States (US) rarely interact *physically* with extremists any more, but rather, are increasingly inspired through social media to carry out lone-wolf operations. Social media creates a space for jihadists to directly propagate and influence wider audiences since they are user-friendly, free, and reverse the flow of information as they no longer have to wait for a visitor to access their website (Andre, 2014; Weimann, 2014). The sites act as symbolic battlefields in which pro-jihadists are able recruit supporters, threaten opponents, and conduct psychological warfare such as posting executions (Farewell, 2015; Klasuen, 2015).

Although social media sites create a realm for fostering group cohesion, they also serve as spaces for group competition among pro-jihadist groups (Andre, 2014). Social media allows for the 'single narrative' of AQ to be challenged, and serves as a better forum for debate (Vergani, 2015). Since there is no single and distinct leader on social media, it is an area for

various jihadist-based organizations to discuss and contest conflicting positions about pro-jihadism.

Aside from propaganda sharing, psychological warfare and debating, pro-jihadists also use social media sites to educate, fundraise, and directly recruit new members to their organizations (Fisher, 2015; Qazi, 2011, Sanderson, Russakis & Barber, 2015; Von Knop, 2007; Weimann, 2014). Pro-jihadist Internet communities shape the Internet into a virtual classroom space, referred to by Rothenberger (2012) as the "University of Jihad". As groups form through social networking sites, there is a "spread of vital information" (Benson, 2014, p.302), including instructional manuals on how to launch lone-wolf attacks, migrate to Syria, or participate in the fighting (Huey & Kalyal, 2015). Notably, AQ used Twitter to disseminate the eleventh issue of *Inspire*[27]*,* which communicates AQ's philosophies and instructs operational techniques (Weimann, 2014). Moreover, pro-jihadist groups also use social media to fundraise (Hoyle et al., 2015; Thompson, 2011; Weimann 2014); for example, the social media-based fundraising campaign called "wage jihad with your money" (Sanderson et al., 2015, p. 44) publicized the demand for donations in order to support fighters by providing equipment and ammunition for the 'Holy War'[28]. Furthermore, as pro-jihadist groups gain more attention via social media, there is a greater potential to recruit individuals with distinctive skill sets that would not otherwise be attainable (Benson, 2014; Rothenberger, 2012). Not only can pro-jihadists now recruit 'foreigners', but they are now able to deliberately approach individuals who have the necessary proficiencies to help build the caliphate (Bergen, 2015; Gonzalez-Perez, 2011).

2.3.1. Twitter. Brym et al. (2014) found that social media (i.e., Twitter and Facebook) played a significant role in the Egyptian uprising since it allowed for people to form online

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[27] *Inspire* is AQ's English Internet-based magazine (Weimann, 2014).
[28] The 'Holy War' is a common, yet incorrect, translation of *jihad* that derives from defensive jihad and is widely accepted by pro-jihadists (Qazi, 2011).

communities based on shared grievances, and thus communicate, plan and facilitate social

action. Networks grew as individuals realized that others were in the same positions as

themselves (Herrera, 2014). Although both Fuch (2012) and Brym et al., (2014) conclude that

social media did not cause the uprising – nor does it cause revolutions in general – it is an

apparatus to support change. Similarly, pro-jihadist organizations use Twitter to circulate their

objectives and create change. Twitter is not only capable of spreading propaganda to an

international audience in real-time coverage, but it is also used by pro-jihadists to communicate

both with sympathizers and amongst themselves (Weimann, 2015). Klausen's (2015) findings

support this, ruling that Twitter "dramatically expanded the organizations' reach and efficiency"

(p.20) as it was used by both the fighters and ideological supporters (Magdy et al., 2015).

Although Twitter is the second most popular social media site (Marcu & Balteanu, 2014),

Weimann (2014) claims that it is "terrorists' favourite Internet service" (p. 8). Since it provides

real-time coverage, there is no time for in-depth analysis of posts, which means 'breaking news'

can be falsified in pro-jihadists' favour. Additionally, Twitter's use of hashtags[29] makes

discovery of, and communication with, other pro-jihadists easy. As was used by participants in

the Egyptian uprising (Herrera, 2014; Thompson, 2011), hashtags can be used to find others who

share similar values and organize events. In fact, Magdy et al. (2015) used 'hashtag searches' to

access and expose IS members' Twitter behaviour. However, hashtags are not always detectable

and useful as a search mechanism to those outside the pro-jihadist group. For example, IS

members have been known to use an app that is able to evade Twitter's spam-detection

algorithms when posting 'radical' tweets (Farewell, 2015).

As much as social media can be used by terrorists to accomplish their goals, it can also be

used for counter-terrorism purposes (Benson, 2014; Bloom, 2011; Farewell, 2015). Twitter

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[29] A Twitter hashtag is a way to categorize tweets based on keywords (Twitter, 2016).

prohibits specific material from being posted, including but not limited to violence, threats and graphic content (Twitter, 2015). Failure to follow these rules can result in account suspensions. Indeed there are tweets that violate Twitter's rules[30], resulting in some pro-jihadist linked accounts being suspended.

However, suspensions are not always effective at reprimanding pro-jihadist users. Amarasingam (2015) claims that, for some pro-jihadists, having one's Twitter account suspended is considered part of jihad, and that each suspension represents 'account martyrdom'. In fact, Twitter handles belonging to pro-jihadists will indicate the number of times they have made a new account after being deactivated (Amarasingam, 2015), which may indicate the sacrifice they have made. Rather than deterring users from posting prohibited content, suspensions may perpetuate disruptive behavior.

2.4. Women, Social Media, and Pro-Jihadist Terrorism

There is an abundance of literature on 'women and pro-jihadist terrorism' and 'social media and pro-jihadist terrorism' *separately*. Understanding how the three variables of women, pro-jihadist terrorism, and social media interrelate, however, has been greatly understudied. Although there are specific cases such as 'Jihad Jane', who used the Internet to fundraise money for operations in the US, Europe and Asia (Bloom, 2011, p.207), Malika El Aroud, who used the Internet to teach and recruit women and men into doing jihad on behalf of AQ (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortbals, 2013), or the development of the "IS fan-girl"[31] (Huey & Witmer, 2015), the specific roles that pro-jihadist women play on social media are largely unknown. Moreover, the ways in which these roles vary among groups are also undetermined. Both Vergani (2015)

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[30] For example, Klausen's (2015) study indicates that over 40% of posts are related to 'reporting from battle'; these posts include "pictures of dead martyrs, pictures or discussion of battles, reporting current locations and/or activities related to battle" (p.11).
[31] See *Appendix A* for Huey's description of the 'IS fan-girl'.

and Andre (2014) argue that the single narrative of AQ has been widely reinterpreted on social media since there is no way for one jihadist leader to control the message. Therefore, a better understanding is needed about the distinction between pro-jihadist terrorist groups and the roles that women have within each of them online.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used qualitative content analysis to explore the roles that AQ women adopt on

Twitter and how these roles vary between AQ and IS. To do this, tweets were collected on a

daily basis for six months from women within AQ-affiliated networks. The content of the tweets

was then coded and analyzed to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does content posted by pro-jihadist women on social media reproduce
   traditional female roles within pro-jihadist networks? To what extent does this content
   challenge these roles?
2. To what extent do female al-Qaeda Twitter users conform to the roles found within
   Huey's classification of women within pro-Islamic State networks?
3. Is there anything in the social media content posted by users affiliated with these groups
   that introduces a new understanding about *women* and *pro-jihadist terrorism*?

3.1. Method of Inquiry

Qualitative content analysis allows for both the discovery of new insights and further

exploration into existing ones (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Accordingly, 36 Twitter accounts were

analyzed as a means of adding to current research on pro-jihadist activity online by exploring

two factors: gender roles and pro-jihadist ideologies. This study uses inductive reasoning to

uncover the relationship between gender, pro-jihadist terrorism, and social media. Data was

collected from a small sample of women in order to develop a larger understanding of the

experiences of women in pro-jihadist networks and how their roles vary online and across

groups.

3.2. Data Collection

From March 1, 2015 to August 31, 2015, more than 14,000 tweets were collected from

36 women in Twitter networks associated with AQ and AQ-affiliated groups[32]. The sample of

accounts was assembled using purposive snowball sampling, in which one Twitter account led to

uncovering further accounts within the network. The original account was identified as linked to

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[32] Affiliated groups used in the sample included JN, al-Shabaab, and AQAP.

AQ based on the content of the user's Twitter profile; her tweets, retweets, biography and pictures indicated support for AQ. After her Twitter relationships (i.e., who she followed, who was following her, and who she tweeted and retweeted at) were investigated, the sample expanded to 36 women over six months. A Twitter account was only followed and included in the sample if it met three criteria: (1) it belonged to a woman; (2) the user tweeted primarily in English; and (3) it was linked to a network associated with AQ or an AQ-affiliated group.

Female users were identified through their tweets, profile pictures and user names. Female *kunya*[33] (i.e., "umm", which means mother) and *nasab*[34], (i.e., "bint", which means daughter, and "ukht", which means sister), as well as direct gender references, indicated that a woman maintained the account. For example, one woman stated, "For those who mind sisters on twitter, can u please block me if you dislike my postings?" (User #25, 2015).

It was also common for the women to provide links to their other personal social networking sites including blogs and YouTube channels. When available, these links were used to provide further confirmation that the owner of the Twitter account was a woman and associated with AQ. Accounts were also deemed to be associated with AQ or an AQ affiliate based on the content within their profiles – particularly pictures. The Black Standard (see *Appendix B*), the flag often used by AQ, is a fairly reliable indicator of affiliation with AQ. Many women listed their location, which also helped substantiate group affiliation[35]. For example, if a user stated that they lived in Syria, it could help validate that they were affiliated with JN.

Profile pictures, biographies, and tweets were collected from all Twitter accounts that

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[33] The *kunya* is an honorific name. It indicates that the man or woman is the father or mother of a particular person (Notzon & Nesom, 2005, p. 20).
[34] The *nasab* is patronymic and starts with *bin* or *ibn*, which means "son of", or *bint*, which means "daughter of" (Notzon & Nesom, 2005, p. 20).
[35] Since AQ is a loose network of affiliated groups, it makes it difficult to verify where a user is located; therefore, locations were only used to help *corroborate* a group affiliation.

were followed. As each account was added, their profile pictures, biographies, and group affiliations were recorded in a Word document and re-documented again at the end of the collection period.

Tweets were collected daily using a Twitter analytics software called Twitonomy. This software downloaded daily newsfeeds and individual Twitter profiles into Excel spreadsheets (see *Appendix C*). The spreadsheets organized the tweets by date, time, and user, which made coding and analyzing six months of content more straightforward. Additionally, the daily backups provided a safeguard against deleted tweets and account suspensions or deactivations. Although there were 36 women in the sample, there were a total of 45 accounts that were analyzed. Some women had as many as six different accounts. For example: one women posted, "People still don't know who I am [emoji] Here's my old @'s [Twitter handle], [Twitter handle], [Twitter handle]" (User #22, 2015). Twitonomy offered a way to monitor women who changed their account names or who had created new accounts after suspension. Without daily backups, it would be difficult to connect Twitter accounts to the same women, affecting the reliability of the study and validity of the classifications.

3.3. Data Analysis

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) discuss three types of qualitative content analysis – conventional, directed, and summative – that differ based on the processes used to code data. This study used directed content analysis, which means the coding schemes were derived before and during the data analysis. Prior research provided a set of themes; other themes emerged from the research questions and through analysis of the data. The remainder of this section will explain the coding scheme used for each research question.

In order to determine whether traditional pro-jihadist female roles were maintained or

challenged on Twitter (research question #1), five broad categories were created based on current

literature on women's roles and existing categories used, such as those in Klausen's (2015)

study[36]. Relevant tweets were coded in the following categories:

- 'Active participation on the battlefield' tweets – include references to women in physical combat

    (including FSB). This category contains tweets that both advocate and criticize women's

    participation in violent activities.

- Emotionally supportive tweets – include references to religion and support for fellow AQ

    members (i.e., account shoutouts[37] or member mentions). Religious-related tweets could take the

    form of *dua* requests and religious advice.

- Ideologically supportive tweets – include educational tweets and propaganda content that

    reference AQ-related sociopolitical concerns including Muslim unity, as well as anti-US, anti-IS,

    anti-Shia, anti-Assad, and pro-jihadist beliefs. Educational tweets include how women use

    Twitter to educate and how women understand education within pro-jihadist network (i.e. how

    they feel about education and women's roles in it). They may also include 'religious instruction'

    such as references to *fatwas*, scripture, or prominent religious figures (e.g. Allah, Osama bin

    Laden, or Azzam).

- Logistically supportive tweets – include references to fundraising and recruiting for AQ.

- 'New roles' tweets – include content that is common among women in the sample, but not

    referenced in existing literature. These tweets suggest new roles for females within pro-jihadist

    groups (e.g. using Twitter to morally police on issues such as gender and marriage).

    All tweets were recorded and organized into Excel sheets via Twitonomy. They were then

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[36] In *Tweeting the Jihad,* Klausen coded tweets as: religious instruction, reporting from battle, interpersonal communication, tourism, and threats against the West.
[37] An "account shoutout" is a Twitter term in which one Twitter user references another Twitter account in a post.

manually coded through careful line by line readings, with each tweet copied again to a Word document and sorted under the appropriate heading. This process of coding was done for all three research questions. As tweets were coded, sub-types were created to better organize and understand the importance of roles and how they translate to the wider pro-jihadist network. Each of the initial four categories – active participation, emotionally supportive, ideologically supportive, and logistically supportive – incorporated tweets that lent support for that role as well as tweets that countered the role. This coding scheme also assisted in addressing the other research questions, since the tweets were clustered into categories, which made it simpler to match each woman to a category in Huey's classification structure, as well as provide insight into new roles for women in pro-jihadist groups.

Whether or not AQ women conform to Huey's categories of women within pro-IS networks (research question #2) was determined by investigating each woman's Twitter behaviour. Tweets, retweets, replies, and biographies indicated how women used Twitter for pro-jihadist causes. Using this evidence, women were categorized according to Huey's existing classification system: fan-girls, *baqiya* members, propagandists, recruiters, migrants, mothers of the caliphate, widows, terrorists, and those who leave. The following is a summary of each role as applied to AQ women (see *Appendix A* for Huey's IS roles):

Fan-girls	Women who are active online supporters for AQ. They tend to be young females (15-25) and believe their membership with the AQ network to be cool. Their tweets vary in content, ranging from posts about family and school issues to those supporting hardcore violence. They often retweet AQ propaganda but sometimes post controversial material that may conflict with the group's ideology.
Baqiya members	Women who use Twitter to support fellow AQ brothers and sisters. They share many emotional supportive tweets and participate in account shoutouts. They pass along AQ propaganda through original messages and retweets.
Propagandists	Women who are ideologically committed to AQ and have strong religious views. They predominantly post pro-AQ propaganda, provide little or no personal information, and have minimal interpersonal communication. They have the potential to convert other users to their cause. They participate in

	account shoutouts to high-ranking AQ members or accounts that share AQ news.
Recruiters	Women who serve as contact points for potential recruits as they provide information and other support to females seeking to migrate (e.g., to Syria) to join JN.
Migrants	Women who serve both a practical and ideological function within AQ; they represent success stories within AQ propaganda that is aimed at recruiting women who are seen as necessary to build AQ. They are often wives and mothers, as well as workers (when required).
Mothers	Women who serve both ideological and practical purposes to AQ; their children are used to support claims that AQ-held territory is a legitimate state. Their status as mothers is vaunted within pro-AQ circles and their children are held up as a future generation of AQ fighters and mothers.
Widows	Women whose husbands have been killed fighting for AQ.
Terrorists	Women who have been charged with a terror-related offence.
Exiters	Women who leave pro-AQ Twitter networks to join other pro-jihadist groups or desist fully from pro-jihadist activities.

To ensure validity, three coders[38] independently assigned each woman to a role and provided a brief explanation for their decision. For example, "[User #3] is a baqiya member because she views herself as a member of the AQ community and views online participation as supporting AQ; also communicates with others in network" (Coder #3, 2015). The coders used the same manual coding strategy that was used for research question #1. All tweets were reviewed and relevant data was transferred from the Excel spreadsheets and sorted into Word documents. As previously stated, the same coding headings were used – active participation, emotionally supportive, ideologically supportive, and logistically supportive and 'new roles' tweets – as a step to classify the females into a suitable role. For example, women who mostly posted emotionally supportive tweets and shoutouts were categorized as *baqiya* members. The three coders' results were then compared to evaluate consistency. If there was a discrepancy between their findings regarding an account, the account's content would be reevaluated, and most often placed in a combined role (e.g., *baqiya*-propagandist) if there was no clear match. Huey's

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[38] The coders included the author, Hillary Peladeau, and two research assistants, Rachel Inch and Alyssa Malandrino.

categories are not mutually exclusive, which means a woman can occupy two roles at the same time. The coding schemes from the prior research questions were used to generally explore women and terrorism. Conclusions for research question #3 were based on the literature examined and the data collected.

There was a heightened level of vigilance taken in the methodological procedures to ensure reliability, validity, and consistency in the findings. The sampling methods – purposive snowball sampling – helped substantiate that the sample met the strict criterion for inclusion. Moreover, the rigorous qualitative investigation into users' presence on Twitter and other associated sites helped confirm AQ affiliation and a higher degree of certainty that the user was female. In addition, the coding procedure of reading every individual tweet protected against common problems associated with electronic coding software such as keyword searches and taking information out of context. Although electronic programs for coding may add precision for large data sets where there is a greater chance of human error and missing information, the manual approach used in this study proved superior as it allowed for careful scrutiny and consideration of different perspectives and circumstances. Furthermore, the study recognized objectivity in all stages of the research, including the conceptualization and operationalization processes for investigating the tweets. In order to produce the most genuine findings, previous methods and pre-existing categories that were used in related, published research (i.e., *Tweeting the Jihad*, 2015) were tailored to be used in this study. Rigour was also maintained through independent verification of all coding that multiple coders added; the coders did not communicate with one another prior to coding and therefore did not have preconceived ideas on how to categorize each woman. They followed the same coding procedures (see *Appendix D*) in order to guard against individual biases.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet (2016) discuss the ethical considerations surrounding social media research including issues with consent as users are often unaware that their public posts are being used for research (p. 8). To ensure "researcher accountability" (Boyd and Crawford, 2012), confidentiality and anonymity, account handles are not included in paper. However, since all of the accounts followed were public, meaning that they were not protected and did not require a request to follow, informed consent was not applicable. In order to further safeguard against harm and uphold the standard of minimal risk to the sample of users, an account was unfollowed if requested. For example, there was a situation in which one of the users 'shouted out' the research account and asked to be unfollowed. This was done immediately. The research account never interacted with any of the users in the sample; the account never tweeted, retweeted or direct messaged any of the users, thereby avoiding ethical issues of inappropriate behaviour.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1. Traditional Female Roles and Social Media

From an analysis of more than 14,000 individual tweets, it is apparent that women in AQ-affiliated networks use Twitter to spread radical-Islamic dogma, communicate messages and spread propaganda. Also known as *mujahidaat[39]*, female pro-jihadist Twitter users are considered ideological supporters rather than on the ground fighters. They use their distinct positions within pro-jihadist networks to increase publicity and support, and intensify and validate their extremist groups' foundations. Twitter provides a platform for women to voice their opinions, engage in dialogue with others and actively share their experiences, sometimes beyond the restricted perimeters of traditional Islamic gender customs. *Mujadidaat* communicate with fellow online jihadists, share ideological and religious messages, and debate various subjects. Twitter appears to be an interface where female Islamic extremists are able to perform *jihad bil kalam[40]*. Labelled as keyboard warriors, these women post tweets that translate into a form of 'lesser jihad', where a message of 140 characters (or fewer) contributes to the fight for the 'Holy War':

> User #25: Nowadays it's more like: "Some Muslims go to the frontlines, others go on Twitter." (June 13, 2015)

> User #14: [RT] We will make accounts. We will support each other. And we will tweeeeet (June 23, 2015)

4.1.1. Traditional Roles 'Maintained' on Social Media. Literature suggests that traditional roles for women within pro-jihadist networks are primarily supportive (Lahoud, 2014; Qazi, 2011; Von Knop, 2007). Likewise, females within the AQ and AQ-affiliated networks (i.e.,

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[39] *Mujahidaat* (plural) are females engaged in jihad (Qazi, 2011, p. 33).
[40] *jihad bil kalam*: "us[ing] a pen to spread Islam and promote ideals of struggle and sacrifice in the name of religion" (Qazi, 2011, p. 38).

JN, al-Shabaab & AQAP) reproduce this trend on Twitter and provide emotional and ideological support for the group and its goals.

Emotionally Supportive Tweets. Supportive and emotional tweets are the most common type of tweet that AQ women post. Emotional support typically comes in the form of tweets that request encouragement and *duas* for fellow brothers and sisters.

> User #7: I wish all my Muslim brothers and sisters were safe. May Allah protect Muslims everywhere (April 22, 2015)

> User #11: [RT] Don't forget to make DUA for your brothers the Mujahideen. #Nusra #Shaam #Jihaad (April 20, 2015)

Most of the women tweet or retweet content that includes either specific names of brothers and sisters, or tweet more generally and include all Muslims within AQ and an AQ-affiliated group. Yet there is a small portion of females who share supportive, emotional tweets and provide *duas* without identifying with AQ. Females in this category tweet more generally, supporting Islam and Muslims overall, with no reference to any pro-jihadist organization. The division suggests there may be self-imposed boundaries around the content that online pro-jihadists are willing to share, perhaps due to the threat of an account suspension or of detection from authorities. Although all the accounts are associated with a Twitter network of AQ supporters, there appears to be variation in the degree of membership transparency that a user will display on Twitter.

Ideologically Supportive Tweets: Propaganda Sharing and Education. Women support AQ's ideology primarily through propaganda sharing and educational tweets.

> User #25: Jihad is not about raising guns. Jihad is also about giving right education, spreading awareness and speaking against injustices. (August 16, 2015)

Propaganda Sharing. Users spread both positive propaganda pertaining to AQ and negative publicity about AQ's opponents. Propaganda takes the form of words, pictures and videos (see *Appendix E*). Tweets and retweets devoted to positive propaganda include news of

AQ victories and territorial gains, as well as content that promotes AQ's tactics, objectives, and

goals.

> User #22: Al-Qaedah poses in terms of strategy, ideology and doctrine a greater danger for the West than IS does (March 18, 2015)

> User #31: AQ is not suppose to be a violent org, but a foundation and footprint to build a disciplined Muslim army. (April 25, 2015)

> Tweets about the 'enemy' include a broad range of material from news on mass civilian

killings to questions about the legitimacy of other groups and their devotion to Islam. Tweets are

framed with the intention of eliciting sympathy for AQ's principles.

> User #33: Crusader coalition Airstrikes target Jabhat Al Nusra headquarters in Reef Idlib, killing a number of mujahideen including muhajireen (March 8, 2015)

Unexpectedly, there are many more tweets that portray AQ's adversaries in an undesirable light,

compared to tweets that directly promote AQ. It appears that AQ users post in this manner in

order to discredit the other groups and their philosophies, while also indirectly endorsing AQ and

offering itself as a solution. The tweets reveal that members of AQ and AQ-affiliated groups

most commonly criticize IS, Shia Muslims, the Assad Regime and the United States. IS's

methods within Syria and Iraq are repeatedly criticized as excessively violent and directed

toward the wrong targets:

> User #21: …IS chose to fight Mujahideen! If only they'd focus on the real enemies! (1) If you want to fight terrorism & get rid of #ISIS, bring those mass killers to justice. #Syria (2) (May 7, 2015)

> User #28: Sinjar, Kobane, Tikrit shows al-Qaeda's goal is more important than ISIS goal. All ISIS defeat have been by USA. Not Shia or Kurds. (October 13, 2015)

Tweets frequently compare JN to IS. IS operations and ideological goals are perceived by many

AQ women as *distorted*, while JN is observed as heroic with an everlasting devotion to Islam.

User #25: [RT] Today JN sent a martyrdom seeker to blow up the Nusayri[41]. filth in Hama Meanwhile IS sent 2 suicide bombers to kill Muslims… (April 10, 2015)

Many of the women in the sample are *takfiri*[42], and accuse IS members of being *kafir*[43], infidels,

or apostates[44]. IS members are argued to be 'non-Muslim' because their actions are destroying

other Muslims. For example:

User #22: Daesh declared almost everyone in Syria an apostate and yet #Daesh_Logic would have us believe they're fighting for the Muslims of Syria (April 7, 2015)

User #23: Yes! Once Upon A Time We All Were Muslims. Al Qaeda And Nusrah Were Muslims, Sheikh Ayman Zawahir Was A Muslim, The Taliban N IF Were Muslims. (1) Then Came Along The "Islamic State". Now We Are All A Bunch Of Apostates, Nationalist, Murjiahs, Puppets n Agents Of The West. Throwing Decades Of Jihad Down The Drain, For What? (2) (June 3, 2015)

Shia Muslims as well as Muslims who support the Assad regime and the United States are also

referred to as *kafir*.

References to hostile Shia-Sunni relations are prevalent in AQ tweets, and Shia Muslims

are openly degraded on Twitter.

User #25: dad who was bit anti Mujaihdeen , Now is openly supporting Jihad against shias now. Shia Rise more, pls?!:) We'll have more Ummah together. (March 27, 2015)

Even the animosity between AQ and IS is less than AQ users' expressed antipathy towards Shia

Muslims. For example, User #24 regularly shares anti-IS propaganda:

User #24: [RT] Most of women who captured by Isis as a sex slaves are relatives and wives of #JN and #Free_Syrian_Army fighters (May 31, 2015)

User #24: I wonder when IS supporters will begin to understand that "implementing Shari'ah" does not only mean "implementing Hudud[45]". (June 4, 2015)

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[41] Nusayri is an extreme Shia group (Talhamy, 2010).
[42] A *takfiri* is a Sunni Muslim who accuses another Muslim (or an adherent of another Abrahamic faith) of apostasy (Vertigans, 2009).
[43] *Kafir* is a derogatory term to describe a disbeliever of Islam (Vertigans, 2009).
[44] An apostate is one who denounces their religion affiliation [in this case, their Islam identity] (Vertigans, 2009).
[45] *Hudud* are "crimes against God in Islamic penal system" (Okon, 2014, p.227).

Yet, between those posts – May 31 to June 4 – the same user endorsed IS when discussing Shia

Muslims:

> User #24: [RT] Shia dogs stabbing sunni over his head. May Allah grant victory 2 IS
> group over these filthy rawafidh, not the Muslims (June 1, 2015)

AQ antipathy towards Shia Muslims is further conveyed in tweets concerning Bashar al-

Assad. Tweets regarding Assad and his regime in Syria consistently portray him as a murderer

and terrorist. The women report on Assad's war crimes, broadcasting mass civilian and children

killings and the use of barrel bombs against his own people.

> User #21: Bomb the real terrorists→ Assad's regime ← NOT innocent civilians who have
> no place to run or hide. Wake up world. (August 12, 2015)

> User #15: Dropped by the assadist regime. Lifes of the civilians are cheap for them.
> (April 26, 2015)

Tweets consistently criticize Assad and offer zero support towards or even understanding of his

sociopolitical goals. According to the AQ Twitter content examined, the Assad regime within

Syria is not only corrupt and dangerous, but more importantly, an unnecessary threat for

Muslims, as it draws attention away from greater threats like the US.

AQ users in the sample also denounce the US. Often referred to as 'the West', the US is

frequently criticized for their military presence in 'Muslim countries' (countries or nation-states

governed by Sharia law) and considered an obstacle towards a caliphate. Tweets not only blame

President Obama and the U.S. government for killing Muslims, but also for AQ attacks directed

against the US.

> User #26: we dont need American soldiers in our country, the enemy of islam (May 5,
> 2015)

> User #25: Its US that provoked Muslims to take action against them thru 9/11. Had they
> not worked against Muslims, maybe not this fate. (August 20, 2015)

AQ Twitter members also disagree with many 'Western' ways of living, as well as topics ranging from gender and marriage norms to democracy and US foreign policy.

> User #36: I can't wait to leave this country [the United States]. I'm tired of living amongst ppl who think all this immoral stuff is ok. This generation is so corrupted. I see 13 year old girls pregnant not sure who the father is. 12 year olds talking bout getting drunk. Gays kissing/touching in the streets. (June 27, 2015)

> User #1: Democracy has become West's biggest act of skulduggery beyond its shores. In short, democracy is a muggin on a grand scale #obama. (May 25, 2015)

For these users, the existence of Western values and the US itself threaten AQ's goal of Islamic law prevailing throughout the world.

Education. While propaganda sharing shows AQ's ideological perspectives, females followed also use Twitter to directly educate others about their perceptions of Islam and AQ. Among other activities, users clarify misinterpreted terms, discuss ideas, and dispute viewpoints with other online pro-jihadists. Words that are commonly used to describe a pro-jihadist from a Western standpoint are the most frequently contested, including "jihad", "terrorist", and "radicalism".

> User #24: Waiting for the word "terrorism" to be removed from our vocabulary, since it has already lost all meaning & definition through wrongful & overuse (June 19, 2015)

> User #1: [reply] … "radicalization" is a western construct designed to label Muslims as evil beings. (April 11, 2015)

> User #25: JIHAD is misunderstood by all those who have Maradh in their hearts. ALLAH protect us all, Aameen (1). Jihad is not about raising guns. Jihad is also about giving right education, spreading awareness and speaking against injustices. (2) (August 10, 2015)

Twitter is viewed as a metaphorical battlefield for many of the women in the sample. They see themselves as active combatants who are fighting jihad for Islam through their words and ideas, working to distinguish legitimate Islam from perceived illegitimate claims about Islam. Women

often contribute their own opinions as well as reference primary and secondary sources (e.g.,

Qur'an, *fatwas* or Azzam) to support their arguments.

Females also tweet about how to educate others. Many suggest that female pro-jihadists

should attain an Islamic education so they can be capable of answering questions pertaining to

jihad and to educate their children properly.

> User #25: We the sisters can't be effective journalists in JIHAD arenas cos of hijab, distance, the kidnappings etc. Better opt for BA/MA in Islamic stds (1) Studying to benefit Islam is rewarding whether science subjects or Islamic stds or some language to fight kuffar and defeating it with ilm (2). (August 11, 2015)

> User #21: Dear Sisters, Don't Teach Your Daughter How To Dance, Teach Her How To Perform Salah. Don't Teach Her To Sing, Teach Her How To Recite QURAN. (May 2, 2015)

4.1.2. Traditional Roles 'Challenged' on Twitter. While females express emotional and

ideological support for jihad, there are other established roles that are not found within the

sample studied. On a logistical and instrumental level, the women's accounts do not support AQ

through fundraising, recruitment and administrative duties. Additionally, the responsibility for

women to engage in physical combat remains contested by those studied. It not only remains

unclear whether women are permitted to engage in physical combat, but also if combat is

supported and reproduced on Twitter.

Logistically Supportive Tweets: Fundraising and Recruitment. Although social media

sites are cited as a platform where fundraising occurs for pro-jihadist groups (Bloom, 2011;

Thompson, 2011), it is only marginally applicable to this sample of women on Twitter. Over six

months, only four tweets – three being retweets – reference fundraising and are posted by only

two women.

> User #21: Support by funding them, raising awareness on their plight, assisting their families and praying. (July 26, 2015)

User #21: [RT] Support Mujahideen of #AnsarUlFurqan with your Money (May 16, 2015)

Besides the fact that all of the women in the sample are associated with an AQ-affiliated Twitter network, there is no observable evidence that they have successfully raised money for pro-jihadist groups. None of the tweets provided an active link with information on where to send the money, which further suggests that fundraising is not prominent in AQ and AQ-affiliated Twitter networks.

It has not been confirmed whether or not the users in the sample use Twitter to recruit, since direct messages[46] are not part of the study's data. Based on public tweets, however, it appears that AQ-affiliated females do not use Twitter to directly recruit new members to AQ. Although there are tweets that share pro-AQ propaganda including pictures and videos, there are no tweets within the sample that contain direct references to recruiting. The tweets that come the closest to 'recruiting' are those that encourage brothers and sisters to join jihad and those that praise others for joining:

User #7: Dear sisters encourage your husbands to go for Jihād and remind him that you and his children will be in the preservation … (August 16, 2015)

User #21: Western Jihadis in #Syria People & Power meets young Muslims who have abandoned the West to fight in Syria. (March 30, 2015)

However, there is neither content that implies any of the women act as contact points for people who would like to become involved in AQ, nor anything that suggests they help others migrate to locations to fight in jihad (e.g., helping a woman get into Syria to fight). Unless the recruitment techniques are concealed through unfamiliar language or unconventional procedures, AQ females do not actively recruit on Twitter. Rather, they predominantly use Twitter to share propaganda that may ultimately lead to recruitment.

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[46] Direct messages are private conversations between Twitter users.

'Active Participation on the Battlefield' Tweets. Tweets studied frequently mirror the continuing dispute over females in jihad, and the possibility of their engagement in physical combat. Although participation in armed conflict is not discussed in the tweets, there is reference to "women", "defense", "training" and "martyrdom", all of which are relatable terms to jihad:

> User #28: Sisters - Learning martial arts or basic self defense is VITAL in our times...#Islam #Muslims #Ummah #Islamophobia (July 28, 2015)

> User #25: [RT] Female training camp in #Aleppo named "Camp of Women of Victory & Empowerment": training women from all around Syria (April 10, 2015)

> Do I only die once in my life? So why not make its finale martyrdom? (August 27, 2015)

Further, three users displayed pictures that illustrate women in combative positions: two in which the females are holding guns and one of a woman on the battlefield fighting (see *Appendix E*). Although the photos cannot confirm pro-jihadist women have been involved in combat, they suggest it is possible. Nevertheless, there are also women in the sample who do not support combat roles for females in jihad.

> User #25: I wont do Jihad as I'm just a sister and its not fit for us women to do it [link] (May 5, 2015)

Some users uphold the notion that females are to only play supplementary roles in jihad, providing emotional and ideological support to fighters or logistical support for the group as a whole. Others argue that jihad itself does not have to be combative and can take on different forms (i.e., *jihad bil kalam*). Although there is reference to female combatants in Islamic history (Cook, 2004; Lahoud, 2014), and more recently, to AQ FSB (Poloni-Staudinger and Ortbals, 2013; Stone and Patillo, 2011; Von Knop, 2007), the AQ Twitter accounts indicate no unified position on the issue.

4.2. Roles of Women in AQ Versus IS

Females in the sample are classified as *baqiya*, propagandists, fan girls, or exiters. Since some of the women fit into multiple roles, two role types are combined in order to code the user (e.g., *baqiya*-propagandist).
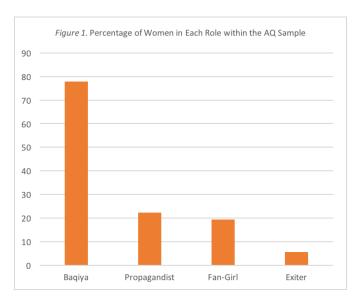

Figure 1. Percentage of Women in Each Role within the AQ Sample

Table 1. Number of AQ Accounts

Sample Size	36
Number of Accounts Active (as of Aug 31)	28
Number of Accounts Deactivated (as of Aug 31)	8

Table 2. Number of AQ Women in Each Role

Baqiya	28
Propagandist	8
Fan-Girl	7
Exiter	2

Table 3. Number of AQ Women in Combined Roles

Baqiya/Propagandist	3
Propagandist/Fan-Girl	1
Fan-Girl or *Baqiya*[47]	3

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[47] Although a fan-girl moves into the role of *baqiya* once she is accepted into the community (Huey and Witmer, 2015), three women were indistinguishable between the two roles, and thus, included in both.

Huey's categories are not mutually exclusive, which means a woman can occupy two roles at the same time. Unlike accounts found within the IS Twitter network, there are no AQ users who are classified as migrants, mothers, widows or terrorists. Although some of the women are mothers and widows, or may even be migrants and terrorists in practice, their Twitter accounts do not correspond with Huey's descriptions of these roles.

4.2.1. *Baqiya* Members. Consistent with Huey's (2015) findings, the majority of the women in the sample are *baqiya* members. Females are classified as *baqiya* members in about 78% of cases. Twitter accounts for *baqiya* members in the sample generally contain tweets and retweets supporting Muslim brothers and sisters, pro-jihadist propaganda, and religious content. For example, User #4 is a JN *baqiya* member whose tweets primarily request *duas* for brothers in battle or make comments regarding jihadist ideology. Retweets contain news and updates for JN, including pictures of JN mujahedeen, as well as critical posts about IS:

> User #4: May Allah accept the brothers as shuhada who recently died by two car bombs from IS, in the north of 7alab. #JN (January 11, 2015)

Although User #4 directly references JN in her tweets, it is more common for AQ- associated females not to do this. In fact, during the analysis of the accounts studied, it was more common that a woman would fit all the criteria to be considered a *baqiya* member, except that they did not pass along AQ propaganda. Instead, these accounts would tweet and retweet *general* pro-jihadist propaganda – similar to AQ's ideological goals – including content that is pro-Islam (Muslim unity), pro-jihad, anti-US, anti-IS, and anti-Assad:

> User #5: "Civilized"!! US soldiers burned alive members of the Taliban in Afghanistan. hypocritical shaytan #US!! [link] (Match 16, 2015)

Of the 28 accounts that were identified as *baqiya* members, only 13 directly referenced AQ in their tweets. Those who mentioned AQ appeared to tweet more radical content than those who

did not. This is evident as Twitter suspended or deactivated more of these accounts; over 86% of those who did not reference AQ stayed active on Twitter within the six-month period compared to 61% of those who did. Although there is no legitimate explanation for this incongruity, two assumptions are made. Either those users are not AQ supporters and just happen to be on AQ Twitter networks and share similar principles to AQ, or rather, they support AQ and merely fear public exposure of an affiliation with a global terrorist organization.

IS women also use the term "*baqiya*" to speak about themselves.

[IS account]: Whoever is against my sister [female IS account handle] is against me. I testify she is 100% legit. And all the baqiyah twitter knows I've never lied. (2015)

Unlike the IS, women in AQ do not refer to themselves as *baqiya*. In fact, some women in the sample use the term in a derogatory manner to describe IS members:

[AQ user speaking about the IS]: User #4: only thing that come out of their mouth is baqiyah and murtadeen. In sha Allah our brothers will finish you all very son, dogs of hell. (June 3, 2015)

Although women in AQ reflect the role of a *baqiya* member, as outlined by Huey (2015), the term evidently holds different connotations. A new category for this role may need to be introduced to adequately include those apart from the IS.

4.2.2. Propagandists. Propagandists represent about 22% of the sample of AQ women. Comparable to IS propagandists, AQ propagandists post positive propaganda pertaining to AQ. Women in this role predominantly use Twitter to endorse AQ and Islam through words, pictures and videos. For example, User #18 is an AQ propagandist whose Twitter account contains strictly tweets (and retweets) about AQ and its successes, strategies and ideologies:

User #18: #NEW #JN video release showing the liberation of a checkpoint in #Homs [link] (July 3, 2015)

User #18: For #Nusra, chasing #US-backed groups isn't fun anymore, they collapse too fast... (August 8, 2015)

In order to gain sympathy and thus support for AQ, User #18 unfavourably frames the IS, the US, and Assad as perpetrators against Muslim victims (mainly Syrians).

> User #18: May Allah protect the muslims of Shaam. Bashar bombs them from the skies & daesh sends them car bombs (May 31, 2015)

She is strongly attached to Islam as evident through religious posts; however, there is no content that is personal on her Twitter account. The only interpersonal content she posts publicly on Twitter are replies that explain how to open a link to an AQ magazine.

Unlike women within pro-IS networks, AQ women rarely devote their Twitter accounts exclusively to propaganda sharing. More commonly, accounts that share AQ propaganda and advocate strong religious views also contain a large amount of personal and interpersonal content. Moreover, AQ propagandists make no reference to recruiting; a pro-IS propagandist's goal is to "help convert potential recruits to their cause" (Huey, 2015). Although AQ propagandists are possibly doing this indirectly through their posts, there are no women in the sample who publicly post about recruiting or helping others recruit.

4.2.3. Fan-Girls. Fan-girls represent approximately 19% of the sample of AQ women. Notably, fan-girls also represented 19% of the sample of IS women in Huey and Witmer's 2015 study. AQ fan-girls are transparent about their AQ affiliation, and regularly mention, shoutout, or hashtag the group in a post.

> User #22: The only people I ever get mad jelous of.....Snipers [emoji] Jubba Dreams [emoji] #JAN_Sniper_Team (March 15, 2015)

Like IS fan-girls, AQ fan-girls post a range of content, from food photos and marriage comments to jokes about radicalization and killing. It appears that fan-girls seek attention from other pro-jihadists. This is achieved by posting controversial content and engaging in conversation and debate with other fan-boys and fan-girls.

User #10: "A bullet a day.. Keeps the kuffar away.. [emoji]" (March 8, 2015)

User #16: Them coconuts always piss me off.. No wonder I feel like murdering one of them or counting more [emoji] (July 1, 2015)

Comparable to Huey and Witmer's (2015) findings regarding a lack of coherence between IS ideological stances and IS fan-girl's online behaviour, AQ fan-girls also contradict themselves, AQ's philosophies, and even some of the basic tenets of Islamic beliefs:

User #22: Havin an Intense discussion wit my dad about jihad n politics. I'm explainin to him how n who started de Fitnah. Radicalisation in session[emoji] (March 16, 2015)

Two-weeks later:

User #22: I'm a radical according to the fam[emoji] #shootmeplz (March 28, 2015)

Similar to IS fan-girls, the role of AQ fan-girls appears to be about generating public attention. Compared to the role of propagandist or *baqiya* member, fan-girls seem to be in AQ Twitter networks primarily for the notoriety that comes from membership. This 'attention-seeking' impression is further supported by fan-girls' use of emojis . As with IS fan-girls, AQ fan-girls noticeably tweet with more emojis than any other role. Since fan-girls are typically younger women (Huey, 2015), it is probable that they have grown up with technology, which would explain familiarity with social media culture and emojis. This small pictograph also seems to signify an informal tone in posts, perhaps indicating another reason why propagandists and *baqiya* members use them less. Although fan-girls' posts would appear to violate Twitter's terms, only one out of the seven fan-girls in the sample had her account suspended.

AQ fan-girls, like IS fan-girls, boast about Twitter suspensions:

User #36: Twitter has suspended [AQ account] 80 times for doing dawah[48]. I guess they dont like Islam [emoji] Follow & spread his account (May 25, 2015)

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[48] *Dawah* means the preaching of Islam (Vertigans, 2009).

Yet, accounts identified under the fan-girl category are least likely of all accounts within the AQ sample to be suspended. Perhaps the inconsistency and fanciful nature (e.g., the emojis) are deemed to pose less of a threat on Twitter.

According to Huey and Witmer (2015), IS fan-girls move into the role of *baqiya* once they are accepted as community members. However, some AQ fan-girls conflict with this finding and appear to be more embedded in the AQ community. Women that are only classified as fan-girls in the sample typically only retweet AQ propaganda, including content that may contradict AQ's values. Comparably, fan-girls who retain other roles too – such as propagandists – may also tweet and retweet AQ propaganda, while sharing strong religious ideologies and expressing support for fellow AQ brothers and sisters. This indicates that fan-girls may be more involved in pro-jihadist groups than originally theorized.

Notably, women within the AQ sample who are labelled as fan-girls are most likely to express aversion to the fan-girl or fan-boy role.

> User #25: [JN Fan-Girl/*Baqiya*]: Fanboyism is Actually too bad whoever he or she does or is at & I include Nusra fans init.Too much cheerleading for it, hurting other Muj (August 24, 2015)

> User #24: [JN Fan-Girl]: FYI, contrary to popular belief, I'm not an AQ fangirl either. Just putting it out there. (July 20, 2015)

This could lend support for Huey's (2015) contention that more committed members of pro-jihadist groups – in this case, propagandists and *baqiya* members – are likely to tolerate fan-girls.

AQ fan-girls also show specific and blatant dislike for IS fan-girls. They frame IS fan-girls as imprudent, impolite and pretentious. For example:

> User #22: A lion doesn't lose sleep over the opinion of sheep likewise I don't care for the opinion of teenage ISIS fangirl (March 18, 2015)

User #21: #PRT Apparently Jihad Has Become A Popularity Contest 4 ISIS Fanboys/girls. Someone Tell Them This Ain't High School Or Some Teen Show!!! [emoji] (April 2, 2015)

User #21: It's disturbing to see many Nusrah supporters who, once were known for their beautiful manners are now slowly replacing IsIs fanboys/girls (June 16, 2015)

IS fan-girls continue to generate substantial attention in the media. This attention may not only explain why AQ fan-girls express distaste towards IS fan-girls, but also why they fear being associated with 'fan-girlism'. Nonetheless, fan-girls produce considerable dialogue regarding AQ, despite their marginal role in AQ networks. Perhaps the phrase "any publicity is good publicity" most appropriately describes the phenomenon of fan-girls and others' reactions to them.

4.2.4. Exiters (People Who Leave). Two out of the 36 women in the sample exited AQ. Over the six months, one woman left JN to join IS and the other woman went from being a fan-girl for JN to denouncing affiliation with any pro-jihadist group.

In the case of User #29, she simply adjusted her ideological viewpoints and changed her group affiliation overnight.

Date	Name
August 16	----
August 17	New Family
August 18	IS New Family

Prior to August 18, User #29 acted as a propagandist for JN, predominantly posting pro-JN and anti-IS news pertaining to Syria. After August 18, User #29 shifted her support to the IS, playing the role of a fan-girl. Both her name change, "New IS Family", and tweets indicate the switch.

User #29: [RT from IS fan-girl] Follow my new sister [emoji] "Baqiya New Family"

Although User #29 now posts pro-IS content, her tweets remain neutral about JN. Her Twitter account provides no explanation for why she suddenly decided to support the IS.

Like User #29, User #5 abandoned her identification with JN, but only moderately shifted her views. This shift was evidenced by the fact that, over the six-months, the tone of her tweets changed from being those of a fan-girl of JN to someone who has abandoned pro-jihadist ideologies.

> User #5: When people stare at my niqab I want say: Ooh yes sir..I'm a terrorist.oh wow yeees.I shoot with my ıphone case;) (March 3, 2015)

> User #5: "Civilized"!! US soldiers burned alive members of the Taliban in Afghanistan. hypocritical shaytan #US!! [link] (March 16, 2015)

> User #5: Allah said: Everything has a disaster that subverts itself. The disaster of this religion is the bad administrators. #Syria (April 2, 2015)

> User #5: sharia is not idea, is law (August 8, 2015)

Although User #5 never posted content directly mentioning JN, she retweeted material from other JN women. She posted about personal issues, and used attention-seeking and violent tweets that suggested a conflicted ideological commitment to JN. Her Twitter biography also revealed the change in group affiliation: "Sheriah; not any group anymore. Only support shariah" (User #5, 2015). Twitter biographies were documented both at the beginning and ending of the six-month period. User #5 did not include a biography in the initial collection but made this distinction by the final collection.

Another AQ Twitter account – User #28 – also 'exited'. Prior to the collection period, User #28 left the IS and joined JN. Her Twitter biography "Stopped Supporting ISIS since Ramadhan Last Year" (User #28, 2015) indicates the exit. Other than her biography, there is no content that suggests she once supported the IS, especially since she now primarily posts support for JN and content that is critical of the IS. For example:

> User #28: ISIS Fanboys. they co-called Muslims, but their mouth like speaking ugly rubbish & spread Fitnah. This is the type Ummah of Rasulallah ..?? (June 31, 2015).

Although User #28 did not exit AQ, her Twitter history introduces a possible distinction between IS exiters and AQ exiters. While User #28 blatantly expresses distaste for the IS, User #29 and User #5 did not post negative or positive content about JN affiliation. Though this is based on a small number of women, it appears that the pro-jihadist group that a woman exits may have an effect on the type of content (i.e., negative, positive or neutral) that they post regarding prior affiliations. In this case, the woman who left IS posted more negative propaganda concerning her former group compared to the women who left JN.

Both of the AQ exiters also experienced an account suspension at one point in the six-month period.

Name	Suspension Period
User #5	Temporary Suspension: Early May – Early June
User #29	Temporary Suspension: Late April – Early June

Although it could be a coincidence, further investigation into Twitter suspensions and the effect they have on pro-jihadist women could provide evidence to help identify exiters on Twitter.

4.3. Women, Pro-Jihadist Terrorism, and Social Media

Although this study involved a small sample, the Twitter content suggests that, with the establishment of social media, there has been increased activity by women within pro-jihadist organizations. Social media gives women the opportunity to overtly support pro-jihadist activities without having to compromise traditional Islamic gender norms by abandoning their conventional roles as wives and mothers, maintaining their femininity[49]. Rather than having to make *hijrah*[50] or participate in combat to do the holy obligation of jihad, women use their Twitter accounts to support pro-jihadist goals. For example:

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[49] Sjoberg and Gentry (2011) argue that female participation in combative positions compromise 'traditional' feminine traits associated with being a woman (e.g., gentle, passive, and obedient).
[50] *Hijrah* is migrating as a form of jihad (Hoyel et al., 2015).

> User #25: [link to online blog] "wont do Jihad being woman" Yes and I have done online Jihad again! (June 14, 2015)

> User #21: Dear lil sis,Think carefully before you make Hijrah. Perhaps you could be a more potent weapon to our fighters by equipping yourself here. (April 2, 2015)

Since Twitter is available on any device that can be used to access the Internet, there are few boundaries around where one is able to tweet. A woman could be posting from the private realm (e.g., in her house), yet broadcasting her opinions to the public realm, interfering with the conventional home boundaries that women are generally concentrated in (Lahoud, 2014). Twitter interrupts typical constraints – such as the requirement of a *mahram*[51] (Cook, 2004) – on female members' ability to participate in jihad.

It also appears that the social media gives women a sense of autonomy. Herrera (2014) found that females use chat rooms to debate religious concerns, learn new perspectives and form their own opinions. AQ women used Twitter to discuss and question everyday affairs such as their group affiliation and the 'gendered' customs in a pro-jihadist based society.

> User #31: Can some1 frm JAN tell me CLEARLY...are WE, Jabhat al-Nusrah in ALLIANCE with Dawla in Latakia or Idlib or Hama or anywhere else in Syria? (April 24, 2015)

> User #28: The Prophet [emoji] said: "If your women ask permission to go to the mosque at night, allow them." (Saḥīh Al Bukhārī, 865) (July 19, 2015)

Twitter gives women the opportunity to form online relationships and interact with new people, cultures, and customs since it lacks conventional 'spatial' constraints (Stephens & Poorthuis, 2015) and some of the clearly-defined power structures within those physical spaces (i.e., patriarchal social order). Women are able to communicate with individuals from all over the world without the same traditional hegemonic power dynamics typically found within pro-

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[51] *Mahram* is a male chaperone (Cook, 2004).

jihadist organizations. AQ women use Twitter to debate with both men and other women, thus questioning the traditional gendering of pro-jihadist activities and Islamic gender norms.

> User #25: Seeing ill mannered men spoils my mood !So i get Angry at how they degrade Muslim women ,the pearls of sea!Subhan ALLAH. (March 18, 2015)

> User #25: For those who mind sisters on twitter ,can u please block me if you dislike my postings? Anyone from JN or IS or any other fighters. (April 1, 2015)

It appears that women are able to explore new ideas and communicate candidly on Twitter.

There is inconsistency within literature regarding whether increased or different female participation in jihad and terrorist-related activities affects their positions within pro-jihadist groups. Some argue that Twitter empowers these women through a more active level of participation, ultimately leading to a sexual revolution balancing the roles of women and men within pro-jihadist organizations (Lahoud, 2014; Peresin, 2015). Others find that female participation does little to change the gendered-social status for women within the groups (Bloom, 2011; Qazi, 2011). Essentially, pro-jihadists' goals embrace traditional Islamic law (including gendered roles) and are not concerned with changing the gender norms. In most cases, women's participation is merely a military tactic and propaganda tool for the absolute objective of creating a Muslim caliphate (Gonzalez-Perez, 2010; Stack, 2011). As previously explained, Ness (2005) found that the 2005 increase of female suicide bombers within AQ did not advance women's positions within pro-jihadist organizations.

Ultimately, the results of this study explain how the three variables of women, pro-jihadist organizations, and social media interrelate. While it does not seem that women are empowered or achieve superior roles within AQ (e.g., combative positions) through their use of Twitter, it does enable them to share their opinions and experiences with larger masses of people, broadly helping the pro-jihadist group (in this case, AQ). Perhaps the growing function of social

media by pro-jihadist terrorist groups shows a potential for gender roles to evolve within these

groups as social media allows women to share their thoughts more freely and with wider

audiences. Conversely, although computer screens offer concealment from one form of gender

censorship, there are still women online who 'morally police' the behaviours of other women.

> User #5: Sisters getting all hyped up on social media speaking about jihadi politics, just get off your phone n go cook or clean (July 12, 2015)

Evidently, the 'voice' that Twitter provides to women within pro-jihadist organizations is used in

a variety of ways.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

5.1. Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This study is among the first to evaluate terrorism, gender, and social media. Although there is existing research regarding 'terrorism and social media' and 'terrorism and gender', there has been a lack of investigation into how women in pro-jihadist groups use social media. The present study has analyzed the content posted by women within AQ and AQ-affiliated networks in order to address this gap in knowledge.

Among the findings of this study, it was revealed that females in AQ primarily use Twitter to extend their supportive roles in pro-jihadist organizations. While some scholars (Peresin, 2015) suggest that social media empowers females and balances gender roles in pro-jihadist groups, others (Bloom, 2011) argue that social media is simply an extension of their current, inferior position within the group. Discoveries from this study suggest that women use social media sites to engage in jihad by supporting their fellow pro-jihadists emotionally and ideologically in the forms of propaganda sharing and education. However, females remain absent from active combat or direct terrorist activities, including logistical responsibilities (e.g., fundraising and recruitment) that are regularly cited as their responsibilities. In short, it appears Twitter does not empower AQ women to take on more active roles within pro-jihadist organizations, but may rather give them a greater voice to a wider audience and indirectly fulfill logistical functions in support of terrorist activities through propaganda sharing.

Not only does female support over Twitter have a direct impact on pro-jihadist organizations and the role of women within them, but it also affects policy responses. Female presence on social media platforms introduces a new aspect to a familiar threat that needs to be addressed by counter-terrorist agencies. While the AQ women in this sample did not directly

recruit, their propaganda sharing and commitment to their fellow AQ family promotes AQ's

ideology and may indirectly encourage new supporters. Although radicalization over social

media is already on the political agenda in several countries, female participation adds a new

dimension to discussions, as women have traditionally had covert voices within pro-jihadist

organizations. The Internet, and social media in particular, introduces a domain for women to

engage in pro-jihadist activities without having to compromise traditional Islamic gender roles.

Therefore, there is a need for appropriate responses that directly target females. As is the

case with IS, Twitter acts as a community for AQ supporters where women are able to engage in

dialogue with others and share common problems (Huey & Witmer, 2015). Social media sites

will have to act more diligently to monitor these uses in order to make the domain unfavourable

for pro-jihadist activities. Twitter explicitly forbids its users from using the platform to advocate

violence and does react to some accounts like these by suspending and deactivating them;

however, there is little transparency in the rules for making new accounts (Berger, 2015). Based

on the number of female members who have had their accounts suspended – 22% of the sample

– it is clear that many AQ women do not fear Twitter's suspensions and continue use their

profiles to speak candidly. Better monitoring is required so the same users are unable to make

multiple accounts and spread AQ propaganda and support. Presumably, if there is a change in

Twitter use by pro-jihadist women, it will have to be through preemptive Twitter initiatives as it

does not appear that pro-jihadist's will desist on their own.

Moreover, in comparison to Huey's categorization of IS women's roles online, AQ

women have fewer roles on social media. Borrowing from Huey's roles, AQ women in this

sample are predominantly concentrated in *baqiya*, propagandist, and fan-girl roles, which

substantiates the idea that they act in a largely supportive capacity. The AQ women were entirely

absent from the migrant, mother, widow, and terrorist roles seen among IS women. As opposed to IS women, the limited number of roles that AQ females adopt may indicate that their Twitter activity does not strategically help their pro-jihadist group, consequently posing less of an overall security threat. Perhaps policy makers and law enforcers need to respond to AQ women and IS women independently, as it is clear that their roles, goals and approaches vary from one another. Singer and Brooking (2015) argue that "winning the war on social media" will require counter-intelligence techniques such as content moderation and Twitter account hunting based on the groups' *independent* characteristics. This means that for pro-jihadist Twitter activity to disperse, AQ and IS women should be targeted separately.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

The sample only contained 36 accounts within a six-month time frame which makes it difficult to offer generalizations concerning the larger population of female pro-jihadists. A future study that includes more Twitter accounts in its sample and collects tweets over a longer period could yield a greater understanding of trends, and the relationship between AQ female affiliates and social media.

There were also a number of limitations with the methodological strategy and the criteria for inclusion in the study. As the results indicate, there were some users who did not overtly identify as supporters or members of AQ. Although all accounts in the sample were identified with an AQ network, there is no way to authenticate AQ membership.

Moreover, the restriction of only following English-speaking accounts limits the scope of the study[52]. In the initial collection period, there were many females who were AQ supporters who communicated in different languages (e.g. Arabic) but could not be included. The ability to

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[52] In the Magdy et al. (2015) study, the research team was able to interpret Arabic tweets, adding to the depth of their findings.

collect and interpret content in a variety of different languages may produce a different outcome from what this study has shown; for example, some of the excluded women may have lived in areas where English was not spoken, yet may have acted in critical roles such as recruiters, fundraisers, or combatants, impacting the results and implications of the study. Furthermore, although precaution was taken on who was included in the sample, there is still some uncertainty about the real identities of the account holders. Female *kunya* and in-depth searches may have indicated a female, but there is no way to fully validate a user's gender[53]. There also remains no way to confirm that the accounts were in fact operated by humans, as opposed to Twitter spambots[54].

The study's results may also have differed if Twitonomy was capable of collecting and backing up pictures, videos, and profile information such as biographies and profile pictures. While this data collection tool saved links to photos and videos, there was no way to access a picture or video if the account had been terminated or if the media had been removed. Therefore, certain content that could indicate support for a group, or a position that a female poster occupied is absent from the data analyzed.

Qazi (2011) argues that females associated with pro-jihadist terrorist networks are understudied because it is difficult to draw conclusions about them, and thus most studies rely greatly on theory and secondhand data that is difficult to verify. Although this study was conducted using Twitter, which means there were sampling and collection processes that are unverifiable, Twitter has opened up access to females in terrorist networks who are, rarely otherwise, accessible. Further studies replicating the analysis of Twitter could use a larger sample of women among a variety of pro-jihadist groups (e.g., Hezbollah), as well as include a

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[53] Klausen (2015) also notes this as a limitation in his study.
[54] Spambots are automated programs designed to spread spam on Twitter through automated posts and followings (Wang, 2010)

control group of non-Jihadist women. The comparisons between the groups could generate

discoveries that are more extensive, and therefore have a greater impact on how policymakers

should respond. *Jihad 2.0* is growing and its existence needs to be recognized so new

components such as female participation is realized and addressed appropriately.

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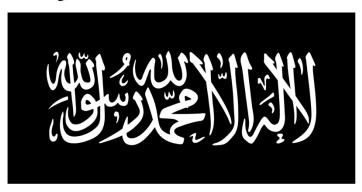
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    https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F_0.pdf

Appendix A

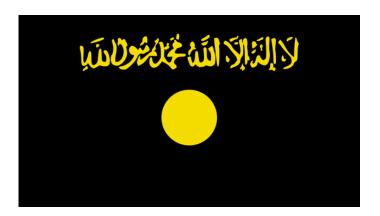Huey's Roles of Women within Pro-IS Networks (2015)

Baqiya Member	They see themselves as members of a community and view their participation online as supporting their 'brothers' and 'sisters' – both ideological and emotional bonds. They are not only potential migrants and financial supporters of IS, but also function to pass along IS propaganda/messages (retweets).
Propagandists	They are ideologically committed to IS and espouse strong religious views. Their posts are largely, if not exclusively, promoting pro-IS propaganda; they post little to no personal information or inter-personal content. Their goal is to help convert potential recruits to their cause.
Fan-girls	Active online female supporters of IS and part of pro-IS networks. Typically, they are young females (15-25) and view belonging to a subversive network as 'cool'. They tweet a range of content, from family and school issues to support for hardcore violence. They produce no propaganda content themselves, but retweet material produced by others in the network.
Recruiters	These women serve as contact points, providing information, emotional and other support to females seeking to migrate to Syria to join IS. They have a strong ideological commitment and public espousal of strong religious views.
Migrants	They serve both practical and ideological functions within IS: They represent 'success' stories within IS propaganda aimed at recruiting women ('she made hijrah, you can too'). They are the women necessary to building the IS (a state requires a population, particularly one contributing to its support); They are wives and mothers, as well as workers (when required).
Mothers	These women also serve both ideological and practical purposes: their children are used to support claims that IS held territory is a legitimate state **and** their status as mothers is vaunted within pro-IS circles and their children are held up as a future generation of IS fighters and mothers.
Widows	These are women whose husbands have been killed fighting for the Islamic State. As widows, they hold a highly regarded status, which they take from their husbands who are now "shaheed" or martyred for the cause.
Terrorists	Individuals who have been charged with terrorism-related offenses.
Exiters	Individuals who leave IS-networks for any reason, whether it be through abandonment of pro-jihadist causes or to join another group
Next Generation	Children who are used for propaganda purposes. Children/adolescents who are being socialized into pro-IS ideology and values ('the next generation' of the Islamic State).

Appendix B
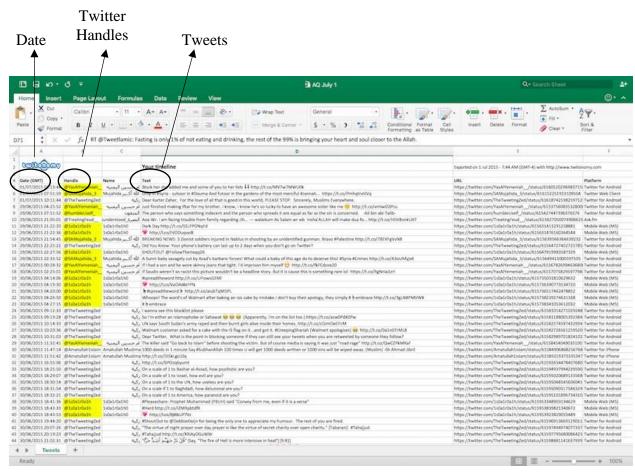
Black Standard (Shahada Flag)

Al-Qaeda Flag

Jahbat al-Nusra Flag

Source: *Mclaughin (2014)*

Appendix C

Sample of Twitonomy Backup

Date   Twitter Handles   Tweets

Appendix D

Hi Rachel and Alyssa,

I have provided you with tweets for each individual girl. You will use the backups from the **August 31** folder for all the girls who have current accounts. For the women who have been deactivated/suspended, you will use the backups in the folder from the date next to their name.

Deleted/Suspended		BACKUP DATE:
███	████████	June 9
████████████	████████	---
██████████		---
███████████	████	June 9
████████	████████	---
████████████	████████	May 8
██████████	████████	---
█████████	██████	June 9
███████████	██████	---
█████████	██████	---
██████████	█████████████	June 9
█████████	█████████████	August 13
██████	█████████	August 24
████████████		June 1

You will also see a list of Huey's Classification. I used the updated list but if you think the older list is more appropriate, you can use that. You will also see "Classification Sheets" - this is what you will fill in and send to me when you are finished. For example:

Twitter Account	Twitter Name	Classification	Details Why? (Keywords)
@abcd1234	HP	Propagandist	Strong religious views, Promote pro-AQ prop

All these girls are associated to AQ so just adjust the descriptions to say AQ rather than IS. IMPORTANT: each woman can be categorized into more than one role. Also, if they do not fit into any of the roles, just put a question mark next to the name and explain why or suggest an alternative. In the "Details Why", just provide a couple keywords or small blurbs about why you decided to categorize the way you did.

There is no right answer. We are just trying to see how well this classification list works as applied to AQ girls. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. I hope I made this clear and it will be an easy task!

Thank you very much,
Hillary

Appendix E

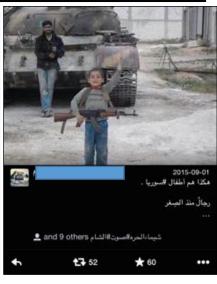| Profiles Pictures	

Memes	

| **Sample Biographies** | Nothing to see here, move along. Waiting (impatiently) for the end. In perpetual turmoil with my self. Anti-Da3ish. Usual disclaimers apply.

◉ Lost   ◉ Born on January 17

Proud Muslimah! #Terrorist by birth #LoveOurMujahideen Standing up for those being unjustly oppressed, tortured, abused, imprisoned and humiliated. طالبة العلم |

Curriculum Vitae of Hillary Peladeau

EDUCATION

2010 - 2014   The University of Western Ontario
               Bachelor of Arts, Honors Specialization in Criminology

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

2014 - 2016   Graduate Teaching Assistant, The University of Western Ontario
               Courses: Women and Crime, Administration of Criminal Justice, Serial Killers

2013 - 2016   Research Assistant, Dr. Laura Huey at the University of Western Ontario
               Duties: Emailing, Transcribing, Interviewing, Field Research for 'Resiliency
               Formation in the Lives of Homeless Women' Project.

PUBLICATIONS

Huey, L., & Peladeau, H. (2016). Cheering on the jihad: An exploration of women's
        participation in online pro-jihadist networks. TSAS working papers series WP16-07.
        Available at:
        http://tsas.ca/tsas_library_entry/tsas-wp16-07-cheering-on-the-jihad-an-exploration-of-
        womens-participation-in-online-pro-jihadist-networks/

RESEARCH REPORTS

Peladeau, H. (2016). "Best practices in data retention." Canadian Society of Evidence Based
        Policing Best Practices Series. Available at: www.can-sebp.net

PRESENTATIONS

Peladeau, H. (2015). "Support for sisters please": A comparison of online roles played by al-
        Qaeda women and their Islamic State counterparts. Canadian Criminal Justice
        Association.

GUEST LECTURES

Peladeau, Hillary. (2015). "Ways to Improve in Administration of Criminal Justice". Presented
        for SOC 2253 (Administration to Criminal Justice), The University of Western Ontario,
        London, Ontario, Canada. November 2015.

Peladeau, Hillary. (2014). "Motivations for Killing". Presented for SOC 4442 (Serial Killers),
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