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2016

https://doi.org/10.25595/3438

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Maddah, Homa: *Reflections on ISIS' Gender Ideology: Between Male Supremacy and Aspirations for the 'Islamic Nation-State'*, in: Femina politica : Zeitschrift für feministische Politik-Wissenschaft, Jg. 25 (2016) Nr: 1, 149–152. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/3438.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/feminapolitica.v25i1.23420

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

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Reflections on ISIS' Gender Ideology: Between Male Supremacy and Aspirations for the 'Islamic Nation-State'

HOMA MADDAH

It is hard – if not impossible – to ignore the role of The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[1] in any analysis of not only the Middle East region but the World. Founded in 1999, the militant organization has been on the frontline of the civil war in Syria since its onset, has strengthened its protracted presence in Iraq and has expanded its repertoire of terror through coalitions and mergers both to Non-Western, distant areas like Libya and Nigeria, and to the heart of the Western world like recently Paris. The extremist group's ultimate goal is the establishment of a Sunni Caliphate encompassing and controlling all people worldwide. Although mainly financed through smuggling oil and gas from the fields it controls, ISIS also earns money from vast extortion and private donations (Brisard/Martinez 2014).

ISIS has been successfully recruiting fighters, both locally and from foreign countries: The Times (2014) estimated that up to 30,000 combatants are fighting under the ISIS flag, nearly half of them from countries other than Syria and Iraq. Aside from coalitions with and allegiances to other extremist groups, the most important

recruitment strategy of ISIS is through vast online social media campaigns, which also attract Europeans and North Americans. Approximately 15 million people are currently living under ISIS rule and there are reports of widespread violations of human rights: either in the name of Islamic prohibitions and orders or through explicit 'ethnic cleansing', cultural destruction and public punishment.

From the very beginning, Western mainstream media has paid intense attention to ISIS' relation with and its treatment of women by focusing on two very different strands: first, on the level of their violence against women – ordinary civilians of the occupied territories, female prisoners of ethnic groups like Yazidis as well as Western hostages. Second, against this background Western media is surprised that ISIS is at the same time successively recruiting women and girls, especially from European countries and North America. This twofold take on women raises the following questions: Does ISIS have a consistent gender ideology? If so, what is it? Or, is ISIS favoring and respecting those women, who are joining them, while oppressing and demeaning all other women? In the following I want to discuss some reflections on these questions from a feminist perspective. I argue that ISIS has a rigid gender politics based on male/soldier supremacy that applies to women generally, yet in different forms and according to the different interests of the organization.

Owning and Controlling the Female Body

Women, of course, are not the only victims of ISIS violence. The militant organization has long persecuted indigenous, religious and minority groups, among them Assyrian, Yazidis and Shia Muslims. In the occupied territories, guidelines for civilians, both women and men, were issued. While women have to cover themselves and in some cases cannot easily move in public, men are banned from shaving their beard and wearing jeans. According to various reports and ISIS' self-made videos the ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol as well as the amputation punishment for stealing apply to both women and men.

Still, most of gender-based violence can be understood in the context of male supremacy and male private ownership over women. These 'rights' mainly belong to those to be called the first class 'citizens' of the Islamic State, namely the Jihadists. The most extreme and most explicit manifestation of both male supremacy and ownership is men's control of the women's body through sexual intercourse. While the form of this control and domination affects female supporters and other women differently, its presumptions and content are very similar. In October/November 2014, ISIS' publishing house, Al-Himma Library, released a pamphlet, "Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves", which demonstrates this attitude very well (MEMRI 2014).[2] In the English translation of excerpts of the pamphlet by The Middle East Media Research Institute's (MEMRI) Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor (JTTM) we can read that a man can only have intercourse with a female slave if he "owns" (ibid.) her exclusively. Indeed, the exclusive ownership is so important

that the pamphlet explains that a man can only immediately have sex with a slave, if she is a virgin (which means that her body has never been owned by another man); otherwise "her uterus must be purified first," (ibid.) to make sure that the imprints of the last owner are not there anymore. If a slave is married, no other man can have sexual relations with her. In the case of a female supporter, the control over the body takes the shape of marriage. According to ISIS' Al-Khansaa female brigade manifesto "Women in the Islamic State" the main duty of women is to get married as soon as possible and no excuse – especially not studying – is accepted (Quilliam Foundation 2015).

For both groups of women, male private ownership is strengthened through regulations on covering bodies (hijab), female seclusion and gender segregation in public places. While the only female public figure of ISIS – Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist – is far from the battlefield in a US prison, the single example where women are openly present in public is an all-female brigade, Al-Khansaa. Besides being geographically limited to the capital city of Raqqa, there is little proof – only some pictures and narratives – to convince us of their active public role and religious policing activities. Moreover, Al-Khansaa's manifesto "Women in the Islamic State" indicates that the brigade is rather a part of ISIS' visual propaganda.

Aspirations for the 'Islamic Nation-state'

The body of women and the idea of controlling it have two different but closely entangled power functions: sexual pleasure and reproduction. For both female supporters and non-supporters these two functions are relevant. I argue that the call for female supporters has its roots in in the militant group's long-term objectives to establish an Islamic 'state' (Caliphate) and a Muslim 'nation' (Ummah). For that reason, ISIS needs more than combatants, it also needs 'citizens' who want this state and who bring the longed-for state legitimacy and materiality. As authors like Nira Yuval Davis (1997) have shown, the role of women/mothers in such processes of nation-state building is unique. Women are, on the one hand, the biological reproducers of citizens and on the other hand the social reproducers of ideology, traditions and customs. Despite the differences between notions of the Western nation-state and the Islamic Ummah, ISIS seems to be no exception in this sense, and the importance of family life and kinship in Islamic tradition even reinforces this view. For ISIS, women are wives and mothers. Even in the case of female non-supporters, where the pleasure aspect of sexual oppression becomes more important since they are not considered to be the best mothers for the next generation, this picture of women as mothers is maintained: "The female captive impregnated by her owner" cannot be sold to another person and "It is not permissible to separate a mother from her prepubescent children" (MEMRI 2014). Here, ISIS' approach towards women and mothers is also in line with a protracted history of women's presence in many fascist, conservative, and right-wing movements, nearly for the same reasons: from

the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile to Hindu nationalist movements, many fundamentalists have enjoyed – though differently – not only the extensive support and presence of women/mothers, but their very active participation in building a national or local identity (Bacchetta/Power 2002). However, this does not mean that the recruitment of women by ISIS is not affiliated with short-term needs of military groups and soldiers. Indeed, the narrative of the runaway wives and brides unveils, perhaps, a patriarchal culture that is very similar to those old stories of Asian "comfort women", who accompanied fighters during wartime (Stezt 2003).

Conclusion

Following from this, I conclude that the ISIS gender ideology is not dual, which means that ISIS does not favor female supporters, while oppressing all other women. Rather, ISIS' gender ideology follows very similar attitudes toward both: sexual objectification and compulsory reproduction of citizen-to-be. There is only one privileged group, the group of male Jihadists. From a feminist perspective, ISIS' attitude towards women is a continuation of previous military groups' acts and shows how the construction of male gender identity among soldiers, the paternalist consequences of occupation and militarism in general put women in harm's way. To a certain extent, the militant organization is harvesting what foreign troops, the failed states of Iraq and Syria, and conservative tribal and ethnic groups have been planting over years – exercising established male privilege in an exemplary way.

Although a feminist approach to ISIS needs to draw attention to the group's misogynist acts and values, I also argue to move beyond privileging gender as our only axis for analyzing its attitudes towards women. Indeed, like many other political organizations, ISIS is taking advantage of not only local complexities in Syria and Iraq, but also of the general ethnic discrimination and marginalization of younger and poorer generations of migrants and Muslims in the West. Coming back to the Western media discourses I have mentioned in the beginning, what is needed is a change of attitude in addressing controversies and, consequently, sensitive policies towards poor migrants, especially young female Muslims, in Western countries as well as an effort to give more voice and power to women in the conflict regions. This could – at best – transfer the gender politics of ISIS from an 'exotic' phenomena to a shared battlefield for feminist action around the world.

Notes

1 The group has had many different names since its foundation, most importantly ISIS, ISIL and DAESH, used by different audiences in different settings. In June 2014, the group renamed itself as Islamic State (IS), which refers to their goal to expand their activities worldwide. In this essay, I use ISIS as it represents the current reality of the group's most important occupied territories and geographical centers of activity.

2 According to the pamphlet, all "unbelieving" captives are slaves (MEMRI 2014).

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Südafrikas Born Free-Generation im Aufstand: Ein feministisches Revival des Black Consciousness Movement

VERENA NAMBERGER

Ausgehend von den Universitäten entsteht derzeit in Südafrika ein neues, progressives Black Consciousness Movement.[1] Das Land erlebte im vergangenen Jahr die größten Proteste seit Ende des Apartheidregimes und, so Achille Mbembe, seinen „Fanonschen Moment".[2] Die von Schwarzen[3] Student_innen angeführte Protestbewegung richtet sich vor allem gegen institutionellen Rassismus an den Universitäten. Sie ist Ausdruck und Katalysator eines breiten Aufbegehrens der Born Free-Generation – derjenigen, die nach 1994 geboren wurden – gegen das Erbe von Apartheid und Kolonialismus. Diese Generation sieht die Versöhnungsgesten Desmond Tutus und Nelson Mandelas angesichts der nach wie vor eklatanten sozioökonomischen Ungleichheit zwischen der *weißen* Minderheit und der Schwarzen Mehrheit des Landes als gescheitert und fordert eine radikale Transformation und Dekolonialisierung der Gesellschaft. Besonders bemerkenswert ist die starke Position Schwarzer Feminist_innen in der Bewegung. Sie vertreten einen politischen Ansatz, der Geschlecht, sexuelle Orientierung und Befähigung als mit ‚Rasse' und Klasse interdependente Machtkategorien versteht, und politisieren so unterschiedliche Unterdrückungserfahrungen und -verhältnisse. Dies ist ein ermutigendes Beispiel dafür, wie feministische Konzepte in sozialen Kämpfen (weiter-)entwickelt und adaptiert, ja