THE ISLAMIC STATE ON TUMBLR – RECRUITING WESTERN WOMEN

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February 2016

ABSTRACT

The research discusses ISIS's Media Strategy towards western women by examining the Tumblr blog UMM LAYTH. Written by a young woman from Scotland who traveled to the Islamic State, the blog speaks about daily life under ISIS. The paper gives a background on the author, the content and the blog's style.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

"[T]hey took me to the "Hesba" headquarters in the city, and escorted me to the torture chamber, then they asked me to choose between a whip or a "biter"[.] I did not know what a "biter" was and I thought it is a reduced sentence, I was afraid of whipping, so I choose the "biter", then they brought a sharp object that has a lot of teeth and held me, placing it on my chest and pressing it strongly, I screamed from pain and I was badly injured. They later took me to the hospital." "[…] [My] femininity had been completely destroyed." [1]

This story comes from a young woman from Raqqa, Syria. She was caught breastfeeding her baby in public by the Al-Khansaa Brigades − an all-female police unit enforcing Sharia Law among women.[2]

The story is far from an exception. The violation of women's human rights has reached a new level of horror in the so-called Islamic State. Such information and reports are widely spread over the Internet and covered by the big media agencies. Nonetheless, women living in western states continue to make the decision to leave their countries and to migrate to the Caliphate. According to the US National Counterterrorism Center, there are currently around 20,000 foreign fighters located in the territories controlled by Daesh, the Islamic State. Among these 3,000 are Western Foreign Fighters, including 550 women.[3]

This paper will deal with the question, of how Daesh uses social media − in particular the phenomenon of blogging - to recruit western women to join the Islamic State. For this goal the blog of the young Scottish girl, Aqsa Mahmood, who migrated to Syria and Iraq will be portrayed and analyzed with respect to three sub-questions: who, what and why. Firstly, we will look at the blog's author and reader: Who is Aqsa Mahmood and to who is her target audience? Secondly, the content will be interpreted. What is said, what promises made, and what expectations arise from those? Thirdly, we will look at how the content is presented in terms of language, rhetoric, pictures and design. The blog has been online already since 2013 and the

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[1] Guyle, D. (2014). "All female All-female Islamic State police squad tortured new mother with spiked clamp device called a 'biter' after she was caught breastfeeding in public". Daily Mail
[2] Peresin, A. & Cervone, A. (2015). "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.*
[3] Petrou, M. (2015). "'Teen girl jihadists'". *Maclean'*s. 128, 10: 28-30.

amount of posts exceeds a number of 5000. Due to a lack of capacities this paper will only analyze the posts published from the territory controlled by the so-called Islamic State (November 14, 2013 until October 3, 2015). Further studies should proceed an in depth analysis of the blogposts published before that time in order to track the process of radicalization.

SPEAKING ABOUT TERROR – TERMS USED

Tumblr

The medium of Internet blogs were developed in the early 1990's and were originally merely used as a tool to write online diaries. In this early stage of blogging, it was limited to those with at least some technical skills. Over the time however, online service providers offered platforms where everybody without any technical know-how could create their own blog websites: write and post texts upload and share pictures or videos and comment or discuss on content. Through this development blogging has become a multipurpose communication tool and is today "the primary Internet publishing channel for user generated content for the masses". [4] Free access, anonymity, easy to use but difficult to control: These are the factors that make blogs a very suitable medium for organization with clandestine structures to share their views and reach audiences all over the world. Moreover, the medium allows direct conversation between author and reader because of comment and feedback sections on the website. Twitter, came up in 2006, and is a special type of blogging (microblogging). Posts on twitter are generally a lot shorter than posts on classic blogs.[5]

Tumblr, which will be in the focus of this paper, is one of the most successful providers for online blogs. The website allows users to log on and create their individual online blogs. The service is free of charge and does not require extensive technical skills. Users can upload pictures, quotes, videos, texts as well as share links. Users can follow blogs, which means that they will be informed about any changes and uploads on the blog of their interest. Through the

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[4] Caffrey, C. (2015). logging in the 2000s. *Salem Press Encyclopedia.*
[5] ibid.

comment and chat function users can have public or private conversations. Tumblr, with 230 million active users is one of the bigger social media platforms worldwide. [6],[7] The majority of users are between 16 and 24.[8]

Islamic State vs. Daesh

The Islamic terrorist group today controlling wide territories in Iraq and Syria has been acting under various different names since its occurrence in 2013. As a result of the war in Iraq, former Saddam Hussein supporters and ex-soldiers from the Iraqi Army founded the terror organization *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. At that point it was mainly committing attacks against Shia Muslims. After swearing allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2004, the group became a regional branch of Al Qaeda, namely *Al Qaeda in Iraq* (AQI).[9] After Zarqawi's death in 2006, Abu Ayyub al-Masri took over the lead of the organization and changed its name to the *Islamic State of Iraq*.[10] In 2010 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi replaced Abu Ayyub al-Masri and entered the Syrian civil war in 2013. From then on ISI is called the *Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS).[11] At this point the goal became to install an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria as well as Lebanon and Israel/ Palestine. Due to armed conflicts between the Al Nusra-Front, a regional Syrian terror organization affiliated with Al Qaeda, ISIS was excluded from the mother-organization Al Qaeda.

In spring 2014, Baghdadi declared the Islamic Caliphate.[12] From then on the organization called itself the Islamic State. By excluding all territorial terms from the name it indicates that the caliphate does not stop at national borders and is aiming to control all Muslim territory

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[6] We Are Social. n.d. (2015). "Ranking der größten Social Networks und Messenger nach der Anzahl der monatlich aktiven Nutzer (MAU) im Jahr 2015 (in Millionen)". *Statista*.

[7] In order place these numbers mentioned above in context: *Facebook* the biggest social network has 1.550 billion active users and *Linked In* only has 97 million users.

[8] GlobalWebIndex. n.d. (2014). "Altersverteilung der aktiven Nutzer von Tumblr weltweit im 4. Quartal 2014". Statista.

[9] Laub, Z., & Masters, J. (2015). "The Islamic State". Council of Foreign Relations.

[10] John, T. (2015). "Timeline: The Rise of ISIS". *TIME*.

[11] ibid.

[12] Berret, R. (2014). "The Islamic State". Soufan Group.

worldwide. So far, the Islamic State has brought wide territories in Syria, Iraq as well as Libya and Sinai under his control. Nonetheless, the speed in which it was expanding has now decreased.[13]

Writing a paper on this rapidly developing and changing phenomenon brings up the question of how to refer to it. The current term suggested by the group itself would be Islamic State. However, president Obama says, "ISIL is not Islamic . . . and [is] certainly not a state".[14] The way we speak about things changes the way we feel about them. By using the term Islamic State we acknowledge to a certain degree the existence of a state and give it a certain amount of legitimacy. Daesh is therefore the term suggested. Language matters in the war against this group especially since Daesh relies on a highly successful media strategy, which has already recruited thousands of fighters. Daesh cannot be defeated only militarily. To the contrary, changing the way people think about it, will make the difference. The idea that this group stands for has to be defeated. Hence, it is crucial to consider the way we refer to the group in order not to allow it to dictate us the way we feel and behave towards it. Therefore, this paper prefers to use the term Daesh instead of Islamic State.

Wanderlust?

"Hijra, [is] the name of the transfer of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions from the hostile Mecca to the promising Medina in 622 CE, and it consequently identifies migrants from a problematic place to a better one, for the sake of Allah. Hijra, intended as migration from the lands inhabited by infidels to Muslim lands or to contribute to jihad, is the 36th of the 44 famous 'Ways to support Jihad' preached by Anwar Al Awlaki and published on his blog in February 2009."[15] Women making Hijra to the territories of Daesh are referring to themselves as Muhajirah [sg.] or Muhajirat [pl.] which is the feminine form of Muhajir meaning literally

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[13] Müller-Seedorf, W. (2014). "Aktueller Begriff: Die Terrormiliz Islamischer Staat und ihre Entwicklung." *Wissenschaftliche Dienste, 28*(14).
[14] Kahn, Z. (2015). "Words matter in 'ISIS' war, so use 'Daesh'." The Boston Globe. Accessed October 20, 2015.
[15] Peresin, A. & Cervone, A. 2015. "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.* ,495

"migrant".[16] According to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the migration to the caliphate is a religious duty of all good Muslims.[17] Bakr al-Baghdadi called for Muslim women throughout the world to do Hijra because they are a relevant factor on the way to establish a new territorial entity: They are needed to fulfill the traditional roles of mothers and wives in order to ensure the future of the caliphate by giving birth and raising the second generation of Daesh "in the love of Jihad".[18]

A GLANCE ON THE MEDIA STRATEGY OF DEASH

According to James Farwell, Daesh's media strategy is a "double-edged sword".[19] Whilst Daesh is gaining territory through warfare, extreme violence and displacements, it uses a sophisticated media strategy mostly based on social media. This strategy is directed towards two different audiences with two opposing goals – to recruit fighters and intimidate enemies.[20] This paper will only focus on the media Daesh publishes with the intention of propaganda. Daesh gains a number of advantages from this strategic use of propaganda in contrast to other terrorist groups: Firstly, through the use of social media, Daesh is not reliant on the classical mainstream media and news agencies. In the past, terror organization would only be able to attract public attention through the reports of the mainstream media. Hence, it was not in their hands to decide how the world would know about their acts. In fact, they could only provide the event itself but the interpretation of it lay in the hands of the media.[21]

With the use of social media as a tool of propaganda, Daesh has the opportunity to bring their information directly to a global audience without being filtered by western media. Since they have the opportunity to post images they can create a global public image of the Islamic State. Thinking about IS, the first association coming into our minds will most likely be the beheading scenes in the Syrian desert with James Folley dressed in orange prison clothes and the black

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[16] ibid.
[17] ibid.
[18] Peresin, A. & Cervone, A. 2015. "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.* ,494ff.
[19] Farwell, J. (2014). "The Media Strategy of ISIS". *Survival: Global Politics and Strategies*. , 52
[20] ibid.
[21] Klausen, J. (2015). "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.*, 4

dressed executer holding a knife against Foleys throat right behind him. By spreading those pictures over the Internet, Daesh has managed to ingrain those pictures of absolute power of the terrorist and absolute submission of the western world represented by Foley into our minds and hearts. However, in order to recruit, Daesh is also posting pictures of the seemingly joyful and glorious every daily life in the Caliphate.[22] Social media such as Twitter, Facebook or blogs are particularly suitable for the goal of recruitment. Young westerners encounter with the terrorist content in their ordinary online environment. It makes a significant difference whether we see terror attacks in the format of the evening news or on our newsfeed on Facebook. Firstly, it is a more direct conversation between terror organization and target on a more individual basis. One fighter is posting something on a personal level and not (at least not openly) on behalf of the organization.[23] Secondly, the content is not framed by the news agency's comments but is reaching the user unfiltered and framed by harmless tweets and posts of friends. Thirdly, the content published over social media does not have the format of ordinary advertisement − it rather seems like an authentic report of experiences.

UMM LAYTH - ANALYSIS

The Author

Online

Umm Layth's blog (fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com) is one of the most relevant female jihadi websites related to Daesh. The Tumblr blog is relevant due to its ability to influence people's actions: it is suspected that it was Umm Layth's blog posts, throughout various channels over the Internet, that motivated three British school girls, 15-year-old´ Shamima Begum, 16-year-old Kadiza Sultana and 15-year-old Amira Abase, to migrate to the Islamic State in February 2015.[24] In addition to the tumblr blog, there is also a Twitter account under the name UMM LAYTH,

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[22] Klausen, J. (2015). "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*., 10f.
[23] ibid.
[24] Franz, A. & Shubert, A. (2015). "From Scottish teen to ISIS bride and recruiter: the Aqsa Mahmood story". CNN

which has already been shut down once in November 2014 but was opened under a new account recently (https://twitter.com/Brooke_Ess).[25]

Twitter, began in 2006, and is a special type of blogging (microblogging). Posts on twitter are generally a lot shorter than posts on classic blogs (limited to only 140 characters). [26] Therefore we will examine the blog and not the twitter account, because we suspect that the longer the posts the more implicit clues on the propaganda strategy can be found.

The tumblr blog UMM LAYTH was created on January 22, 2013 and the average number of posts per day is 5.7. The last activity on the blog was on September 22, 2015 (https://www.tumblr.com/). Translated from Arabic Umm Layth means "Mother of the Lion".

Offline

The username UMM LAYTH is suspected to belong to a young girl from Glasgow, Scotland named Aqsa Mahmood. Her parents migrated to the UK from Pakistan. Her father was a cricket player and became a successful businessman later on. She grew up in the Scottish middle class environment with good education in different private schools. First, she visited Craigholme – all girl school in Glasgow. "Mahmood left Craigholme after failing to get into university and went to study at the nearby Shawlands Academy, a mixed state school.

After Shawlands, Mahmood began a course in diagnostic radiography at Glasgow Caledonian University but dropped out in order to travel to Syria."[27] According to classmates she used to be a very ordinary, bright and friendly girl.[28] Her radicalization took place on the Internet. "In her fifth year, Mahmood became more interested in Islam and began wearing the hijab. She began buying religious books, taking classes and chatting to people about Muslim ideology over the

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[25] UMM LAYTH. (2015). Personal Tumblr Blog
[26] ibid.
[27] Rahman, K. & Allen, V. (2014). "The private school jihadist: As PM unveils new terror crackdown, a Scots girl incites bloody massacre on British streets". *Daily Mail*
[28] ibid.

Internet." [29] Apparently nobody in her environment expected her to make the decision to migrate to Syria. However, in November 2013, she left to Syria where she got married to a foreign fighter.

The Audience

The audience that is following UMM LAYTH's blog seems to be one that is already sympathizing with her beliefs: The comments on the blog are mostly positive or even admiring. Further, many followers repost UMM LAYTH's post, which is again a sign of their approval. Since the language used is mostly English but intervened with Muslim expressions in Arabic such as "*Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakutah*" [30], it seems like the audience UMM LAYTH is speaking to is from an English speaking background and familiar with the Muslim tradition. When explaining what to bring when migrating to the Islamic state in the "Hijrah checklist"[31] UMM LAYTH clearly refers to the female life in the western world – e.g. by referring to specific types of clothing that can only be bought in the west but cannot be found in Syria. Moreover, her writing contains abbreviations such as *lol* that are common among the digital natives that grew up with online chatting and text messaging.[32] Drawing from these observations it seems that the targeted audience are young English speaking Muslim women living in the West who have already been radicalized to a certain degree.

Content

The paper examines all posts made since the departure to Syria until today: November 14, 2013 until October 3, 2015.

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[29] Randall, C. (2014). "From Coldplay to Jihad, the Scottish girl who joined ISIL". *The National*.
[30] UMM LAYTH. (2015). Personal Tumblr Blog
[31] UMM LAYTH. (2015). Personal Tumblr Blog
[32] UMM LAYTH. (2015). Personal Tumblr Blog

First, all posts were counted in order to track changes in the quantitative posting behavior. Secondly, all posts published during this period were reviewed in terms of content and put into categories. Findings will be presented in order to formulate general implication in relation to the general media strategy of Daesh.

In 2013 (from November 14, 2013 to the end of the year) UMM LAYTH uploaded 29 posts. In 2014 she made 54 posts and in 2015 she posted 39 times. The number of posts has decreased rapidly since entering the territory controlled by Daesh. This significant decrease of posts after she traveled to Syria could be due to bad Internet connection or because the content she is allowed to post is controlled by Daesh authorities. The latter is supported by Klausen (2015). He suggests that even though social media seem to be very spontaneous and therefore authentic formats, they are actually embedded in a general propaganda strategy and controlled by authorities.
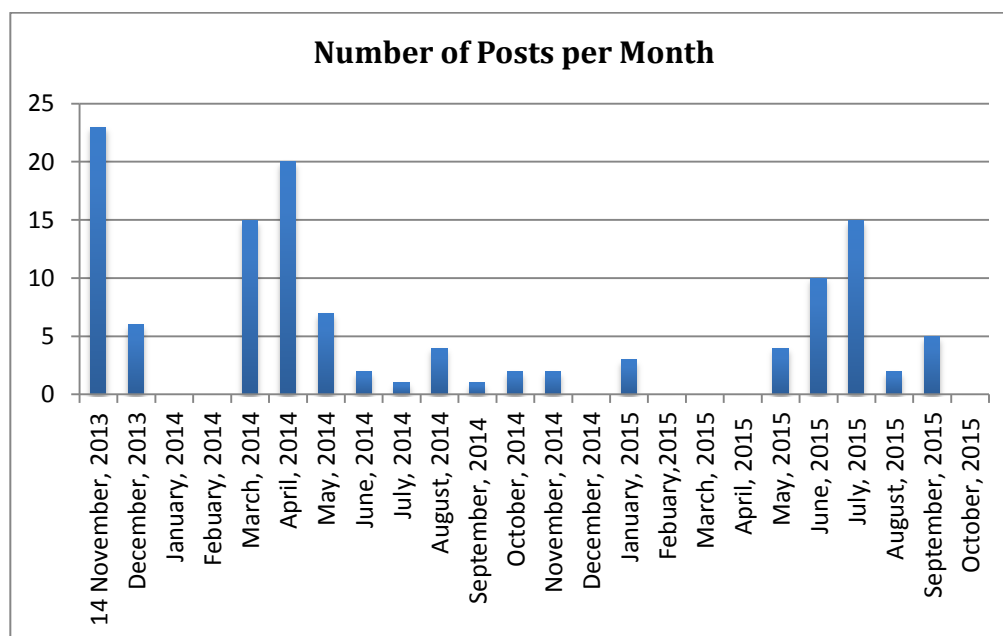

Figure no. 1: Number of posts since November 14, 2013 to October 3, 2015

The blog's content (all relevant 122 posts) were put into 17 categories: (1) *Family,* (2) *Feminism*[33], (3) *Call to activism*, (4) *Hijrah*, (5) *Rewards by Allah*, (6) *Return to the West,* (7)

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[33] All posts where the female position in society is highlighted.

Jihad, (9) *Direct conversation with followers*, (9) *Western politics*, (10) *Advice on a religious life*, (11) *Companionship*[34], (12) *Disbeliever,* (13) *Daily life,* (14) *Fear,* (15) *Martyrdom,* (16) *Diary of a Mujahirah,* (17) *not classified.* The most important categories are *Advice on a religious life, Hijrah* and *Jihad.* Furthermore, it is striving, that even though Jihad is one of the most frequent topics, UMM LAYTH does not speak about violence and fighting in an explicit way.
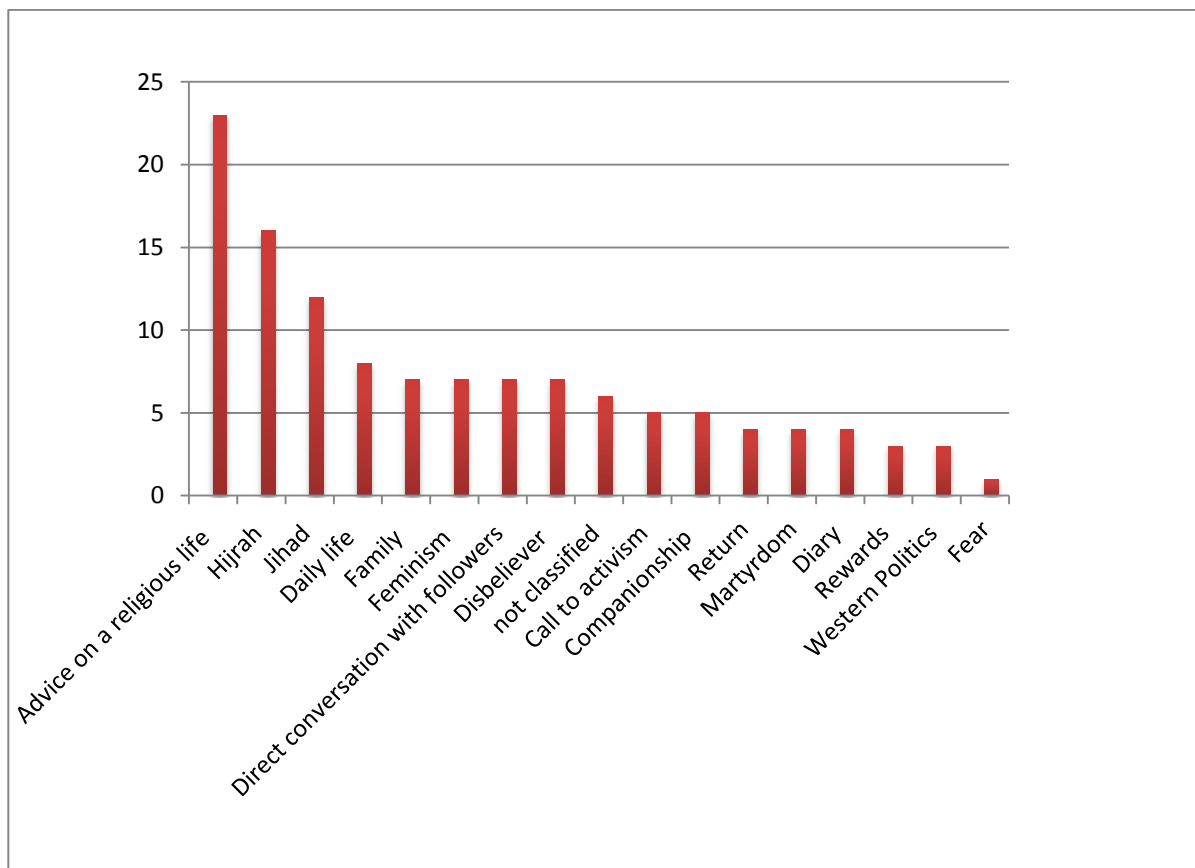

Figure no. 2: Frequency of categories

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[34] Marriage and friendship

Style

A few aspects in terms of style will be discussed: First, the blog is mostly written in English, only a few quotes are in Arabic and very frequently she includes Arabic sayings such as "Wallahi" in her English sentences. Secondly, there are five types of posts in the period of interest: (1) The vast majority of posts are *quotations* from various sources such as Islamic leaders, people she admires, leaders of terrorist organizations or the Quran. (2) Her personal *posts* comprise all post that are of direct speech, everything that she says in her own words. (3) **Images** include pictures, photographs, cartoons and drawings. (4) The fourth type of posts are **questions** asked by followers. (5) And the fifth type of posts is her personal diary **"Diary of a Mujahirah".** It is surprising, that the pictures posted mostly show landscapes. Partly she took the photos herself and partly she seemed to have found them online. Even though she lives in a country where war is part of the violence, none of the pictures posted from Syria show any violence but rather show the beauty of the country.
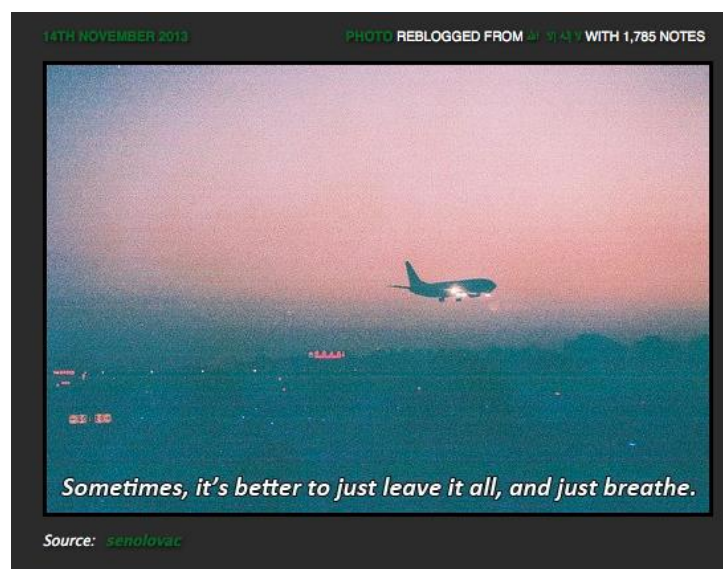

Figure no.3: Picture posted on the day of UMM LAYTH departure to Syria.

Diary of a Mujahirah

"Diary of a Mujahirah" – UMM LAYTH revealing online diary - only occurs 4 times during the relevant period. Nonetheless, it is important because those are the longest direct posts without quotation, in which UMM LAYTH, personality as well as her ideas become most obvious. Diary of Mujahirah 1 from April 9, 2014 will serve as an example.

She begins with the Arabic greeting: *"Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakutah"* – meaning May Allah's peace, mercy and blessing be upon you. Followed by a statement in which she moderately explains her status. She considers herself as blessed by Allah to have been able to make her Hijrah. By giving a realistic report on her life in Syria, she wants to help brothers and sisters in their decision. Following this introduction, she explains her view on the topics what to bring, how to prepare, the routines of her daily life, her living situation in her marriage and Jihad.

This diary post reveals a number of characteristics of UMM LAYTHS's way of writing, which are relevant for the discussion. Firstly, she presents herself as extremely moderate. "Allah knows my intention but I am in no way at all boasting or bragging on about the position I have been blessed with out of the mercy of Allah."[35]And "I am merely a sinful servant of Allah, please forgive me my shortcomings."[36] Secondly, she is thankful for her experiences and acquaintances: "Wallahi I have come across such beautiful sisters who will spend mornings and nights in happiness (…)."[37] The reader gets the impression that she is content with her decision. Moreover, she is speaking very disillusioned: "Ok, so this is one of the most common and hyped up questions I have been receiving from sisters who are intending on making hijrah beithnillah. I will be straight up and blunt with you all, there is absolutely nothing for sisters to participate in Qitaal."[38] Or "I really need sisters to stop dreaming about coming to al Shaam and not getting married."[39] This conveys a great sense of authenticity. She is not trying to lure people into the Islamic state by creating wrong expectations. In contrast, she is advising them to be thoughtful in their decision and get prepared: "You will not enjoy your Hijrah truly until you believe from the

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[35] UMM LAYTH. (2015). Personal Tumblr Blog
[36] ibid.
[37] ibid.
[38] ibid.
[39] ibid.

bottom of your heart it is to please, Allah, and most importantly you need to be sincere in your intentions." In addition, she is practical and gives very concrete advice on what to bring and how to get prepared: "It's a miracle if you find a top or trousers which last longer than a month. So bring all your clothes from socks and underwear to dresses and hijab."[40] All of the advice comes in a very informal and friendly way of speaking.

To the reader it feels almost like reading a letter by a friend or even sister who is trying to help him make the right decision. The fact, that doing hijrah in this case means moving to a place where war and death is on the daily agenda is only briefly touched: "At the moment I'm living at a sisters Makar (headquarters/base) along with many other sisters in Raqqah, since the situation with the Muhajireen has been unsettling since the fighting with FSA in Halab broke out (…)."[41]
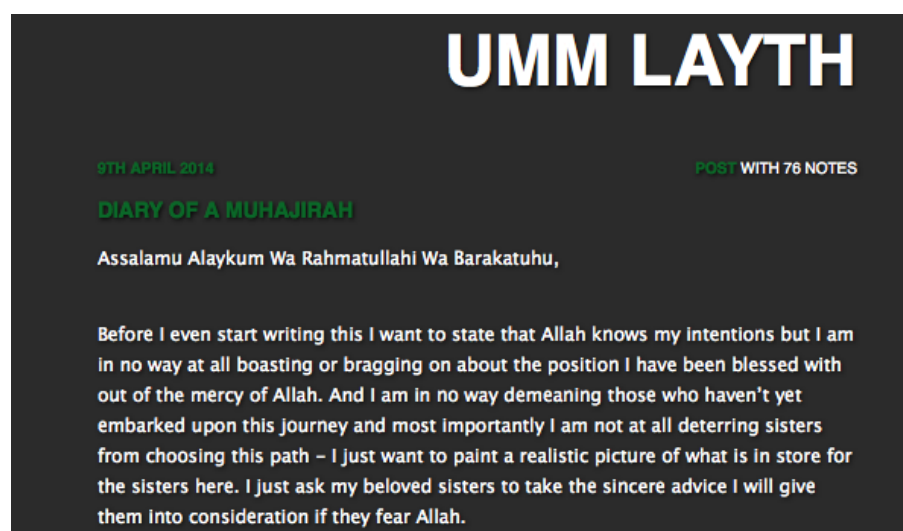

Figure no. 4: Diary of a Muhajirah

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

UMM LAYTH decided to join one of (if not the) most violent and radical terror organization operating today. Reading a blog and especially an online diary of someone who made such a decision gives an inside in the mind of an extremely radical Islamist.

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[40] ibid.
[41] ibid.

The author mainly uses quotes to give the reader the impression of a pseudo intellectual dispute on the matter. She takes into consideration the Quran as well as various Islamic leaders among which are extremely radical figures. For example in March 2014 she frequently deals with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of Al Qaida in Iraq. Those are the parts of the blog where she is most radical. However, because they are not her own words, they have a higher authority: Since the quotes are uncommented, they are not as closely linked to the personality the reader imagines while reading. To the uncritical reader they might seem more like facts or pieces of truth. Directly connected to the author, however, are her diary posts. The picture that arises here is rather positive: As explained above she seems like a caring friend that is trying to help you make the right decision: Make Hijrah but only if you are ready and 100% sure – is the message. This is not the typical luring we know from advertisement campaigns. In terms of topics, she gives a lot of advice on how to live a religious life. Today, we live in a world of endless opportunities (at least in the west). Every day, we have to make choices on how we want to live our life. Barely anything seems to be decided for us. This is the freedom of a modern life but for some it can also become a burden. Many young people feel unable to cope with this endless supply of options and the duty to choose. An ideology with no ambiguity and extremely clear expectations could feel like a relief.[42]

The second most frequent topic (Hijrah) can be relevant to a wide range of young western people. Making Hijrah, could be understood as a way of giving meaning to our life. A meaning that is higher than being part in the endless circle of rotating commodities in a capitalist world of consumption in which value is determined only by money. Moreover, there is something very feminine in the way the blog addresses the reader. The focus is far away from war and violence. This becomes obvious by comparing the blog to the pictures shown in *Dapiq* (the online magazine of the Islamic State).[43] The pictures on this blog are mostly landscapes showing the beauty of Syria. Studies have shown that women are less attracted by violence than men.[44] The fact that there is war in Syria is not denied but it is not explicitly discussed. The images of Daesh

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[42] Dignös, E. (2015). "Die Generation Y hat Angst vor dem Leben". Die Welt.
[43] Dabiq. (2014). "The Return of the Khilafah", Issue 1.
[44] Hughes, I. (2015). "Why are men more likely to be violent then women?" The Journal.

arising in our mind when reading the blog are euphemisms to the pictures of the unbelievable brutality that we see on the news.

CONCLUSION

The euphemism on the situation in Syria is what is especially dangerous for young western Internet users. By reading the blog the impression of an authentic source on how life is like in Syria arises. It is motivating at the same time thoughtful and very subtle. It does not give the impression to be part of a general media strategy. Nonetheless, it is impossible to know who is actually writing the blog. However, we can be very certain that the ISIS media department knows about its existence and most likely controls its content. It seems, as propaganda is the same on structural level – no matter what the ideology behind it is. Out of this perspective, it seems reasonable that the blog has finally been shut down in October 2015.

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