

The Role of Al-Fatihin Magazine Published by the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in Influencing Women Towards Extremism

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) is one of the contemporary extremist groups. They erroneously use religious justification to validate their violent actions against others. This group has successfully influenced a number of Muslims to join their cause. In the context of the Malay Archipelago, ISIS has published the AlFatihin magazine in Malay, serving as propaganda material to sway more Muslims in the region to join them. Based on a qualitative approach, this paper aims to analyze the role of Al-Fatihin magazine in influencing women towards extremism. The research findings indicate that Al-Fatihin magazine employs specific strategies to influence Muslim women towards ISIS. The magazine presents narratives related to sacrifice, obedience to jihad, and the glorification of women's roles in ISIS's struggle. Most notably, it misinterprets Quranic verses to manipulate Muslim women, encouraging them to support and join ISIS. In conclusion, Al-Fatihin magazine must be avoided by all Muslims in the Malay Archipelago to prevent them from falling into extremism.

Keywords: Al-Fatihin Magazine; ISIS; Extremism; Women; Malay Archipelago

INTRODUCTION

Extremism and radicalism threaten every country, including the Muslim world. This study focuses on the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), or al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (DAESH). The official emergence of ISIS began on June 29, 2014, with Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi declared as the first caliph. Subsequently, Muslims worldwide were urged to join the “jihad” with ISIS. Many Muslims were swayed by ISIS's propaganda and migrated to Syria, including those from the Malay Archipelago, particularly Malaysia.

Even after the territorial defeat of the organization, there still exist individuals belonging to and supporting the group in different countries. This is a threat because the group still has the potential for terrorism. Therefore, the government should improve its surveillance for factors contributing to the support and involvement of Muslims in the group. One of the primary mechanisms employed by ISIS is the dissemination of propaganda materials including books, videos, and magazines through online platforms. This paper examines how Al-Fatihin magazine influences women toward extremist ideologies.

Review of Extremist Group Magazine Publication

There are two magazines that were published by the ISIS organization which are Dabiq magazine (2014) and Rumiyah magazine (2016). Both of these official magazines were published online by ISIS's media center, Al-Hayat Media Centre (Haron, 2016). The content of *Dabiq* magazine is written in Arabic and English which is focus on jihadist ideology and Islamic eschatology, presenting a narrative about the end-of-times battle in Dabiq, Syria. It further encouraged its followers to migrate to ISIS-controlled areas and engage in violent acts against their enemies (Winter, 2017).

When ISIS lost control over Dabiq, the publication of *Dabiq* magazine was immediately ceased and replaced with *Rumiyah* magazine. The replacement of the magazine signified a strategic shift to ensure their “jihadist”

struggle remained relevant. The name *Rumiyah* is derived from the Arabic word for ‘Rome’ symbolizing ISIS’s aim to capture international attention. The naming of this magazine also represents the fall of the Roman Empire and the center of Christianity by ISIS (Bröckling et al., 2018). A clear quote from *Dabiq* magazine states (Dabiq, Zulhijjah 1435 Hijrah):

“O muwahhidin, receive glad tidings, for by Allah, we will not rest from our jihād until we are under the olive trees of Rome.” – Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Dabiq 4: 4).

There are seven magazines have been identified as published by various extremist groups: *Azan* magazine by the Afghan Taliban, *Gaidi Mtaani* by al-Shabaab, *Inspire* and *Jihad Recollections* by al-Qaeda, including *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *Al-Fatihin* published by ISIS (Macdonald, 2016). Generally, the publication of these magazines aims to highlight their jihadist struggle, the implementation of *tawhid*, *hijrah*, the Islamic caliphate, and other concepts. Most of these magazines greatly glorify Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and Usamah bin Laden (Razak et al., 2023).

As discussed earlier, these ideological themes form the core of ISIS propaganda strategy. This strategy also serves as a form of psychological warfare against their enemies. In this regard, the publication of *Al-Fatihin* magazine shocked the world because it is the only magazine published in Malay, even online. The objective of this publication is clearly to spread ISIS's ideology more widely in the Malay Archipelago region of Southeast Asia.

Background of Al-Fatihin Magazine Pulished By Isis

Although *Al-Fatihin* magazine is not the first magazine published by the ISIS group, its content is seen to have similarities and continuity with *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines. These ideological principles, as discussed earlier, continue to underpin the content of *Al-Fatihin* magazine and shape its propaganda objectives. All these aspects are crucial in influencing Muslims to support every action of ISIS and recruit new members, while simultaneously ensuring existing members of the group remain committed to striving for jihad to establish an Islamic state (Wahab et al., 2021).

Al-Fatihin magazine has 10 issues, with the first edition (01) published in Jumada al-Akhirah 1439 Hijrah, which corresponds to around February to March 2018. Based on the publication date of the first issue, it is evident that *Al-Fatihin* magazine is the most recent and newest publication after *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines (ISIS, 2018a). The last in the series, the tenth edition (10), was published on 28 Sha'ban 1439H, around May 2018 (ISIS, 2018d). The continued publication of *Al-Fatihin* magazine indicates that the ISIS movement in the Malay Archipelago region remains active to this day.

Al-Fatihin magazine features several forms of writing. Among them are long articles, consisting of 4 to 5 pages, which include relevant images to discuss the issues and events, as well as incorporating historical elements and current affairs. *Al-Fatihin* magazine often displays section from the works of earlier figures like Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, to provide clear and strong justifications for their call to jihad.

Additionally, there are advertisement sections featuring insightful text snippets accompanied by suitable images to attract readers. The magazine also exhibits scrupulous planning in terms of layout and graphics, where the placement of images or words corresponds to the topic presented on each page. *Al-Fatihin* magazine is also designed with various segments and sections to cater to readers from diverse backgrounds. Each issue of the magazine features 12 main segments, including an introduction, news, articles, advice, reports, correspondents, Muslim women, martyr stories, interviews, weekly world news, audio texts, and exclusives.

Although *Al-Fatihin* magazine generally features 12 main segments, not all segments are included in every edition. The content in each issue depends on the propaganda strategy intended at that time. Physically, each issue of the magazine consists of approximately 13 to 15 pages, providing space for the delivery of in-depth and comprehensive information to its readers. As a result, the structure of this magazine is dynamic and flexible, as it serves as a strategic communication tool for disseminating ISIS ideology through the content presented in each edition (ISIS, 2018a).

The Role of Women in Isis Movements

The role of women in ISIS is limited, yet they still play a significant part in supporting the group's agenda (Dewi et al., 2023). It is generally understood that ISIS focuses on forming a society centered on their extremist ideology, and women are expected to fulfill roles as wives and mothers in educating and raising children to contribute to this ideology. Additionally, they bear the responsibility of nurturing the next generation to perpetuate the ISIS group's agenda. Women are also restricted in social life and must adhere to strict rules enforced by the group (Saltman & Smith, 2016).

Although the roles of women in ISIS are mostly domestic and not particularly extensive, some women are involved with the al-Khansaa Brigade, a special female unit that operates in the field alongside other ISIS members. This group was established around 2014 in Syria. The primary function of the al-Khansaa Brigade is to perform policing duties, such as conducting security checks at checkpoints and ensuring Muslim women comply with dress codes and laws in areas controlled by ISIS (Spencer, 2016).

They also play a role in recruiting young women through social media, especially from abroad, to join ISIS. Recruited members are typically placed in supportive and encouraging roles, aligning with the group's ideology. However, women are rarely directly involved in offensive activities, as combat roles are usually performed by men. Women are primarily restricted to providing indirect support in ensuring the continuity of the ideology through their roles as wives and mothers (Saltman & Smith, 2016).

Furthermore, women in ISIS also play a role in marrying militant members, a practice known as 'jihad nikah' (News, 28 August 2014). This term refers to marriages driven by extremist ideology as a form of support for the jihadist struggle. The ISIS group utilizes these marriages as a long-term strategy to produce new generations who will continue to support their cause (Online, 1 May 2017). The use of the term 'jihad' in this context is a perversion, employed as a strategy to influence and recruit women.

In the Malaysian context, the majority of women involved with ISIS primarily focus on providing support, recruiting new members, and disseminating ideology, especially through social media. Although the country has taken strict measures to address this, there are still several cases of Malaysian women involved in spreading ISIS propaganda and recruiting new members. They employ an approach of sharing content and writings that promote jihadist narratives and glorify the struggle of the ISIS group. Through these means, they attempt to influence individuals seeking purpose in life to join ISIS (Zakuan, 2018).

Apart from online activities, there are women in Malaysia who contribute financially to the ISIS network. They collect funds and transfer money to ISIS as a sign of support for the activities carried out, either directly through personal networks or indirectly through international networks. These funds are also used to finance group activities such as the purchase of weapons and the provision of basic facilities for ISIS fighters. Women involved are difficult to detect because they operate in small groups and use methods of disguise to transfer money abroad (Zakuan, 2018).

Based on police statistics (PDRM) from 2013 to 2018, a total of 46 women were arrested for joining and supporting ISIS. Of this number, those aged between 26 and 35 constituted the largest category influenced by ISIS (Sandaran, 2019). Interestingly, there was a case of a 52-year-old woman recruited by ISIS who planned a suicide attack against non-Muslims during the 14th General Election on May 9, 2018. The woman intended to detonate her car, which was rigged with gas cylinder detonators. The PDRM successfully detected the plot in advance and managed to thwart it (Sandaran, 2019).

The Position of Women in Al-Fatihin Magazine

The ISIS group strategically constructs gendered narratives that frame women's roles as religious obligations, thereby legitimizing their involvement within a narrowly defined ideological framework. For instance, the involvement of women during the time of the Prophet Muhammad's companions in battles, and the subsequent events of those wars, has become a source of pride for women for being willing to wage jihad as representatives of women. This method functions as a persuasive rhetorical mechanism that emotionally mobilizes women by

equating loyalty to ISIS with religious devotion and moral righteousness. In *Al-Fatihin* magazine, propaganda regarding the position of women is given a special section called 'Muslimah'. However, this special section only appears in editions 3 and 6 (ISIS, 2018b) (ISIS, 2018c).

The first 'Muslimah' special section in edition 3, titled 'The Duty of Muslim Women in Fighting the Enemy', conveys messages regarding the ruling on women's participation in war, claiming that it is an individual obligation (*fardhu ain*). This is because ISIS at that time was in a state of emergency, where women needed to be involved in fighting the enemy to uphold Islam and the caliphate. Therefore, the magazine selectively appropriates the historical figure of Nusaibah binti Ka'ab al-Ansyariyah, transforming an exceptional historical context into a normative model to justify contemporary militant participation.

Nusaibah was involved in several battles, including the Battle of Yamamah, the Battle of Uhud, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, and many others. In these war events, Nusaibah fought and had her hand severed, yet she was still able to protect the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) despite being in pain (ISIS, 2018b) story is an ISIS strategy capable of inspiring and attracting women to engage in jihad. Such as, jihad is seen as a great form of sacrifice for religion, much like the female mujahideen of the past who fought to defend Islam.

The second 'Muslimah' special section in edition 6, titled 'Be an Assistant to the Mujahidin,' conveys messages about assisting fighters who battle to defend Islam. Unlike the Muslimah series in edition 3, this series focuses on Quranic verses and hadith regarding aiding the mujahidin in war as an act of worship. Women must wage jihad in the path of Allah SWT and swiftly defend Islam with their lives as ransom, as well as motivate their husbands and children to continue fighting (ISIS, 2018c). This approach limits women's identities to enabling and sacrificing roles and promotes patriarchal power relations with submission as religious morality.

At the same time, there are also other sections not specifically dedicated to 'Muslimah' but which nonetheless focus on women. For example, in the 6th edition also features an advertisement related to the concept of women's jihad. Jihad is not obligatory for women except in situations of defending oneself, religion, and honor when attacked by an enemy, even if it risks losing one's life. This concept of jihad encompasses involvement in armed warfare, contributing property or finances, and logistics. The section also touches on the great rewards for women who cannot engage in physical jihad due to infirmity but still wholeheartedly intend to assist ISIS's jihad non-physically (ISIS, 2018c).

Although the sections discussing 'Muslimah' are not extensively featured in the magazine, the content intended for delivery is very clear in calling upon women to participate in jihadist activities. Research on both editions of *Al-Fatihin* magazine in this special 'Muslimah' section reveals that the ISIS group tends to use a persuasive and pleading writing style to attract women to join their group. The tone used in this special 'Muslimah' section is gentle and harmonious, like a mother's advice to her child. However, it differs from other sections that cover the entire magazine, where the presentation style is more abrasive and overly aggressive.

Analysis of the Role of Women in Al-Fatihin Magazine

This analysis is based on understandings of gendered radicalization and extremist rhetoric, which emphasize the ways that militant organizations formulate their appeals towards women. Through this lens, the agency of women is not abolished but instead constructed and circumscribed for ideological purposes. ISIS uses religious rhetoric as authority, presenting their command and sacrifice as moral mandate and rejecting other interpretations of Islam through religious scholarship.

Based on the literature review, this study critically examines how ISIS reconstructs the concept of jihad through selective textual interpretation to legitimize violence and gendered participation. For instance, the concept of jihad in Islam is not limited to warfare alone. There are various other forms of jihad, such as jihad against one's desires, jihad with wealth, jihad through knowledge, and so on. Jihad generally means a sincere effort to uphold the religion of Allah SWT, whether through life, wealth, speech, and other means. The specific definition of jihad encompasses various forms of struggle, including self-improvement, community service, and defending the religion (Malaysia, 2016).

However, ISIS deliberately omits these jurisprudential constraints, allowing militant interpretations to dominate while marginalizing classical Islamic legal authority. Among them, jihad must be carried out with sincere intentions to uphold justice and defend the religion, not for personal or political gain. Furthermore, it is obligatory to obtain permission from a legitimate Islamic ruler because jihad is not an individual act. Subsequently, jihad must adhere to clear rules of engagement in war, and it is forbidden to kill innocent civilians such as women, children, and religious figures not involved in combat (Persekutuan, 30 August 2018).

Al-Fatihin magazine, published by ISIS, serves as a propaganda medium that devises systematic strategies to manipulate the role of women in supporting their jihadist agenda. The approach taken encompasses the glorification of jihad and martyrdom, women's domestic roles, and their responsibility in educating new generations, such as children. However, an analysis of these narratives reveals that they contradict the true teachings of Islam according to Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jama'ah. Therefore, the author will delve deeply into each aspect of women highlighted in Al-Fatihin magazine editions 3 and 6, as well as in the special women's section, 'Muslimah'.

In Al-Fatihin magazine edition 3, the emphasis is placed on the aspect that fighting for women is an individual obligation (fardhu ain) and that martyrdom in jihad is the highest goal. This also shows discursive manipulation where selective historical narratives are raised beyond their original legal and historical contexts to create the sense of individual religious obligation, especially in the rendering of Nusaibah al-Anshariyah as a model version of women's involvement. Though the historical narrative itself is true, ISIS uses this historical narrative to legitimize women's involvement in violent activities, thus negating fixed Islamic legal restrictions. In contrast, Islam emphasizes the role of women in peacefully developing society and does not prioritize them as armed jihadists. This is consistent with the hadith of Rasulullah SAW, through the question of Ummul Mukminin Aisyah R.A.:

يَا رَسُولَ هَالِكٍ عَلَىٰ آلِ نِسَاءٍ جِهَادٌ قَالَ " نَعَمْ عَلَيْهِ هُنَّ جِهَادٌ لَا قِتَالَ فِيهِ الْحَجُّ وَالْعُمْرَةُ "

Meaning: "O Messenger of Allah, is there a jihad for women? Rasulullah SAW replied: Yes, they are obligated to jihad, but it is a jihad without fighting, namely Hajj and Umrah."

(Sunan Ibn Majah: Hadith no. 2901)

This narrated hadith indicates that women are not obligated to participate in armed jihad unless in emergency situations, such as self-defense when directly attacked. ISIS's call for women to join armed jihad not only contradicts the *maqasid syariah* (objectives of Islamic law) but also distorts the original purpose of jihad, where true jihad is to defend religion and not to incite chaos and violence to an excessive degree. Furthermore, participation in war jihad is also directed towards men who meet the necessary conditions. Allah SWT says:

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يَفْتُلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ هُنَّ أَهْلٌ لَا يَحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ ١٩٠

Meaning: Fight in the way of Allāh those who fight against you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allāh does not like transgressors.

(al-Baqarah 2: verse 190)

The Quranic verse above reminds Muslims not to commit violence, especially against women, who should be protected rather than sacrificing their lives for an unclear "jihad." However, the narrative presented in *Al-Fatihin* magazine encourages women to participate in armed jihad, which endangers women's lives and poses significant risks. Furthermore, ISIS's approach clearly contradicts the spirit of Islam, which rejects extremism. Rasulullah SAW advised Muslims not to be excessive (extremist) and emphasized that it was the cause of destruction for previous nations. The Prophet SAW said:

وَإِيَّاكُمْ وَالْغُلُوهُ هُوَ فِي الدِّينِ فَإِنْ هِنَا أَهْلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ الْغُلُوهُ فِي الدِّينِ

Meaning: "And beware of going to extremes in religion matters, for those who came before you were destroyed because of going to extremes in religious matters."

(Narrated by al-Nasa'ie: Hadith no. 3059)

Rasulullah SAW also said:

هَلَكَ الْمُتَنِّ طِعُونَ . قَالَهَا ثَلَاثًا .

Meaning: "Destroyed are those who are extreme." (He said it three times.)

(Narrated by Muslim: Hadith no. 2670)

This hadith serves as a reminder to Muslims to avoid extremism in religion because it can harm their faith and deeds. In this regard, the ISIS group has violated this principle through their call for women to become sacrifices in this "jihad." This ISIS doctrine has damaged the true concept of jihad, which is a legitimate tool of defense and not an act of unlimited violence (Qardhawi, 2020). This is because Islam is a religion of peace, mercy, and moderation (*wasatiyyah*).

In *Al-Fatihin* magazine edition 6, women are encouraged to be wives to mujahidin (their husbands) and mothers to fighters, educating their children to understand and submit to ISIS ideology. Mothers are discursively constructed as ideological transmitters whose prime function is that of reproducing and maintaining the ISIS militant ideology. This encouragement is reinforced by a Quranic verse that calls upon Muslims to protect their families from hellfire, by educating their children to do good. Allah SWT says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا قُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَأَهْلِيكُمْ نَارًا وَقُودُهَا آلْ هِنَاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ عَلَيْهَا مَ لَآئِكَةٌ غِلَظٌ شِدَادٌ هَلَا يَعْصُونَ ءَمْرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ٦

Meaning: "O you who have believed, protect yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is people and stones, over which are [appointed] angels, harsh and severe; they do not disobey Allāh in what He commands them but do what they are commanded."

(At-Tahrim 66: verse 6)

The role of a mother is to educate children with love, civility, and noble character in Islamic teachings. On the other hand, those mothers that they provoke uncivil, hateful and violent ideologies among youth are not considered Islamic teaching. ISIS's narrative, which demands mothers prepare their children to become their mujahidin, is a manipulation of true maternal responsibility. Within the framework of Islam, mothers play a role in educating children to grow up and be nurtured with values of love, noble character, and a balanced understanding of jihad. The concept of jihad according to Islam encompasses various aspects such as struggling against one's base desires, seeking knowledge, serving the community, and defending religion from enemies, not instilling an ideology of hatred or committing limitless violence. Therefore, ISIS's approach is clearly deviant because it transforms the mother's role of nurturing into a doctrine that violates *sharia* and contradicts the *maqasid syariah* (objectives of Islamic law).

Both editions demonstrate that ISIS manipulates Quranic verses and hadith to legitimize women's jihad in support of their extremist ideology. ISIS influences women through their primary roles as wives and mothers to the mujahidin. Women who refuse to engage in jihad are deemed weak in faith. This tactic plays with women's emotions, aiming to increase support for jihad by portraying them as sinners if they do not participate in these activities (Dewi et al., 2023). This approach clearly contradicts the true teachings of Islam, which emphasize the concept of *maqasid syariah* (objectives of Islamic law) to preserve life, honor, and social harmony.

CONCLUSION

Al-Fatihin magazine, that published by ISIS, plays a crucial role in spreading extremist ideology, particularly to women. It employs strategic approaches aimed at garnering emotional, ideological, and social support from women through carefully crafted narratives. The use of manipulated religious narratives in this magazine utilizes religious concepts by emphasizing the importance of women's jihad for the Islamic Caliphate. The selective use

of Quranic verses and hadith legitimizes extremist actions, making them appealing and subsequently able to captivate women with limited religious understanding.

The magazine also uses very simple and gentle language, yet it manages to attract women, especially in the 'Muslimah' section, by tailoring content to be relevant to various segments of society. This medium used as an effective propaganda channel, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries, particularly in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia. Women influenced by ISIS not only have the potential to become passive supporters but also take on active roles as recruiters, propaganda disseminators, and planners of domestic attacks. The manipulative approach using religious, emotional, and technological elements has made this magazine a serious threat to national security.

Therefore, deradicalization efforts need to be intensified by focusing on holistic religious education, controlling online extremist narratives, and providing psychosocial support to at-risk women to comprehensively address this issue. Counter-narratives led by women, as well as the concept of *wasatiyyah* (moderation), must be implemented in anti-terrorism measures. Although women show agency within the ISIS narratives, this agency is strictly controlled and filtered through ideology, and the end result of this agency for the most part has been the reinforcement of the patriarchal and violent agenda of the organization. This process requires long-term commitment; however, its potential impact contributes significantly to peace and stability in Malaysia and supports broader efforts to counter extremist ideologies globally.

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