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'Okhti'[1] Online

Spanish Muslim Women engaging online Jihad
– a Facebook case study

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Abstract

Virtual reality is becoming increasingly relevant as an online space where Muslim women gain a new religious and social role by accepting the expression of Jihad through violence. Until now, the study of online radicalization in Spain has been focusing in the male perspective therefore it is important to analyze Muslim women online Jihadism participation. Facebook due to its easy, cheap access and interactive way of connecting with other people through a virtual channel is growing in popularity among Muslim women in Spain.

As so, it is important to examine how women understand Jihad in a general manner, how they live and enact Jihad on Facebook, how do they embrace the Jihadist recruitment online and most importantly how to they transfer this role from online to offline reality.

1   Introduction

'Okhti' online is a virtual sisterhood aiming first to share and spread Jihadist contents, secondly to support the Jihadist conflict scenarios and thirdly to become a Jihadist fighter. Jihad is perceived and performed by Spanish Muslim women on Facebook under their feminine perspective, as sisters, mothers, wives and as women. Despite the feminine aspect, violence is present through photos, images and videos but also through comments and declarations. These declarations sign their

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1   ʾOkhti' is the most used Arabic transliteration of 'my sister'by my informants on Facebook.

intention to transfer their online Jihadists performances into real war scenarios. Furthermore, the online active role of the okhti associated with the changes on the Global Jihad Front[2] is transforming women's independency on social and religious level. However, the most important factor in this transformation has been the interference of modern Islamic academics as well as the online Sheikhs who are enhancing the role of women in the Jihadist fight issuing fatwas (legal opinions) ruling in favour of the okhti right to participate in the Jihad fight.

Online sites offer Muslim women knowledge, information and a space to share, to question and to debate Islamic living and practices while at the same time being able to manage the privacy of their online activities and interactions. Fruit of these online performances and fruit of the equal right of online intervention, Muslim women are also able to reclaim an active and egalitarian role for themselves.

> "O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created His wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allah through whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship). Surely, Allah is Ever an All-Watcher over you[3]."

However, the most important change on gender Jihad was brought up by the Syrian war to the global Jihad Front. In fact, a new perspective on women's agency is being transformed online and challenging what was once a strict male performance.

Anthropologist and author of 'The Politics of Piety', Saba Mahmood (2004, p.8) defines agency as:

> "(…) the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)."

David Cook (2005, p.84) in his article, 'Women fighting in Jihad?' addresses the legal circumstances of the feminine participation in Jihad (here understood as fight) since the pre-modern times to today, underlining the conservative character of Muslim ruling. Cook also raises gender issues related with women engaging Jihad, namely their sex purity and the definition of their martyrdom' reward. To my informants, the idea of being received with glory in the highest level of Paradise ('Firdaws') is the ultimate reward a Muslim woman may aspire to achieve in the afterlife: "We walk together, hold fast to the Qur'an and the Sunna and the victory will be ours. A greater reward will be given to us by our God."

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2   The Jihadist recruitment to Syria is the highest ever seen in recent history and Spain has a considerable number of Jihadists joining it.
3   Surah Al-Nisan [4:1].

For these reasons, the present study will focus on the following research questions:

- How women understand and define Jihad?

- How they live and enact Jihad on Facebook as a virtual sisterhood?

- How do they transfer this Jihadist role from online to offline reality?

Earlier this year I opened up a Facebook account to enter in contact with the cyber Jihad feminine sphere in Spain. I began by browsing through public Facebook pages of Muslim Spanish women, stopping to better observe the ones that had Jihadist related posts, comments, videos, Islamic music (anasheed), images or photos, mention to Dawah[4] and to i-Imams[5] (Imams who use the Internet for Islamic knowledge dissemination and argumentation, for example, issuing fatwa, giving conferences or courses). The i-Imam (as a virtual Islamic authority) and the i-Khutba (as a virtual Islamic narrative) are essential parts of the online radicalization and recruitment processes of individuals who in the ultimate phase will transfer their online knowledge and performance into an offline action in order to participate in current hot spots Jihadist scenarios like Syria or Iraq. What follows next is the result of my online fieldwork based on Facebook.

2   Method

A new Facebook account associated with the university email account was created and maintained strictly to manage the contacts that serve the purpose of this study. My name, academic affiliation, professional web link and provenience were made public on my Facebook profile. In some cases, the informants demanded more personal data to confirm my identity and the aim of the research.

The study started in February 2014 (data of the creation of the Facebook account) with me sending 'friendship requests' to Facebook accounts owners that had an open, public content[6]. The open, public content facilitates the task of profile's selection as one can directly observe the contents, images, videos or comments and determine if they fulfil the Jihadist criteria employed for the purpose of this study.

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4   Dawah simply understood as the preaching and proselytism of Islam, as a call towards Allah is the task of the men mentioned by the Qu'ran (Sura An-Nahl, The Bee, 16:125): "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way."

5   My informants follow online Imams, sheiks and Islamic religious scholars who are considered to belong to the general Salafist current.

6   My network of Facebook contacts was also enlarged when "friends of friends" invited me to be part of their own network. The same selection criteria (language, gender, location, Jihadist contents) was applied here and extended to the Facebook groups.

By Jihadist contents I have taken in consideration the presence of one or more of the following elements:

1. Propaganda, visual symbols and imagery (flag banners, weaponry, black horses, violence) including or promoting the female Muslim presence

2. Al-Qaeda, Isis, Caliphate references

3. Shahid's (martyr's) photos/videos/comments

4. Graphic, violent photos/videos of victims (explicitly of children) of war/conflict

5. Citations of Islamic religious sources about Jihad, battles and/or of violence

6. Salafi-Jihadist ideological orientation and features (narrative, fatwa, scholars)

All contents were filtered according to their relevance to the theme, high number of received comments or likes.

To evaluate the Jihadist contents into depth, all the collected information was crossed with semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place via private messaging on Facebook and continue to evolve until now. The interviews were structure and equal to all the informants. As the dialogue went further in time, open questions were used in order to retrieve more data. Photos, links or comments were questioned to assess the religious knowledge, intention and perception of the Jihadist message.

In the first message, as I have mentioned above, I gave a short self-presentation and I introduced them to the goals of my Facebook account. Furthermore, I requested all my informants their permission to use all contents published, shared, posted or commented by them on Facebook. All the data employed in this study is therefore legitimized by the written acceptance of the informants.

Considering the gender scope of this study, only Facebook accounts belonging to women were taken in consideration. In many cases, the informants place in between brackets the warning that they do not accept men ('no acepto hombres') and all informants were requested to confirm their gender, via private message. Although criticism may be raised concerning the easiness that one may fake their identity and gender online, it is a fact that the group of women that participate in this study are very vigilant about tracing and exposing the male presence.

I have attributed fake names (randomly chosen) to all my informants in order to protect their identities even though the informants themselves already use forged names[7] on their Facebook accounts. They choose war names ('Kunyas') as forged names are frequently based on terminology

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7   Some of the informants as the interviews progressed into a more informal talk eventually shared their true name. In the case of the reverted Muslim women they shared their pre-reversion name as well.

belonging to their Salafi-Jihadist belief. Kunyas are a common Arabic tradition, serving in the past as a parental connection to the name of the first-born child (Abu for the father, Umm for the mother, for instance Abu Karim, father of Karim). The tradition evolved when the head of the Palestinian organization Al-Fatah, Yasser Arafat (Abu Ammar) decided to attribute to himself a kunya as a way to symbolize his fighter status. Although the names of the informants will not be revealed I have observed that as my informants go deeper in their process of radicalization they change their kunyas to reflect even more their full adherence to the Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

The article takes in consideration Spanish, Arabic and English publications/comments, photos and videos on Facebook in order to represent the e-Jihadist women environment in Spain. Technology advances, the living in the Web 2.0 era have transformed the use of language into a more flexible and more informal linguistic structure. Nevertheless, the knowledge of Arabic does confer more status to the believer thus investing the individual with a higher social hierarchical value. As Jan Blommaert (2005, p.71) writes:

> "differences in the use of language are quickly, and quite systematically, translated into inequalities between speakers."

In the present study, Spanish is the dominant language of the group of informants, followed by Arabic transliteration that is employed for religious expressions ('Assalam aleikum', 'MaschAllah', 'InschAllah') and English in very few cases. Some of the informants would during the interviews ask me the meaning of some Arabic words and only a minority of the informants proved to know how to write them in Arabic. Given this fact, I asked my informants if knowing Arabic was not a pre-condition to be a good Muslim. My informants agreed that mastering Arabic was recommended but not a determinant condition to assess the religious quality of a Muslim.

On that matter, a post about 'Tawhid' (doctrine of Oneness) in a Facebook group dedicated to the study of the 'Tafsir' (exegesis) created a long thread of discussion among the participants. A participant affirms that the 'Tasfir' can only be understood and explained in Arabic while others, namely one of my informants (converted Muslim woman in the process of learning Arabic herself) defended that behaving and living as a true Muslim is even more important than mastering the Arabic language. She went even further arguing:

> "It is true that to increase the knowledge and to conserve the purity of the science of Allah subhana wa taala you have to make an effort to learn Arabic. However, these days the converted to Islam with different languages than the Arabic are the ones applying more the alwalaa wal baraa, that purify the tawhid in their daily day, more than the ones who were born amongst Muslims (…)."

The discussion was than transferred from the classic scholars Sheykh al-Islam Taqi Al-Deen Ibn Taymiya (f.728H) and Al Bukhari to the famous converted German Muslim, Pierre Vogel as legitimate religious authorities on 'Tawhid' because they are fluent in Arabic. The counter argument takes an interesting twist when an informant interrogates the other participants about the validity of the 'shahada' (the testimony) and of the 'shahid' (martyrdom) of those intervene the fight 'fisabilillah' (in the way of Allah) in Syria but are not fluent in Arabic. The moderator of the group ends the discussion by declaring that it is preferable to know the 'Tawhid' than the Arabic language.

It is very interesting to notice in this event that the both the religious comments and scholars mentioned by the woman are an integrant part of the Salafi-Jihadist doctrine.

3   Salafi-Jihadism, the online single narrative

"As salaamu'alaykum. I'm Bird of Jannah, another random muhajirah from the blessed land of Khilafah."

Conceptually, the guidelines of this study are the terms Salafi-Jihadist (religious framework) and Jihadism (ideological framework), as developed under the scope of the Global Jihad Front. According to Peter Nesser (2011, p.174), the invasion of Iraq and the consolidation of Al-Qaeda as the transnational ideological Jihadist leader mark the beginning of the Global Jihad Front, at the same time validating it as the ideological homogenization of the Jihadist narrative. Jihadism in the optic of Jarret Brachman (2009, p.5), is a neologism, a non-Islamic term referring to the violent nature of Jihad as preached and practiced by Al-Qaeda. However the analysis of Jihadism has a religious aspect as well which is anchored in the doctrine of Salafism.

The ideological program of Salafism entails the purification of Islam, a return to the principles of the Companions of the Prophet and the dissemination of the faith (dawah). The dawah is in fact as transnational in its goals as the Global Jihad Front ideology and thus promotes the contact and the collaboration between extremists Islamic groups wherever they might be physically located in the offline world. In what concerns the practice of dawah in the West, Salafists promoted the idea that Muslims should refuse to integrate in the Western society and refuse to adopt its impure lifestyle. The Islamic disagreement about the return to the path of purity and the refusal of innovations was responsible for the division ('fitna') that came about in the Islamic world affirms Quintan Wiktorowicz (2001, 19). The author also points out (2006, 207-239), that in the vision of the Salafists the acceptance of the concept of the unity of God ('tawhid'), the obedience to the

Qur'an and the Sunna, and the common refusal of any human subjective intervention are the unique authenticators of the Islamic creed.

Another division was brought up to the Salafist ideology by the vindication of the exercise of violence. Fawaz Gerges (2005, 138) indicates that Salafi-Jihadists, similar to their secular enemies, also hold contending visions on how to engage in the war against apostates. Therefore, Salafi-Jihadism is a subdivision of Salafism that defends the ritualization of violence under the name of Jihad. Nevertheless it needs to be underlined that even among Salafi-Jihadist thinkers the conceptualization and employment of violence differs between authors.

In the interest of the present study it was also important to evaluate the knowledge of my informants about Salafism. When questioned about their knowledge about specific terms expressions linked to the Salafist vocabulary: 'tawhid' (the oneness of God), 'tarbiyya' (religious education), 'taghut' (to cross the limits) or 'al-wala wa'l-bara'a' (loyalty and disownment for the sake of Allah) my informants presented the exact same answers with the exact same sacred texts references, proving that the online theological narrative is being consequent, coherent and effective over these women, in other words, we have here the 'single narrative' as defined by Alex Schmidt:

> "Al Qaeda's ideology is expressed in its "single narrative", a unifying framework of explanations that provides its followers with an emotionally satisfying portrayal of the world in which they live and their role in it, offering them a sense of identity and giving meaning to their lives."

On the other side the present study also focus on how my Facebook informants learn, embrace and then promote online the violent concept of Jihad. Theologically the debate around the interpretation of Jihad is filled with complexity and diversity even within the Salafi-Jihadist group. By adding the justification to the participation of women in Jihad a new moral dilemma was posed with it.

Laiba, my informant is married and has children, her Facebook page is a display of Jihadist women in real action, weaponry and advices on how to have a happy marriage. As Heidi Campbell (2011,p.22) states:

> "It helps explain the ways in which networked society creates new borderlands of interactions between the online and offline worlds, between the digital and embodied."

> 'How do you define Jihad?' She answered me back with another question: 'Do you know that when a woman gives birth that is Jihad?'

Childbirth as a category of Jihad was the first definition that some women presented to me. This is an absolute feminine view of the subject that includes by nature force, fight and blood.

Personal situations also due affect the choice and the manner that Muslim women decide to illustrate their online Jihadist performance, for instance, the converted Muslim women are more diligent and eager to prove their Salafi-Jihadist devotion: 'To prove that I can be as good, or even better than a born Muslim', 'to make clear that I am a ferocious believer' are some of the reasons advanced by the informants to post the most graphic photos or the most violent videos. As a matter of fact, the participants compete among themselves to see who has the most relevant posts or the most committed comments to the Jihadist cause. Actual photos of a woman dressed in a 'burka' and waving a sword was what first captured my attention to one of the Facebook pages. The informant shows much devotion and spends even more time in what comes to represent Jihad online, therefore my question to her was:

> 'What are your thoughts on e-Jihad?'

> 'I am fighting for life and liberty. I am fighting to show that women and men are the same. That is why I want to post photos of war where you can see women fighting, or of shahidah.'

The images receive comments such as 'mashallah', 'okhti', or 'insch'Allah okhti', 'amin okhti' or the saying of the 'takbir' (Allahu Akbar). Even men comment these images with: 'I wish you the best okhti. You are a noble wife.'

What is interesting to highlight here is that we are observing the Salafi-Jihadist online narrative being assimilated by the first time and being automatically applied into their online ritualization of Jihad.

4   Online Ritualization of Jihad, a female perspective

> 'If you cannot start with "Bismillah" when opening Facebook, know that this means that you should not be in fb [Facebook], since your intentions are going to be mean and that is what we are going to be judged by. our. acts and intentions [sic]. '

Cyberspace is a special structure offering a place for interconnections and interactivity between its users at all time. In the words of Christiane Brosius and Karin Polit (2011, 272):

> "As a consequence, the fabric of media spaces constituting social space and geophysical space through rituals challenges our concepts of "virtuality" and "reality", space and place. "

Jocelyne Cesari (2005, p.111) makes here an important spatial distinction between Islam on the Internet or the dissemination of Islamic information and Islam of the Internet understood as a sphere allowing the existence of particular religious activities or narratives that otherwise would not be available. Gary Bunt (2009, p.22) following the same line of thoughts highlights the distinct features of Islamic Internet spaces in the process of the online development of Islamic ritual and Islamic networks.

As Islamic rituals contexts and Islamic spaces change so do the studies of Islamic rituals. In fact, ritual practices associated with 'technologically advanced societies' maybe better referred to as ritualization according with Catherine Bell (1992, p.89). To the American religious study scholar, the attention should be on ritualization (1992, p.7):

> '(…) as a strategic way of acting and then turn to explore how and why this way of acting differentiates itself from other practices.'

From now on the definition above presented will be applied to the online ritualization of Jihad, that is to analyzing it as a practice that it is different from other Muslim practices. By doing so, the analyses will focus on performance, interaction, agents, message (textual and/or visual), all intervenient categories in the design of the social and religious online ritual strategy.

What is the aim of the online ritualization of Jihad?

First, it is necessary to address the fact that Jihad is not per se an Islamic ritual although it is treated as so by many Islamic scholars who insist in including it as one of the fundamental pillars of Islam. Indeed it is a ritualistic innovation that allows its agents to establish, structure and control all activities that occur in cyberspace in the name of Jihad. Bell describes it as a "process of formalization and ritualization" (1992, p.148) that makes the invention of traditions possible.

Second, it is also necessary to address the body is an integral part of the Islamic ritual performance and the essence of the process of construction of an Islamic identity. The prayer ('salat') is embed in physical acts, from the rituals of purity ('tayammum, wudu, ghusl') to the mandatory movements (standing, bowing, prostration, sitting).

How can this ritual be performed online in the absence of a physical presence?

Online the physical repetition of a body movement, an integral part of any ritual activity is not possible in the classic frames of ritual studies. Nevertheless, participating in online activities requires physical actions: turning on an electronic device, writing a password, or moving the mouse into the 'like' button. People do engage in this set of actions, in a repetitive, sequential way by which they enter a space (in many ways perceived as sacred) attributing to these activities a symbolic meaning.

In the interest of transferring this framework to the ritualization of Jihad the attention is pointed to all online activities expressing this complex Islamic concept. And they are plenty of activities, from videos, to photos or simple mentions to the sacred Muslim texts.

In what concerns the Spanish legal framework of online jihadist activities, the Spanish Supreme Court considers them a crime of terrorism, as equal as engaging on physical and direct terrorists acts. An example is the arrest in 2013, of a young man during the police investigation (operation Kafka), accused of inciting Jihadist actions via Facebook through compliments praising Al-qaeda's ideology and motivating other Facebook users to conduct suicide operations in the name of Jihad[8].

Hence violence and ritualization of violence are categories pertaining to the analysis of online ritualization of Jihad. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 107) asserts that the

> "ritualization of violence in fighting is doubtless one of the most typical manifestations of the dialectic of strategy and ritual (...)."

To the development of online ritualization more important than the discipline of the body is the discipline of the mind. The cognitive activities concerning online sharing and/or production of religious knowledge are the emanation of virtual power. Akil Awan (2011, pp.16-19), associates the acceptation and legitimation of the violent online Jihadist message as a practice of cognitive dissonance involving mental acts like framing ('promote a particular moral evaluation'), priming ('preferential selection of news stories') and issuing takfir ('delegitimizing their opponents and sanctioning the shedding of Muslim blood').

Boyer and Lienard (2005, p.3) argue that ritualization is the product of the conjugation of 'two specialized cognitive systems'. The first being the motivational system and the second the separation of action into 'meaningful units' both grounded in a 'precautionary system', that is induced by strangers and that pressures, threats, or socially offends the individual.

In the case of Muslim individuals and moreover in the case of Spanish Muslim women it is the way that the offline world pressures, threats, and socially offends them (due to their specific religious dressing code they became easily identified targets) that induces the emotional transfer into the online sphere. During my offline fieldwork in Catalonia, I collected a considerable amount of data by interviewing Muslim women and by observing their daily life. The common feeling among the Spanish Muslim women can be summed up to the answer that I received from a young woman:

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8   http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/04/11/barcelona/1365680412.html.

'People stop me in the street to tell me to take my scarf, to insult me, why don't they focus instead in the young people at the park using drugs? At the airport and at other police controlled spaces I feel the pressure of being a Muslim.'

Last, when analyzing the practice of ritualization Bell claims that ritualization can promote social solidarity (1992, p.216) and we can find examples being disseminated on Facebook over and over, from relationship advices to exchanging iftar[9] recipes, passing to pragmatic indications on how to arrive in Syria, the sisterhood bond is tangible even online.

The bonding among the participants, is a feature that Bell views as the result of ritualization (1992, p. 193):

"Such stringent ritualization has the powerful effect of tightly binding one to a small community of like-minded people. Indeed, one of the salient features of extreme ritualization appears to be a high-profile identity as a tight-knit group of true followers, a position that heightens the contrast and ill fit with other groups."

5   From virtual sisterhood to sisters in arms in Shams[10]

Belonging, Community and Identity are therefore three social products resulting of the process of ritualization. In fact and in the words of Brosius and Politi (2011, 269):

"(…) ritual is the practice proving that a sense of belonging can become a social fact through practising ritualised actions."

Belonging and its correlation to the establishment of group membership is also an operative concept for Douglas Marshall (2002, p.2). Indeed, online users may be seen as social units who through their networks efforts and transition processes constitute their own virtual communities. The period of transition between being a part of an offline community into becoming a part of the online sisterhood is that of a 'liminal state' as Victor Turner (2007) described it, a time of transition, a time when the emotional bond will produced the necessary acceptation of new messages and beliefs.

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9   Ramadan dinner.
10   Historical Arabic denomination to the region of the Great Syria.

As Hans Ulrich Sanner (2011, 116) states:

'The liminal, "betwixt and between" phase of rituals is an ideal medium for the symbolic communication of sacred truths about the composition of society and cosmos.'

To Brosius and Polit (2011, 268) we have to also underline the value of the transfer of rituals, especially in periods of social crises, wars (as the one in Syria):

"Further, rituals, the transfer of rituals, as well as the transformation of rituals, often play crucial roles at times of conflict, insecurity, or dramatic change in communities and societies, to the extent that even new communities and public or private spheres emerge."

In terms of affective sense of belonging the okhtis are very keen on making the new users feel comfortable and above all to feel that they belong to the sisterhood. Elke Mader (2011, 473) reflects on the affective perspective of 'communitas':

"Furthermore, communitas (…) was emerging, and was expressed in intense communication, empathy, and cooperation in emotional, as well as organisational, matters. "

The three features mentioned above about communitas (communication, empathy and cooperation) are visible for instance, when the virtual sisters choose a similar (sometimes even the same) profile photo on Facebook. Another evidence is that they share their contacts through Whatsapp (an Internet messaging tool). Their personal level of involvement constructed online is visible on their private remarks about their personal problems which they share with detailed information.

Identity is also 'an emotional commitment through which people experience their autobiographical selves' says Gabriel Marranci (2006, p.7). They seek advice, opinion (frequently accompanied by quotations of the sacred texts) or just comfort from one another:

"my dear beloved sister X, m [sic] I m so worried abt [sic] you all the time..dont know frm [sic] where that sort of love comes form. everytime I get yr [sic] post I get relieved that ur [sic] there safe Alhamdullilah. Plz [sic] take my love, lots of duas for u[sic]."

On one side the online connections and interactions further down the 'togetherness' of the virtual sisterhood. On the other side it produces an impact on their offline emotional structure.

Don Radlauer (2007, p.74) co-founder of the Institute for the Study of Asymmetric Conflict comments about the continuity between virtual community and offline existence as so:

> "By providing a sense of "otherness" from ordinary society, extremist virtual communities can also deepen their members' alienation from their surroundings, reducing their normal inhibitions against violence while increasing their ability to perform as 'sleepers'."

Aisha is a young Muslim woman who enjoys her sweets with almond and honey and the sunny days in Spain. She has finished high school and she daydreams about her future partner. Her time is filled with her Facebook page, posting romantic photos the ideal future husband. He is a good-looking Muslim, strong and with loving eyes. He is dressed as a Jihadist, carries a gun and on his forehead he has the green banner of the 'shahid'. Behind him, a young Muslim woman, dressed in a floating black 'abaya' and 'hijab' raises her hands to pray. Aisha wants to be that okhti in the image, better even, Aisha is willing to be another okhti, the one that is a true fighter and she posts a new photo. This time the okhti stands in front, wearing total black while waving a modified assault weapon with one arm and holding a child in the other. I asked her:

> "Would you participate in a Jihadist fight?"

> "I am very much willing to, thanks and praises to God."

And she keeps on searching online for fatwas on Jihadist women, for Hadiths and comments on the Qur'an that justify her favourite subject: 'Jihad fisabililah' (Jihad for the cause of Allah).

> "I use the Internet all the time to search and to share information about Tawhid[11], Dawah or to watch what is going on in Syria and Palestine. I also use it to connect myself with the other sisters. We help each other to become better Muslim women. We all seek a deeper understanding of Islam and on how to engage on Jihad and it is more comfortable to do it among okhti."

A common trait to my informant's online interactions is humour, for instance one of the informants posted a photo of a 9mm weapon with the comment:

> "Did you always question what is inside of a woman's purse? Well, a 9mm thus…"

to what the other okhtis reply to with comments such as:

> 'Thought you would get one in pink', 'I have to get one myself.'

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11 Tawhid means Allah is One and Unique.

Exchanges similar to this one are frequent and since some of the okhtis started to arrive in Syria, they have evolved from posting pictures of children crying along side their dead parents body to inquire about practical information on: "How do I get to Raqqa[12], 'Do you get enough to eat there?', 'How can I book a hotel?' ,'What is the best itinerary?' or 'Do you have Internet connection?' are part of the questions that the okhtis that already performed the 'hijra'[13] (migration to Jihadist war scenarios) are confronted online by the other okhtis.

In the opinion of one okhti, the 'hijra' to Shams:

"(…) was in adherence to the path of Ibrāhīm (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) who established for them the tradition of declaring enmity and hatred towards the mushrikīn[14] and their tawāghīt[15]."

Salafi-Jihadists followers defend that the founding principle of 'millat Ibrahim' (religion of Abraham) is the concept of 'al-wala' wal bara' (loyalty and renunciation) in the terms defined by the Jordanian scholar (accredited as one of the most important Jihadist thinkers) Al-Maqdisi[16] (1959-). Hence, the Salafi-Jihadists justify the displacement (hijra) of men and women to the region as a part of their individual duty to Jihad ('Jihad al-fard'ayn'). Online sheiks have been dedicating their time on issuing fatwa about the subject. Several of them agree with the role of women in Jihad being confined to motherhood, praying, domestic activities and to the moral support of their husbands. In fact, many of the women think that Jihadist contents should also be enlarged to the ones reflecting their role as a mother and as a wife. The mother's support and educator role is therefore understood as a way of doing Jihad and posting it online is a way of promoting and teaching other ohkti about it.

Others expand these activities to the performance of online dawa[17]. 'How do you perform Dawah online?' I questioned her after seeing she had a post with the title 'The role of the Muslim women in the Dawah'. By it Salma gave instructions to her okhtis on how to be and to behave as a good Muslim wife, and how to support their husbands in their call for Jihad fisabililah. The obligation of the women is to follow the example of model Muslim women (like Khadija, Umm Salama or Umm Imarah) and online they can do it by posting photos with instructions on how to wear the hijab or the niqah but also by posting pictures of Jihadist male fighters.

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12 North-Centre of Syria.
13 Name given in Arabic to the migration of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina.
14 Polytheists.
15 Disbelievers.
16 To better understand the written work of Al-Maqdisi I recommend the book of Joas Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
17 On this matter, it is interesting to notice that the virtual sisterhood is well alert of the online privacy sets and correspondent dangers: "Assalamu Alaikum Warahmatullah Wabarkatuh[sic]. ... my sister in Islam, u [sic] should maintain some strategy, u [sic] r [sic] doing dawah, good, but do not share personal matters, be careful of ur [sic] safety, may ALLAH protect u [sic] from all evil and devil ... ameen FI AMANILLAH ..."

Sheik Yusuf al Qaradawi[18], the Egyptian Islamic theologian issued a fatwa were he justifies woman participation in Jihad as part of their individual Islamic duties in order to fight the occupation of Muslim land:

> "(…) I believe a woman can participate in this form of Jihad according to her own means and condition. Also, the organizers of these martyr operations can benefit from some, believing women as they may do, in some cases, what is impossible for men to do."

Still, during my Facebook research on the online diaries of Jihadist women living in Syria (or Iraq) I did not find one narrative accounting their direct intervention in a battle, or even that they receive any weaponry training, as an example of it one informant posted a photo of her 9mm gun saying:

> 'Been six months here, still I don't know how to use kalash [sic].I only know how to use 9mm calibre.'

'The stories of Muslim women who are now fighters of Allah', or 'Feminine Fighters of Allah' are the titles of Facebook photo albums seeking online support or recruitment for the fight in Syria. Syria, Mali, Somalia and Palestine are the main Jihadist fight scenarios that appear in these albums. In it diverse war/violent photos of women that are now living in Syria with the description of their story are displayed and commented by the okhti.

However, these albums revealed three striking features: they were created by male individuals, the male individuals are the one's inciting and praising women's participation in Jihadist conflicts and finally, and third, they justify their posts and photos with Suras and/or hadiths such as Sura Al Nisa 4:74:

> "Those who readily fight in the cause of God are those who forsake this world in favour of the Hereafter. Whoever fights in the cause of God, then gets killed, or attains victory, we will surely grant him a great recompense."

6   Conclusion

'Okhti online' is a virtual sisterhood aiming first to share and spread Jihadist contents, secondly to support the Jihadist conflict scenarios and thirdly to become a real life Jihadist fighter. Jihad is perceived and performed by Spanish Muslim women on Facebook under their feminine perspective,

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18 http://www.meforum.org/646/the-qaradawi-fatwas.

as sisters, mothers, and wives and as women. Yet, violence is defended through photos, images and videos but also through comments and declarations. Declarations that have a clear message, these women are willing to transfer their online Jihadists performances into real war scenarios. Furthermore, the online active role of the okhti associated with the changes on the Global Jihad Front[19] is transforming women's independency on social and religious level. However, the most important factor in this transformation has been the interference of modern Islamic academics as well as the online Sheikhs who are giving legitimacy to the role of women in the Jihadist fight issuing fatwaa ruling in favour of the okhti right to participate in the Jihad fight. Observing Muslim women online (in this case on Facebook) demonstrates that the way they are practicing their faith online is also changing how they practice their faith offline. Moreover, that the okhti online radicalization process is being successful moving these Muslim women into Jihadist wives living as and with frontline fighters:

> "Sister, what's the hardest thing for you there? Nothing beats the palpitation that a Mujahid's wife has whilst checking list names of the Martyrs."

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19 The Jihadist recruitment to Syria is the highest ever seen in recent history and Spain has a considerable number of Jihadists joining it.

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Biography

CLAUDIA CARVALHO is a PhD student at Tilburg University, School of Humanities, analyzing the theme of religious violence in the form of Jihad, Cyber Jihad and Islamic Terrorism. In 2003 she completed summa cum laude her Master Degree in International Relations with a thesis about the Israeli-Arabic conflict that was later published as a book. Pursuing further her education she attended the Course of National Defense promoted by the Portuguese Defense Ministry in 2005. Also in this year she co-wrote a book, Islam in Europe, where she traced the profile of Islamic communities in Scandinavian countries. Since then she has been actively participating in International and national Conferences over Islam, Jihad and Terrorism, either as a key speaker or as a panelist. In June 2014 she finished an online Advanced Course on Jihadism and Terrorism in Spain promoted by CISDE (International Campus for Security and Defense). She is a project member of Euro-Islam.info (GSRL Paris/CNRS France and Harvard University), NISIS (Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies), Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies (Evans/Glasscock Digital Humanities Project, at Texas A&M University), among other organizations.

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