

Framing British ‘jihadi brides’: Metaphor and the social construction of I.S. women

This article considers how mainstream newspapers metaphorically represented the British ‘jihadi brides’, women and girls who travelled to Syria to live in the self-declared ‘Islamic State’ (I.S.). Based on an analysis of 365 articles published between 2013 and 2018, the article demonstrates that three frequently occurring metaphors contributed to the construction of these women and I.S. in general, representing them as natural, biological and supernatural forces. These metaphors served to convert a new phenomenon into a knowable form, but in doing so evoked homogenizing and dehumanizing representations that structured the scope of possibilities for responding to the problem of the ‘brides’. Ultimately, these social constructions had material consequences, as demonstrated by the mood of indifference among policy-makers to the fate of British I.S. fighters and their families following the fall of the ‘caliphate’.

Keywords: jihadi brides, women, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, metaphor, constructivism

Introduction

In October 2017 it was reported that prominent British ‘jihadi bride’ Sally Jones had been killed by a CIA drone strike near the Iraqi/Syrian border in June of that year. Her 12-year old son, Jojo, had been with her at the time and was also killed, raising profound questions about the extra-judicial execution of militants and, most troublingly, whether the children of ‘jihadi brides’ were considered acceptable ‘collateral damage’. The child’s step-father, Junaid Hussain, had been assassinated by drone strike two years earlier. Having been placed on the Pentagon’s ‘kill list’, Hussain had been careful to travel at all times with Jojo, using him as a ‘human shield’ to avoid the drones that monitored his movements, and the lethal strike occurred on one of the rare occasions

that he was unaccompanied by the child. The strike that killed Sally Jones, however, went ahead despite Jojo's presence. What changed in the two years between the targeted killings of Hussain and Jones?

This article considers how such actions become possible from a social constructivist perspective, through an analysis of the framing of 'jihadi brides' in British newspapers. Most scholarship on the 'brides' has approached them through the prism of radicalization,¹ focusing on the role of the internet in providing access to jihadist propaganda,² promoting 'jihadi-cool' sub-cultures³ and enabling young women to develop close on-line friendships with individuals already based in I.S. territory.⁴ A smaller, but growing, area of research considers how they were represented, emphasizing particularly the gendered assumptions that portrayed those who migrated as brainwashed, groomed, and lacking in agency.⁵ The present article builds on this work by analyzing metaphorical representations of the 'brides' in British newspapers, but it also goes further. By considering the consequences of these representations it offers an explanation as to how the increasingly hardline treatment of some 'jihadi brides', including the targeted killing of Sally Jones, became possible.

This study addresses two research questions: How were the British 'jihadi brides' metaphorically represented, and what courses of action were made possible or restricted as a result of these representations? The article proceeds by outlining constructivist approaches to the study of terrorism, and the specific contribution made by metaphor analysis. It then presents an analysis based on 365 articles published in UK newspapers between 2013 and 2018, which discusses three prominent metaphors that portrayed the 'brides', and I.S. more broadly, as natural, biological and supernatural forces. These expressions evoked natural disaster (e.g. waves and floods), toxicity (e.g. poison and viruses), vegetation (e.g. seeds and roots), and the supernatural (e.g. the

enchantment of ‘evil’ jihadist men). While these metaphors sought to explain the novel phenomena of the ‘brides’, they contributed to the dehumanization of the women in question, structuring the range of possibilities for dealing with them. Specifically, these dehumanizing discourses contributed to creating new policy norms, including indifference to the fate of the ‘brides’, the relaxing of attitudes towards international law and the extra-judicial assassination of British subjects.

The social construction of the ‘brides’

Constructivist approaches to terrorism emphasize that the terrorist act does not speak for itself. Rather, it is constituted through the language and practices that interpret it (as crime, an act of war, etc.),⁶ and as such it should be approached in the realm of discourse. Although terrorist acts and the people who perpetrate them are material realities, what these acts and subjects mean is a matter of social construction, and it is the discursive choices made by those who write and speak about terrorism that construct it in a particular way. The effects of these choices have been the subject of a number of studies that have sought to demonstrate how the language used to describe terrorism and terrorists structures the responses that are deemed necessary and those considered unthinkable.⁷

Scholarship on politically violent women has long noted that these constructions rely on gendered assumptions, emphasizing personal explanations for involvement, including family, romance and sexual assault, while downplaying political and ideological motivations.⁸ Reporting on female terrorists tends to highlight physical appearance,⁹ and frames that reproduce well-rehearsed plotlines such as ‘the good girl gone bad’ and ‘for the sake of love’, eliding political and ideological commitment in favor of clichéd narratives.¹⁰

Representations of I.S. women in media discourse have been the subject of a number of recent studies.¹¹ For example, Alice Martini considered how British broadsheet newspapers represented these women, arguing that their construction relied on gendered and neo-Orientalist tropes that infantilized the ‘brides’, homogenizing their desires and experiences, and portraying them as apolitical and without agency.¹² The present article is similarly concerned with media constructions, however it differs in two key ways. First, Martini’s focus on the representations within broadsheet newspapers offers a partial, and somewhat incomplete picture of the discourses circulating. Tabloid newspapers in the UK have a large readership,¹³ and excluding the discourses produced at these sites means omitting a significant site of meaning-making. Second, while Martini’s study presents the key narratives that served to construct the ‘brides’, the consequences of such narratives are not interrogated, and this is important if we take seriously the constructivist position that the way we speak about things affects our material reality.¹⁴

My interest in this article is to understand how constructions made particular policy options more or less possible and, as such, the analysis presented here does not use gender as its primary analytical lens, focusing instead on metaphorical representations of I.S. women (including their relationship to the broader context of I.S.), and exploring the possibilities opened up by these, while at the same time identifying the gendered dynamics that structure these constructions.¹⁵ Understanding the ways in which the ‘jihadi brides’ were problematized through gendered discourses that denied their agency is important, but it is equally important to interrogate the possibilities that such constructions made space for. The present article attempts to foreground this concern by considering how journalists represented the ‘brides’ for

public consumption, the metaphorical understandings that were central to this, and the implications of these framings.

Metaphor and representation

News frames function to define problems, diagnose causes, morally evaluate agents and recommend remedies.¹⁶ In doing so they elevate the salience of particular aspects of a perceived reality in a communicating text, collecting key concepts, phrases and images to prioritize and reinforce particular interpretations of events, by, for example, presenting events as terrorism, as opposed to insurgency, militancy, war, or crime.¹⁷

Metaphors are a useful tool in this framing process, providing a means of presenting complex new phenomenon in familiar ways by importing meaning from other domains.

Since metaphors work by transferring meaning, they can be understood to cognitively structure human understanding of a phenomenon by projecting knowledge about one domain onto another.¹⁸ In their classic work, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson give the example of the cultural practice of arguments, frequently metaphorically represented as war through expressions such as: *I demolished her argument, her criticisms were right on target, she shot down all my claims*. From this, they argue that metaphors operate as more than simply rhetorical flourishes; they fundamentally structure our conceptual systems and how we think and act.¹⁹ Since mental models of the world are articulated through speech and writing, metaphorical cognitions can be located in discourse. It is important to note that the expressions associated with the metaphor 'argument is war' are not simply unrelated individual instances of a particular way of conceptualizing argumentation. Rather, a number of common expressions aggregate around the same conceptual schema of what is going on when individuals are engaged in an argument. For this reason, the frequency of metaphorical expressions alone does not tell us very much; however, when a number of

different expressions point to the same conceptual metaphor, this suggests that a metaphorically structured cognitive schema is being articulated.²⁰

Metaphors are particularly useful (and abundant) when humans are confronted with novel phenomena, serving as a means of reducing complexity and making the unfamiliar comprehensible by mapping the known onto the new.²¹ This process of recognizing similarities between two things leads people to assume other similarities, which in turn opens or constrains possibilities for action: what we (think we) know about a thing affects how we think it should be dealt with.

The present article is concerned with the social construction of the ‘jihadi brides’ in newspapers. As sites of meaning-making newspapers have a large audience and an important public role. Even in an age when circulation is dramatically declining, 40 per cent of people in the UK report that they get their ideas about the world from newspapers.²² There is wide scholarly agreement that the way an issue is framed in the media affects public and policy maker opinion,²³ although it is often difficult to discern how and to what extent these influence support for particular actions.²⁴ This article does not suggest that causality in any direct sense can be discerned from the metaphorical representations of the ‘brides’. Rather, it is interested in how these representations made particular actions possible.

Method

Seven newspapers were included in this study, retrieved from ProQuest newsstand database and chosen based on their high circulation figures and an attempt to broadly balance between ideological position and tabloids and broadsheets: *The Sun*, and the *Daily Mirror* are tabloid newspapers (the former right-leaning and the latter left-leaning), while the *Daily Mail* is middle-market (here classified as a tabloid) and right-leaning. *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* are right-leaning broadsheets, while the

Guardian and the *Independent* are left-leaning broadsheets.²⁵ Articles were retrieved through the following search: ‘jihadi bride* OR muhajirah OR muhajirat’, and was restricted to articles published between 31 January 2013 and 31 January 2018, yielding 365 unique articles.

The articles were analyzed using the software program NVivo and were approached as follows: first, each article was open coded in order to draw out metaphorical expressions without the use of predefined categories. Metaphorical expressions are words or phrases used in ways that differ from their basic meanings, and as such the context, rather than the frequency, of particular expressions was of interest. For example, the word ‘poison’ as it related to the metaphor of toxicity (e.g. the ‘poison’ of jihadist ideology) was included in this analysis, while references to Team Poison (Junaid Hussain’s I.S. computer hacking group) was not. The expressions derived from this initial indicative step were then searched (along with synonyms) within the rest of the articles. Expressions were included in the analysis if the sentence in question was about I.S. women or if it sought to explain the attractiveness of I.S. to these women. Finally, these metaphorical expressions were organized according to the central metaphors they invoked. Journalistic writing very often includes words or phrases that are not used in the basic (dictionary defined) sense of their meaning, however, these are not considered to indicate metaphorical thinking unless a number of different expressions cluster around a particular metaphorical representation of the issue at hand. Table 1 illustrates the frequency of metaphorical expressions within these articles, along with the overarching metaphor each invoked.²⁶ [Table 1 near here].

Results

Within news frame packages, metaphors serve to facilitate the comprehension of new situations through the establishment of similarity between a topic and a vehicle of

thought. By using language that links a new phenomenon with an established idea, the strangeness of the phenomenon may be tamed and the sense of displacement it engenders brought back under control. This is important when considering the representation of the 'jihadi brides' and the novel challenge they represented. At one point something close to a moral panic emerged as women and girls were leaving the UK at a rate of one a week. Every newspaper studied here carried these stories as they unfolded, and metaphorical expressions served to domesticate a new and unknown phenomenon, restoring order through metaphors that placed this novel situation within the realm of the familiar.

The most frequent metaphorical expressions within the corpus were organized around three such metaphors, which represented the 'brides' as natural, biological and supernatural forces. As illustrated in Chart 1, all of the newspapers under study employed metaphorical expressions in their presentation of the women and girls in question, however, right-leaning tabloids employed these expressions, and therefore the metaphors they clustered around, considerably more frequently. This is unsurprising, given the well-established tendencies of such newspapers towards sensationalism and manufactured moral panic.²⁷ Nevertheless, it should be noted that all of the newspapers studied here employed metaphorical expressions, regardless of their tabloid or broadsheet status and ideological leanings. [Chart 1 near here].

Natural forces

Metaphors of natural forces predominantly evoked water, representing each stage of these women's radicalization and migration, as well as I.S. more broadly, as streams, flows, waves, floods and surges. These expressions pointed to the overwhelming 'pull' of I.S., portraying the group as irresistible and the 'brides' as passive in their own radicalization, drawn along by the overpowering force of I.S. ideology.

The Internet was broadly understood to be the starting point of radicalization, a place where young women were exposed to a “*torrent of bile pouring forth every day from extremists,*”²⁸ while parents remained passively unaware of the “*tide of hate and poison lapping into the bedrooms of susceptible young men and women.*”²⁹ I.S. pulled towards it a “*flood of extremists,*”³⁰ creating a “*surge in jihadist activity,*”³¹ and young women were portrayed as swept along by this force. The three schoolgirls from Bethnal Green Academy (Amira Abase, Kadiza Sultana and Shamima Begum), who left the UK in February 2015, for example, were represented as “part of a *flow* of British youths to the war zone,”³² joining a “*stream of young British Muslims,*”³³ and forcing police to escalate “efforts to *stem the flow* of prospective jihadis to Syria.”³⁴

The unmanageable nature of the problem was further emphasized by reports that officials were “struggling to tackle a *constant flow*”³⁵ of Britons to Syria and were “*bracing themselves for an influx of jihadi brides,*”³⁶ where blocking re-entry was “the only way to prevent a new *wave* of deadly attacks.”³⁷ These metaphors served to represent I.S. as a body of water sweeping across the world like a tidal wave and carrying off young women as it passed. Such representations positioned the women as passive onlookers, rather than active subjects, in marked contrast to the way young British migrant men were portrayed (discussed below).

Biological forces

The unstoppable force of nature discussed above was also present in language that represented I.S.’s ‘pull’ for these women as a biological force, through expressions that evoked vegetation and disease. Following the terrorist attack on Manchester Arena in May 2017, the area of Moss Side (home to Salma and Zahra Halane, the so-called ‘terror twins’) was subject to scrutiny, and plant-related metaphors became frequent. representing Manchester was described as a place where the “*evil seeds of hatred* were

sown in the suburbs,”³⁸ and a “hotbed of extremism,”³⁹ where a “climate of division ha[d] been a *fertile breeding ground* for the recruiting sergeants of jihadism.”⁴⁰

Multiculturalism was blamed for having “allowed a *climate to grow* in which extremist ideas ha[d] *flourished* within Britain’s Muslim communities.”⁴¹ The “sharp rise in *home-grown fanatics*”⁴² meant the need to closely monitor Muslim private space as the site “where this [extremism] first *germinates*.”⁴³ Having been scattered, nurtured and grown, I.S.’s extremist ideas were believed to have put down roots in particular areas, implying both that they were well-established: “radical ideology appears to have *taken root* among some young city Muslims,”⁴⁴ and unruly: “successive governments have failed to *root* out extremist ideology and disaffection among Muslims in the UK.”⁴⁵ A determined citizenry was thus required to locate and eradicate this threat.

These representations of radicalization as a biological force were reflected in epidemiological language that constructed I.S. as toxic. The group was said to be “*poisoning* vulnerable minds”⁴⁶ and indoctrinating young people “with this hateful ideological *poison*,”⁴⁷ through “sectarian religiosity, sheer adventurism and cocksure, screw-you street swagger [which] have combined into a particularly *heady and toxic* alloy.”⁴⁸ The toxicity of I.S. was contrasted with the former health of the women in question. The Bethnal Green girls, for example, were described as bright, popular and well-liked young women who “came from *healthy* homes,”⁴⁹ and as I.S. was portrayed as a disease, ostensibly safe spaces were re-framed as places of infection. One article identified universities as serving to “*incubate* the *virus* of extremism”⁵⁰ driving it underground to “find a ready *host* in those who feel lost, alienated and resentful.”⁵¹ The risk of infection from I.S. extremism meant that even Mak Chishty of the Metropolitan Police warned fellow Muslim parents that “I am not *immuni[z]ed*. If I feel the need to be extra vigilant, then I think you need to feel the need to be extra vigilant.”⁵²

The supernatural

Alongside metaphors of unstoppable natural forces lurked more unnatural forces. These took two forms: one that represented I.S. itself as a supernatural force that bewitched the women and girls in question, and another that presented the 'brides' as monstrous.

I.S. was represented as other-worldly through metaphors that described Raqqa, I.S.'s makeshift capital, as the "HQ of *evil*"⁵³ and "earth's closest vision of *hell*."⁵⁴ I.S. fighters were described as "*fiends*,"⁵⁵ "*horror movie ghouls*"⁵⁶ and "manipulative *monsters*,"⁵⁷ taking part in a "*ghoulish* melodrama of hatred."⁵⁸ Their hold on the women who travelled to Syria was also understood as other-worldly, transforming ordinary British women and girls into jihadists seemingly by magic. While Sally Jones was reportedly "*under the spell* of [Junaid] Hussain,"⁵⁹ Joya Choudhury's husband "*mesmeri[z]ed her* with his confidence,"⁶⁰ while Sharmeena Begum was said to have "*fell under the spell* of the Islamists;"⁶¹ and Aqsa Mahmood was described as "a woman *entranced* not just with the idea of Islamism but with joining Islamic State."⁶²

The unearthly powers ascribed to jihadist men served to present the women in question as powerless, vulnerable and unable to resist their own enchantment. Any sympathy generated by these metaphors was displaced by the assertion that, once humans arrived in I.S. territory they were transformed into supernatural beings themselves. For example, JoJo Jones was said to be "gone forever, transformed beyond recognition by his *evil mother* [Sally],"⁶³ and Aqsa Mahmood's parents were described, as "*haunted* and broken, devastated at the *monster* their child has turned into."⁶⁴ This representation of Syria as a place that 'monsterized' served to place these women in a territory of supernatural forces. Bombed out citizens of Mosul were described as emerging "from the ground as dust covered *spect[er]s* into an earthly *hell*,"⁶⁵ Khadijah Dare's mother claimed that "'the *devil*' took her,"⁶⁶ Tareena Shakil described her time

in Syria as “a *living nightmare*...[that] ended up as *hell*”⁶⁷ and Joya Choudhury stated that life in I.S. territory was like “*living in a horror movie* that wasn’t ending.”⁶⁸

Discussion

The results above return us to the research questions of this study: What does it mean to represent people as tides, toxins and monsters? What kind of actions do such representations make possible and what do they preclude?

The metaphors discussed here are not new, and metaphorical expressions of natural, biological and supernatural force have been identified in newspaper writing about immigration, extremism and conflict. However, their prevalence in articles that sought to explain the actions of the ‘brides’ is particularly interesting. What each of these have in common is the representation of I.S. as an unrelenting and overpowering force, and the young women in question as passive bystanders caught up in, or infected by, its unstoppable growth. It is important to note that, while some of these metaphorical expressions portrayed extremism more generally, their proliferation in articles that specifically sought to explain the actions of the ‘jihadi brides’ suggests that gendered explanations of politically violent women found expression in the metaphorical language used to represent them. These metaphors emphasized the passivity of the ‘brides’, explaining their radicalization as a result of exposure or enchantment, rather than their own active interest in jihad, and the women themselves as vulnerable and susceptible, but caught up in the irresistible force of movement towards I.S. territory, exposed to the ever-present virus of radicalization or spellbound. Beneath this representation of I.S. lies an understanding of the ‘brides’ as passive and vulnerable, perhaps even victims, but rarely as active participants in the I.S. project.

Such representations are not only gendered, they are also homogenizing, erasing diverse motivations for migrating to I.S. territory. The social media activity of the

British ‘brides’ reveals a plurality of reasons for leaving the UK, including Aqsa Mahmood’s desire to aid the victims of war, Khadijah Dare’s dissatisfaction with the piety of British Muslim men and Tareena Shakil’s attempt to ensure a place in heaven for herself and her family by migrating to the ‘caliphate’. The media’s tendency to use metaphors that treated the ‘brides’ as one entity did not allow for distinguishing motivations between those who sought to live in an Islamic state and those who wished to support the I.S. project. Instead, the metaphorical representation of the ‘brides’ embraced a depiction of young women as unwitting victims of IS propaganda, in marked contrast to the representation of male migrants, who were understood to be ideologically driven, active and committed to the jihadist cause.⁶⁹

These representations of I.S. and the women involved as non-human forces also had a consistent and subtle dehumanizing effect. Water-based metaphors, that describe people as flows, surges, and waves are frequently found in reporting on immigration.⁷⁰ Given the unprecedented numbers of people who left for I.S. territory, their depiction through water-based imagery may simply have been because journalists were drawing on long-established media frames of migration. Nevertheless, the connotations of this metaphor should be examined. As a mass noun, ‘water’ describes a homogenized, indistinct moving mass; in short, it portrays subjects devoid of individuality,⁷¹ and this has implications for the range of options available to manage the problem described. As Otto Santa Ana has put it:

The control of water varies from total mastery, such as when people shut off a kitchen faucet, to partial control, as in a hydroelectric dam. Great volume and movement of water imply greater need for safeguards and controls, and more powerful human agency to control the water...⁷²

It is the sheer volume implied by the water metaphor that points to the need for greater

human power to prevent an already dangerous situation getting further out of control.

Similar understandings may be detected in the metaphorical representation of I.S. migrants as biological forces, reducing them to a sub-human level and, again, drawing on historical constructions of outside 'others'. The dehumanizing of Jews as parasites and plants in fascist rhetoric is well-known,⁷³ however, discourse in liberal democracies has frequently employed these metaphors in public speech about enemy-others.⁷⁴ For example, immigration debates in early 20th century America commonly represented immigrants as indigestible food, parasites or germs in the body of the nation.⁷⁵ More recent work has pointed to the prevalence of these discourses in counterterrorism, including how metaphors of radicalization as a toxic and contagious disease in the UK have led to public health style counterterrorism responses⁷⁶ and how the idea of the 'bad seed' has securitized Muslim communities in the U.S..⁷⁷ Both versions of the biological force metaphor point to particular ways of dealing with the problem at hand. The body politic can be inoculated against the virus, while the 'bad seeds' must be removed by a watchful horticulturalist. These actions, however, require the aid of a vigilant citizenry to keep a careful eye on developments.

Perhaps surprising about the biological force metaphor is the lack of metaphorical expressions that refer to animals. In their work on metaphors of the 'war on terror', Steuter and Wills noted the tendency to represent the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through the metaphor of 'the hunt', through expressions such as 'lair', 'nests' and 'swamps.'⁷⁸ It is notable that such language was occasionally present, but was not significant within the articles examined here. It is possible that journalists may have purposely avoided animal metaphors, given their link with the dehumanization of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.⁷⁹ Alternatively, the relative infrequency of these metaphors may be due to the fact that the articles studied here were retrieved specifically through

search terms designed to capture writing on *women*. Since these metaphors tend to be employed to describe combatants, women are perhaps less likely to be portrayed through such terms. Comparative research would enable greater insight into whether the lack of animal-related metaphors was due to sampling issues or can tell us more about the specific media construction of I.S.

While the metaphors of natural and biological force are well established in newspaper writing on immigration, supernatural metaphors tend to emerge in relation to conflict. Richard Devetak has how enemies are frequently represented as supernatural beings in international relations, highlighting the portrayals of Al Qaeda as invisible and ghostly, but nevertheless possessing unlimited destructive power.⁸⁰ Particularly important here is the idea of 'evil', the most frequently occurring metaphorical expression in the articles. The rhetoric of 'evil' in conflict situations has been investigated by a number of scholars, particularly in relation to the 'war on terror', and its repeated construction as a war of 'good versus evil.'⁸¹ The criminological literature on women offenders has also noted this as a key signifier, and has highlighted the tendency to portray female deviance as 'evil' through gendered discourses that 'monsterize', constructing women criminals as outside both the moral and social orders.⁸² The threat that deviant criminal women represent to the social order may be seen to be reflected in the threat that I.S. women were understood to pose to the countries they departed. The presence of British women in Syria was not considered a security threat in the same way as that posed by their male co-nationals. In fact, arguably, the threat posed by the 'brides' was more profound. Their rejection of the security, stability and gender-based freedoms of their lives in the UK was deeply disturbing to established civilizational narratives of 'West is best', and this may explain

the tendency to metaphorically represent them as succumbing to (and often becoming) supernatural forces, against which they were powerless.

The consequences of framings

Metaphors work to frame an unfamiliar phenomenon, making it comprehensible by appealing to familiar experiences. However, they also serve a further purpose. By mapping the conceptual knowledge of one domain on to another, they imply not only how the subject in question should be evaluated, but also how it should be managed.

A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that metaphorical framing influences people's perceptions of how best to manage problems.⁸³ Spencer, for example, has argued that representations of the 'barbaric terrorist' implied the tightening of borders to keep out the foreign 'other', while the discourse of 'evil' pointed to more severe action, relying on the perception that engagement was impossible.⁸⁴ Studies measuring the effects of metaphorical representation have similarly found that proposed solutions are influenced by these framings. One study presented two groups with an identical fictional crime report, changing only the way crime was metaphorically represented, and found that those presented with the 'crime as a virus' metaphor were more likely to recommend public health style social reforms, while those presented with the 'crime as a wild beast' metaphor favored heavier policing and more militant tactics.⁸⁵ Perhaps more importantly, the likelihood of choosing one set of actions over another remained the same even when participants did not even notice the metaphor in question, suggesting that metaphorical representations influence mental models even when we do not perceive that they are present.

The constructivist position highlights the influence that representations have on policy from a post-positivist perspective, where the question of concern is not why a

particular action happened, but *how* that action became possible.⁸⁶ That high-level government figures were adopting some of the metaphors described here is well illustrated by prime minister David Cameron's speech on extremism in November 2015:

When you are dealing with radicali[z]ed European Muslims, linked to ISIL in Syria and inspired by a *poisonous* narrative of extremism, you need an approach that covers the full spectrum – military power, counter-terrorism expertise and defeating the *poisonous* narrative that is the *root* cause of this *evil*... The *root* cause of this threat is the *poisonous* ideology of extremism itself. This ideology, this *diseased* view of the world, has become an *epidemic* – *infecting* minds from the mosques of Mogadishu to the bedrooms of Birmingham. And we have to stop it at the start – stop this *seed* of hatred even being *planted* in people's minds, let alone allowing it to *grow*.⁸⁷

The extent to which such frames influenced the acceptability of particular actions is difficult to assess, but the prime minister's use of metaphorical language to explain the pull of I.S. is important given that none of these metaphors pointed to the possibility of rehabilitation. Natural and supernatural forces cannot be engaged with, and furthermore, they are dangerous.

Shortly after Cameron's speech, the ambiguous status of the 'brides' was illustrated by then-defence secretary, Michael Fallon, who was evasive when asked by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in what circumstances drone strikes were approved and whether there existed a 'third category' between target and innocent civilians:

The Chair [Harriet Harman MP]: So you are saying there is a third category. There is the target; there are innocent civilians; and then there is a third category, which is not the target but not innocent civilians either, and therefore in pursuing a target it is all right for people in that category to be killed...? If somebody is involved in ISIL—because they are driving a tanker of oil that is going to be used by ISIL, or they are working in an oilfield, or they are what is described as a jihadi bride—are they in this third category; that is, not a target but not an innocent civilian either?

*Michael Fallon MP: ... we would look at this on a case-by-case basis, look at the numbers of other people involved, and apply the tests of proportionality and military advantage. Does the advantage of stopping potentially large loss of life on our own streets outweigh the necessity of one or two further casualties? What is proportionate in each case is a matter for the consideration of each case.*⁸⁸

The increasing ambiguity over the status of the ‘brides’ is important. The Additional Protocols of the Geneva Convention protect civilians against attack unless they take a direct part in hostilities. This means that those taking an indirect part, even if they are sustaining the war effort through propaganda and recruitment, may not be legitimately targeted under international humanitarian law.⁸⁹ However, in the case of the ‘jihadi brides’, possibilities for action shifted over a short period of time. In late 2014, policy to deal with those who had migrated to Syria involved refusing them entry back to the UK. By summer 2017 Government ministers were openly supporting the targeted killing of British women. Fallon’s replacement as defense secretary, Gavin Williamson, unreservedly supported the drone campaign, arguing “a dead terrorist can't cause any harm to Britain,”⁹⁰ a sentiment shared by Minister for International Development, Rory Stewart, who, a few days after Jones’s death was reported, stated:

They are absolutely dedicated, as *members* of the Islamic State, towards the creation of a caliphate. They believe in an extremely hateful doctrine which involves killing themselves, killing others and trying to use violence and brutality to create an 8th Century, or 7th Century, state. So I'm afraid we have to be serious about the fact these people are a serious danger to us, and unfortunately, *the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them.*⁹¹

This more hardline attitude to British I.S. members has continued at the highest level of government. In July 2018, home secretary Sajid Javid took the unprecedented decision to extradite the remaining members of the British ‘Beatles’ I.S. cell without

seeking assurances that they would not face the death penalty. Although this effort was suspended following a legal challenge, the dispensation of the decades old ‘death penalty assurance’ suggests a shift in position, if not policy, towards those associated with I.S. A similar disregard has been shown for those Britons who number among the estimated 2000 and 1400 women and children respectively held in Kurdish and Iraqi detention, despite the concerns of human rights groups that Baghdad courts were sentencing foreign women to death for non-violent crimes.⁹² Government ambivalence to the fate of British ‘jihadi brides’ was further demonstrated in February 2019 when one of the Bethnal Green schoolgirls, Shamima Begum, was located in Kurdish detention, heavily pregnant and wishing to return to the UK for the sake of her child, having lost two infants that year to malnutrition and illness. At the time of her disappearance, Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner, Mark Rowley, had given assurances that the girls would not be treated as terrorists should they return. However, four years later Javid revoked Begum’s British passport in a move that, in contravention of international law, effectively rendered her stateless.⁹³

How these actions became possible is of crucial concern, and metaphors are one component of a discourse that constructs reality in a particular way, enabling certain actions to follow relatively uncomplicatedly, while others become increasingly unthinkable.

This article opened with a discussion of the case of Sally Jones, asking what changed in the two years between her husband’s assassination and her own to make a previously unacceptable action possible. Although many variables may have impacted on the decision to target Jones despite the presence of her son,⁹⁴ the social construction of the ‘jihadi brides’ was an important contributor to this shift in possibilities. The argument of this paper is not that the consistent dehumanization within these

metaphorical representations *directly* led to drone strikes, or even indifference to the complex moral questions raised by them. What is going on is much subtler: dehumanization does not lead to particular policy options, in the sense that particular metaphors cause certain policies. Rather, discourses that dehumanize subjects make certain options more, or less, appropriate. It is this narrowing of possibilities that makes particular policies feasible.

The drone strike that killed Sally Jones and her son was made possible partly through the discursive construction of what the ‘jihadi brides’ were, the threat they posed and the actions deemed necessary to deal with them. These representational forces were starkly demonstrated in the aftermath of Jones’s killing and the newspaper discourse that dominated. The ethical and legal quandaries thrown up by the child’s death were smoothed over by a visual and textual rendering of Jojo as deserving of his fate. As Major General Chip Chapman, the Ministry of Defence’s former head of counterterrorism, stated: “This 12-year-old had brutally murdered people. He is not someone we should necessarily empathize with. I think one could make a case that he could be a legitimate target.”⁹⁵ These sentiments were indirectly legitimized by the widespread publication of images from an I.S. propaganda video of the smiling child holding a gun to the head of a Kurdish prisoner. The subtext was hardly subtle; the boy had murdered, and therefore his death was not ‘collateral damage,’ but a necessary, and even legitimate, action. Whether empathy with Jojo was possible was tied to the fact that he was a child, who had been taken to Syria by his mother, ideologically conditioned by I.S. and compelled to execute prisoners. His culpability in such circumstances, and the legitimacy of his targeting (even if indirect), was problematic at best, but the representations of I.S. in general, and the ‘brides’ in particular, as new

threats that required drastic new responses facilitated media acceptance that the threat from his mother could only be neutralized if her child was sacrificed at the same time.

Conclusion

When the ‘jihadi brides’ first came to widespread public attention in summer 2014, the notion that British women and girls would choose to decamp to a war-torn country ruled by gender segregation was represented as utterly inexplicable, and newspaper discourse sought to frame the issue in order to explain this novel phenomenon to an unprepared public. Metaphors were an important element of this frame package, serving to reduce complexity by linking this new reality with established ideas and thus rendering the ‘brides’ comprehensible. Far from being singular instances of elaborate journalistic language, these metaphorical expressions pointed toward particular cognitive understandings of the women in question, clustering around three recurring metaphors that represented I.S. as a natural, biological and supernatural force, and the ‘brides’ as inextricably and uncontrollably caught up in them.

The frequency of these metaphors in writing on women suggests that, in attempting to explain the ‘brides’, reporters regurgitated well-established tropes of politically violent women as naïve, vulnerable victims, devoid of the ideological commitment assumed of male migrants, at least prior to their arrival in I.S. territory. Such representations effectively homogenized the category of the ‘brides’, erasing their agency, neglecting their stated motivations and serving both to collectively dehumanize them and legitimize their annihilation.

By taking seriously constructivism’s claim that discursive choices about the representation of a phenomenon influences the possibilities for its management, the analysis presented here has stressed the importance of studying metaphorical frames in media discourse and considering their consequences. All discursive research is subject

to limitations, particularly when undertaken by an individual researcher without the internal coding validity checks that a team of researchers can provide. I have attempted to mitigate these limitations by employing an inductive approach, drawing metaphorical expressions from the data, sorting them into the overarching metaphors they invoked and testing the validity of these categories with reference to the rich literature on media metaphor usage.

While any constructivist approach must be wary of over-claiming, a deeper appreciation of how media framing may contribute to a broadening or narrowing of policy options is an important addition to our understanding of the changing approach towards women who departed, and often now seek to return, to their home countries. This article has presented an analysis of how representations make space for the development of new norms, but it also suggests fruitful areas for future research. Most obviously, case studies, or comparative analyses, of individual women would generate important longitudinal data on the relationship between their metaphorical representation and the actions deemed suitable to deal with them. Such an approach is beyond the scope of this paper, but would allow more fine-grained analysis of whether and how metaphors changed over time and if policy approaches changed in parallel.

The fall of the 'caliphate' has created profound dilemmas for those states which must now contend with the problem of returnees. Not only does the lack of evidence of activities in Syria make prosecution of women migrants particularly difficult, but the status of children taken to or born in I.S. territory is uncertain, and the costs associated with monitoring and treating these, often traumatized, families may be difficult to bear for governments whose populations are hostile to their reabsorption. In the wake of these new realities, there is evidence that new norms appear to be developing with

regard to the conceptualization and treatment of both I.S. fighters and their families, made possible in part by the novel social constructions of the subjects in question.

The effects of such social constructions can never be definitively discerned, given the complexity of variables that influence policy choices. However, discourses that dehumanize must not be dismissed. The high profile ‘brides’ that became the central focus of media attention in fact made up a very small percentage of those known to have left. The vast majority of those who migrated maintained low profiles, neither recruiting to the ‘caliphate’ nor glorifying terrorism. The label ‘jihadi brides’, however, collected around it representations that served to flatten the women and girls constructed thus, rendering their motivations and activities uniformly diabolical and reducing the ‘brides’ into a ‘third category’ - neither targets nor innocent civilians, but individuals whose lives were more disposable because of their decision to migrate. Homogenized and dehumanized, the ‘brides’ found little sympathy from the majority of these newspapers, and military action aimed at their deliberate or ‘collateral’ eradication found few critics.

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- ⁹⁵ Ludovica Iacconi, “Was Sally Jones’s 12-Year-Old Son a Legitimate Target? US Drone Strike on Isis ‘white Widow’ Questioned,” *International Business Times*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/was-sally-jones-12-year-old-son-legitimate-target-us-drone-strike-isis-white-widow-questioned-1642991>.