"Victim" or "Security Threat":

Gendered Narratives on Women Returnees to the MENA Region

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ABSTRACT

The complex question of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families returning from areas once controlled by DAESH is a high priority policy area for NATO members and its partners, particularly in the South. Indeed, although much international attention has focused on those returning to Europe, the question of returnees is central to many countries in the MENA region with thousands of fighters and family members still in prisons, detention centers, or in camps in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Simultaneously, increasing attention has been given to the importance of narratives and counter-narratives in countering violent extremism – and nowhere has this been clearer than in the fight against DAESH.

The aim of this research project is thus to bring together these two important questions – the fate of returnees to the MENA region and the role of narratives in the battle against violence extremism. More specifically, it investigated the gendered narratives surrounding the return of women from DAESH-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq to the MENA region and how this has affected policies toward the women. This analysis is then used to examine the counter-narrative initiatives available in the region and set out policy recommendations.

The research paper – based on an extensive review of academic and policy literature as well as an original analysis of primary material in the form of narratives on women returnees in Arabic, French, English, Spanish, Italian, German, and Turkish – begins by offering a policy-relevant discussion of gender and gendered narratives. It notes that gender and understandings of how men, women, and non-binary gender identities should behave impact on all aspects of human life, including how they engage with, support, or are subjected to violence. Crucially, as noted by NATO's definition of concepts, a gendered analysis reveals important power inequalities. Such inequalities become visible through an analysis of gendered narratives, which aim to make sense of events. Narratives make sense of how individuals go from A to B – in this case from their home countries in the MENA region to DAESH-controlled territories and then back. These narratives in turn impact on the policy options that are put forward – they help determine which polices "make sense" and which do not.

The paper examines DAESH's relatively articulate gendered narratives aimed at attracting women to join the Caliphate and notes that the group's narratives were different for women living in Europe and those in the MENA region. Narratives aimed at MENA women stressed how they would become empowered in joining the

Caliphate by promising opportunities for study and employment, but also by drawing on the history of Muslim women engaging in battle. The narrative has failed to gain widespread appeal in the region although there is no dominant counter-narrative in the MENA region. Indeed, the research finds that there are few regional counter-narrative initiatives challenging the DAESH narratives on women. Although some regional initiatives and some national initiatives with the potential for regional impact are discussed, an initial conclusion reached by the paper is that the question of women returnees and narratives surrounding them needs to be given greater attention by regional organisations and in cooperative initiatives among regional states.

The paper advances that dominant narrative on women returnees can only be identified at national level. The level of analysis needs to be at national or possibly even local level and not at regional level. As such, the paper offers two detailed case studies on Morocco and Tunisia investigating the dominant and contending narratives on women returnees and any initiatives aimed at engaging with them. The sharp contrast between the two countries demonstrates the importance of political and security contexts in determining which narratives come to dominate a political landscape. Indeed, although geographically very close, they offer starkly different dominant narratives on women returnees, with Moroccan political circles and news outlets dominated by narratives of "victimhood," while in Tunisia, the dominant narrative was one that identified women as potential security threats. These narratives had important implications in terms of the policies directed at women returnees and the initiatives available to them.

In Morocco, analysis of narratives from women returnees, from women seeking to return, and most importantly narratives about them, stress their lack of agency in their travel to DAESH-controlled territory. They are presented as victims of their husbands and other male relatives, whom they are forced to follow due to traditional gender roles. As such, they should be allowed to return home as they have often not been involved in any violence. Stressing that the necessary security checks are carried out, authorities have said that most women are unlikely to face criminal charges and will be allowed to return "to their families." This dominant narrative has thus contributed to justifying a policy of reintegration within society. It has also meant that women returnees have largely fallen through the cracks of programmes and initiatives aimed at the supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, most of which happen in prison or upon release. Since women have not been

imprisoned, they have not benefitted for the programmes available to male returnees. It has also meant that women's subordination to their families may be reinforced, as they become again dependent on family to survive. Finally, an implication beyond Morocco is that women who have dual nationality with a European country are seeking to return to Morocco as they try to avoid jail terms in Europe.

Research revealed a very different narrative in neighbouring Tunisia. Indeed, the dominant narrative in Tunisia is that of women returnees as potential security threats aiming to carry out attacks or spread DAESH ideology once they return. This has contributed to supporting clear statements by authorities that all women returnees will go through the judicial system. Appeals by family members and human rights NGOs trying to portray them as victims, again of their husbands or of DAESH itself, have failed to unseat the dominant narrative, which is supported in the wider population as shown by demonstrations opposing proposals of amnesties or more generally against the return. Interestingly, the security threat narrative has been further reinforced by concerns regarding the fate of children returnees, with the debate in Tunisia revolving around whether the children can be returned without their mothers. The threat narrative has thus contributed to policies that focus primarily on the criminalisation of returnees and on the potential separation of family units. It has also probably contributed too little in public or political support for initiatives to facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of women returnees, with few initiatives largely left to NGOs and CSOs. Experts warn that this can also have repercussions beyond Tunisia if entire families of returnees chose to relocate elsewhere, such as in the Sahel raising the prospect of a rise of violent extremism there.

The paper examines the reasons behind such a sharp contrast in the narratives in the two countries and concludes that the role of national political and security contexts cannot be understated. A relatively low incidence of terrorist attacks in Morocco along with legislative reforms have contributed to an environment that is viewed as capable of assimilating and reintegrating the returnees. A higher incidence of terrorist violence in Tunisia, the highly publicised role of Tunisian women in DAESH, as well as a political transition process has made such a reintegration far more fraught politically. Indeed, if the question of women returnees is broadly uncontroversial in Morocco, it is highly politicised in Tunisia, which accounts for the difference in dominant narratives. As such, the paper concludes that, firstly, political

and security contexts play a key role in determining which narratives will dominate a political landscape and, secondly, that these narratives play an important role in laying the groundwork for justifying policy responses. Without a gendered analysis of narratives surrounding women returnees it is thus difficult to understand such stark differences in policy across the region. It is also difficult to address the lack of attention currently being granted to women returnees and to understand how to increase cooperation between state institutions, NGOs, and CSOs in this policy area.

The paper concludes with four policy recommendations. First of all, the return of women from formerly DAESH-controlled territories has to be assessed in terms of the security threat they may pose as well as in terms of their needs to reintegrate a stable social and economic life in their home countries. Secondly, reintegration programmes need to take into account that women often avoid the prison system and thus non-prison based programmes and mechanisms have to be put in place to assess and address their needs. Thirdly, dominant narratives on returnees, women and men, and their potential impact on public opinion need to be monitored to assess their effects and how they can be countered if necessary. Finally, increased attention has to be granted to the potential role of women, and women returnees in particular, in counter and on de-radicalisation programmes throughout the region, including in establishing and disseminating counter-narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

DAESH' large-scale loss of territory in Syria and Iraq triggered a worldwide movement of the so called "Foreign Terrorist Fighters" and their families returning to their home countries. Public and policy attention focused largely on fighters and families returning to western countries and the potential threat they represent to the security of NATO member states. Numerous analyses have examined whether and how returnees could be prosecuted for any crimes committed, what kind of surveillance system could be put in place, and de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes that can support the returnees.[1] Some of these analyses have examined gendered aspects of policies on returnees and others have focused on the effects of narratives surrounding returnees. Indeed, international organisations have identified narratives of violent extremism as one of the key areas that needs to be investigated for future Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policies.[2]

Of the at least 6,900 foreign women – some 3,000 from the MENA region – who are believed to have traveled to join DAESH in Syria and Iraq, it is unclear how many have actually returned to their home countries since the fall of the terrorist group's last stronghold of Baghouz in 2019. A tally of official figures in July 2019 showed that only 609 women – 75 from MENA countries – had been registered as having returned, the lowest percentage of returnees after men and children. This is unlikely to be an accurate reflection, however, as many women returnees are believed to have been neither "acknowledged nor distinguished at the country level".[3] This lack of acknowledgement is cause for concern. What has happened to these women? Are they trying to return? What awaits them when they arrive?

Answering all of these questions is beyond the scope of this project, which focuses on one important aspect of the fate of women returnees, i.e. the narratives surrounding their potential and actual return. Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that narratives have a profound effect on public perceptions and on policy options

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[1] See for example the work of the Egmont Institute (egmontinstitute.be), the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (https://icsr.info/our-work/foreign-fighters-and-the-returnee-threat/).

[2] Statement of Ambassador Agostin Santos Maraver, Permanent Representative of Spain to the Untied Nations, at High-Level Virtual Convening on the UN Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights meeting, June 11, 2020.

[3] Cook, Joana and Vale, Gina (2019) "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate", International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, https://icsr.info/2019/07/26/from-daesh-to-diaspora-ii-the-challenges-posed-by-women-and-minors-after-the-fall-of-the-caliphate/(P. 6).

available to national governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). This project therefore investigates the narratives surrounding the return of women, offering a gendered analysis of the dominant and contending narratives present in the MENA region and examining how these have affected policy in the region. Such an analysis aims to highlight the effects of narratives on women returnees as well as the areas in which counter-narrative efforts can be deployed to create long-term solutions to this largely overlooked policy problem. Indeed, as noted by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED), very little work globally is carried out in counter-narratives at the disengagement phase, with only 5% of programmes compared to 71% targeted at the pre-radicalisation phase.[4]

This report is divided in five sections. Section One briefly outlines the key conceptual underpinnings of this research project and the methodology used to examine the narratives and counter-narratives. Section Two examines the narratives on women put forward by DAESH to attract women, and specifically those aimed at women from the MENA region. It is followed by an overview of the MENA region of gendered narratives and counter-narrative initiatives on women returnees in Section Three. In-depth case studies of Morocco and Tunisia are offered in sections Four and Five. The report concludes with a summary of findings and policy recommendations on how to support the long-term management of women returnees in the region and the potential role of counter-narratives in this management.

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[4] UN CTED (2020) "CTED Analytical Brief: Countering Terrorist Narratives Online and Offline", United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTED_Analytical_Brief_Countering_Terrorist_Narratives_Online_and_Offline.pdf (P. 3).

1. GENDERED NARRATIVES: CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Gender and understandings of how men, women, and non-binary gender identities should behave, impact on all aspects of human life: from how one sits at the dining table, to legal rights, to whether one is seen as a credible candidate for high political office. Violence and in particular political violence are also gendered. This includes the obvious gender-based violence carried out by armed actors, but also the recruitment strategies for men and women, the roles they are allowed to take up in the groups, and the state and international responses to such groups. Most relevant to this research, the possibilities for reintegration of men and women who are linked to violent extremism – as fighters, supporters, or family members – is also deeply gendered.

The aim of this section is to discuss the role of gender and in particular of gender narratives of political violence. Although it is recognised that gender is not only a "women's matter" and that important work has been and needs to be done on masculinity and violence, due to the overall aim of this research project, it shall focus on the dominant gender narratives on women in violent extremism. It shall examine how women's participation in political violence has been understood, the roles they have been assigned, and how narratives on women in political violence have been part of the political contestation between state and non-state actors. Before this can be done, it is important to outline how gender and narratives are understood and have been used in this project, as well as outline the methodology used to research the narratives and counter-narratives surrounding women returnees from DAESH-controlled territory to the MENA region.

Gender

To begin with, NATO defines gender as:

> the social attributes associated with being a female or male, which is learned through socialisation and how society/culture interprets what is permissible for women and what is permissible for men. Gender determines what is expected, permitted and valued in a woman or in a man in a given context. In most societies there are differences and

> inequalities between women and men in many areas. Gender does not mean women.[5]

Beyond this definition, there are increasing calls to adopt a non-binary approach to gender and reject *either/or* constructions (either boy or girl) in favor of *and/or* constructions that recognise that people may be man and woman rather than one or the other.[6] In researching this project, indeed it is important to be sensitive and alert to non-binary constructions of gender and whether and how narratives on women returnees includes such constructions.

Gender is inextricably linked to power and power inequalities. NATO's "Concepts and Definitions: Women, Peace and Security in NATO" states that a "main purpose of gender analysis is to reveal political, social and economic inequalities between men and women by highlighting the gender-based roots of these inequalities".[7] As such, an analysis of gender can contribute to understanding "the underlying causes of power imbalances and inequalities between men and women [structural inequalities]; explain how men and women are experiencing threats, vulnerabilities and conflict differently [conflict related inequalities]; [and] can demonstrate how different roles for men and women during and after conflict will also impact their contribution to conflict-prevention and post-conflict reconstruction".[8]

For the purpose of this research, a gender analysis of narratives on women returnees can help identify differing threats emerging from women returnees as well as vulnerabilities of women returnees, the opportunities open to them, and the potential roles of women returnees and other women in reintegration initiatives.

Narratives

Narratives explain how one got from A to B. They have a beginning (A) and an end (B) and a middle that makes sense of how the events went from one to the other. Narratives of women returnees tell of how women went from their home countries to DAESH-held territory and why they wish to return to country of origin. Most

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[5] https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_07/20190709_1907-wps-glossary.pdf

[6] See for example the work of Cynthia Weber (2016) *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[7] https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_07/20190709_1907-wps-glossary.pdf

[8] Ibid.

importantly they tell us *how we should make sense of it*. Indeed, "narratives order our world, they are 'the primary way in which human experience is made meaningful'".[9] Narratives create relationships between elements that could be understood as disconnected in a way that gives meaning to each element.[10]

Importantly, narratives are political and are also deeply linked to power and power struggles. Dominant or grand narratives "restrict which meanings are possible (i.e., meaningful, reasonable, and rational) and which are not (i.e., meaningless, preposterous, and irrational)".[11] They are however often disrupted by other narratives that aim to undermine dominant narratives. Narratives can be dominant in sub-groups while at the same time being disruptive in a larger group.

As such, the aim of this research is not to seek an objective truth or to understand "the real reasons" behind the return of women from once DAESH-held territory. Indeed, the power of a narrative is not necessarily related to its relationship to "objective facts", although reliance on empirical evidence may strengthen narratives. The principal aim of narrative analysis is to understand what meanings are being produced and what are the political implications of such meanings.

Methodologically, this narrative analysis is undertaken several steps:

1. Identify the dominant narratives in mainstream press and in media outlets linked to violent extremist groups regarding returnee women. More specifically, what stories are being told about why women wish to return or have returned from previously DAESH-held territory? This includes women fighters, as well as wives and widows of fighters.

2. Carry out a gender analysis of the narratives. What role is their womanhood assigned in the narrative? Are the women presented as capable of making choices or as victims of others? Are they presented as hopeless? One must of course keep in mind that the gendered element of a narrative does not necessarily have to explicitly mention gender or state "women do", "men are", etc. Gendered assumptions will exist in narratives of violence and violent extremism without explicitly mentioning gender.

3. Identify the policy implications of the gender narratives. How are these narratives used to justify policies toward women returnees? What kind of counter-

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[9] Wibben, Annick T. R. (2010) *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* Abingdon: Routledge (P. 43).

[10] Griffin, Larry J. (1993) "Narrative, Event-Structure Analysis, and Causal Interpretation in Historical Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology* 98(5): PP. 1094-1133.

[11] Wibben, 2010: P. 43.

narratives are being put forward to contest them? How do they fit in broader initiatives toward returnees?

This narrative analysis is to be carried out for narratives and counter-narratives to examine the meaning making and the political arguments included in these.

Counter-Narratives

As noted above, narratives, however dominant, never completely dominate a social environment. There is never only one narrative that explains how an individual went from A to B. Similarly, there is not one single narrative about why women return from areas controlled by DAESH to their home countries. Contesting narratives often emerge organically and remain on the sideline unable to unseat the dominant narrative. Other times, counter-narratives are part of specific projects and initiatives aimed at undermining and unseating dominant narratives. They aim to tell a *different story* on, for example, why women returned and what they plan to do upon their return. Indeed, some mediation forms are entirely based on rewriting conflict-ridden narratives held by opposing parties into joint narratives of peace and reconciliation. [12]

The aim here is to identify the principal and most fruitful counter-narrative initiatives surrounding women returnees in the MENA region.[13] Such counter-narratives may be part of initiatives that directly aim to establish and propagate counter-narratives, as well as part of broader CVE and/or rehabilitation programmes that are based implicitly on counter-narratives.

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[12] Winslade, John and Monk, Gerald (2000) *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
[13] This project does not aim or involve the writing of new counter-narratives.

2. DAESH NARRATIVES: TARGETED APPEALS TO MENA WOMEN

As has been widely documented, DAESH placed a particular focus onto its communication strategy and specifically its communication aimed at convincing men and women to join to newly-found "Caliphate". Thus, before analysing the narratives surrounding women returnees and those seeking to return in the post-Caliphate landscape, it is important to provide a gendered analysis of DAESH' narratives on women and what their role would be in the so-called Caliphate. Several important studies have been carried out on this topic and this section is largely drawn from academic and research-based policy literature.[14] What becomes evident from these analyses is how DAESH promoted a narrative of empowerment for women – a narrative that did not translate into empowering lives for women in the Caliphate, but that served to attract women from across the MENA region (and beyond) to travel to the lands of the Caliphate.

The goal of attracting men and women to carry out "*Hijrah*" – the term used to refer to the Muslim duty of traveling to holy lands to protect the faith – started soon after the declaration of the establishment of the Caliphate in 2014. Aside from stressing the religious obligation to travel, including to save civilians from the Syrian regime's violence, DAESH publications underlined the idyllic life that men and women could live in the Caliphate, supported by strong public services such as in health and education.[15] Importantly, narratives differed across gender lines – targeting men and women in different ways. DAESH "strategically crafted its messaging to men and women in different ways to achieve its objectives in recruitment, governance, control and state-building", according to an in-depth analysis carried out for UN Women.[16] Its "publications give women a voice, and evocative efforts are made to portray this as

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[14] Lahoud, Nelly (2018) "Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL's Gendered Messaging", UN Women, https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/6/empowerment-or-subjugation; Nassar, Kesmat Taha Reyad (2019) "How ISIS Addresses Women from Western and Middle-Eastern Backgrounds: A Discourse Analysis", The American University of Cairo, http://dar.aucegypt.edu/handle/10526/5722;
UN CTED, 2020; Winter, Charlie (2019) "Daesh Propaganda, Before and After its collapse", NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, https://stratcomcoe.org/daesh-propaganda-and-after-its-collapse; Azman, Nur Aziemah (2020) "Islamic State's Narratives of Resilience and Endurance", *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analyses* 12 (1): PP.82-86; Munoz, Michael (2018) "Selling the Long War: Islamic State Propaganda after the Caliphate" *Combating Terrorism Center* 11 (10): PP. 31-36; Europol (2019) "Women in Islamic State Propaganda", Europol Specialist Reporting, https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda

[15] Winter 2019; Azman, 2020.

[16] Lahoud, 2018: P. 1.

agency, and even empowerment", the report says, noting however that the messaging is about "ISIL empowerment and not women's empowerment".[17]

Crucially for our analysis here, DAESH narratives also varied along regional lines, with Arabic-language publications offering different narratives than English and French-language publications aimed at attracting western men and women.[18] The Arabic-language publications, most relevant for this study, stress that women are valued, as teachers of new generations of fighters, as steadfast and blessed with "sound innate character" although not highly educated and coming "from the general public".[19] Narratives on women also point toward their opportunities for empowerment. Women could seek education, including university education, and were described as the "twin halves of men".[20] Traveling to the Caliphate would also be "liberating faithful women who are imprisoned by 'infidel governments'"[21] in a clear reference to non-DAESH affiliated governments in the MENA region.

DAESH also attempted to offer an empowering narrative by glorifying the history of women in battle. DAESH "revived the model of the early mujahidat, the women who physically fought alongside the prophet". This includes his paternal aunt, Safiyya bint Abd al-Muttalib, who fought off men enter women's hideouts, and other historical figures such as Asma Bin Yazid al-Sakan said to have defeated nine soldiers "with a pole that was holding up her tent".[22] Indeed, Arabic-language publications incite women to fight like the muhajidat, "preparing themselves to defend their religion by sacrificing themselves".[23]

Although there is debate on whether this means that women can fight alongside men – which would break DAESH's rigid rules on gender segregation – the goal of such narratives remains to attract women by offering them purported agency and empowerment. "They also called on women to exercise their jihad through preaching, e.g. electronically, in print, and in person, by inciting their husbands, sons and male relatives to take up jihad and shame them if they do not".[24]

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[17] Lahoud, 2018: P. 1.
[18] Europol, 2019; Reyad, 2019; Lahoud, 2018.
[19] Al-Naba quoted in Lahoud, 2018.
[20] Reyad, 2019: P. 41.
[21] Lahoud, 2018, P. 5.
[22] Europol, 2019: P. 27.
[23] Reyad, 2019: P. 28
[24] Lahoud, 2018: P. 19. Lahoud points out that these narratives of empowerment would be found in the Arabic-language publications alongside demeaning narratives of women's pettiness, of their frivolous nature, and stressing their inferiority to men is what is seen as aimed at boosting the egos of male readers.

Finally, breaking from other violent extremists groups, DAESH publications also encouraged women to perform *Hijrah* without an accompanying male. The possibility to travel on their own is particularly relevant for women returnees, if framed as part of their continued fight for DAESH. Indeed, after considerable territorial loss, DAESH publications began to encourage supporters to consider Hijrah to other "more accessible regions".[25] From the perspective of a DAESH narrative – one that as shall be seen in the following sections has been reproduced by some analysts and officials fearing the return of women – the return of women can be presented as a continuation and indeed an expansion of its fight. Therefore, whether in their attempt to attract women from the MENA regions or in their move to convince women to join the battle elsewhere, DAESH used gendered narratives of empowerment and agency to address and most importantly recruit women from the MENA region.

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[25] Munoz, 2018.

3. NARRATIVES ON WOMEN RETURNEES IN THE MENA REGION

DAESH narratives aimed at attracting women to join the Caliphate were openly challenged by contending narratives throughout the MENA region. Indeed, outside violent extremist circles, the DAESH narrative of women's empowerment failed to gain ground in the region as only an extremely small minority of the broader population actually left to join the terrorist group. What is central for this analysis however is that there is not a single narrative that dominates the MENA region on women returnees. In each country, different contending narratives challenged the DAESH narrative on women depending on the local political and security context. As such, there is no dominant regional narrative that can be identified. Linked to this, Ambassador Soad Shalaby, director of the Egyptian African Center for Women, notes that "there is no regional approach, no links between the countries to cooperate" on the question of women returnees.[26]

There are however dominant and contending narratives within individual countries in the MENA region on women returnees as well as counter-narrative initiatives aimed at challenging DAESH messages to and on women.[27] Such narratives need to be analysed within their national political and security context to understand how some narratives are sustained and others countered. This will be carried out in detail in the case study analysis of Morocco and Tunisia in sections 4 and 5. Before this, however, it is important to briefly examine two points regarding narratives and counter-narratives in the region. Firstly, although there are no discernable narratives on women that dominate the entire region, there are narratives *about* MENA women that can be identified. Secondly, some counter-narrative initiatives can be identified at regional level and some national counter-narrative initiatives have the potential of having a regional impact. Each point shall be examined in turn.

First of all, women from the MENA region joining DAESH are often contrasted in narratives to western women joining the terrorist group. Western women are presented as rebelling against their parents or broader social circles or pulled by their desire to be married (become "jihadi brides").[28] They are sometimes presented as tricked or duped by promises of romance and/or adventure, but nonetheless as agents

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[26] Soad Shalaby, Skype Interview, 10 June 2020.

[27] Further research is likely to reveal that narratives can be further broken down to local level within countries.

[28] Martini, Alice (2018) "Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides": An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women Joining ISIS", *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11(3): PP. 458-477.

who are actively seeking something different and new. The attraction of the DAESH messages is often linked to their frustration with life in the West or their inability to cope with its freedoms.[29] By contrast, the narratives on women from the MENA region stress that their subordination to men – their husbands in particular – as leading them to travel to the Caliphate. Although the narrative of women offering themselves for sex with DAESH fighters "under the pretext of 'a holy act"[30] was relatively widespread in the MENA region at the start of the movement toward the Caliphate, it has largely been refuted and replaced by narratives of women being tricked by their husbands.[31]

Even when women are not seen as being forced by their husbands, narratives on MENA women joining DAESH still tend to be linked to patriarchal structures and gender inequality. Research by UN Women on women and violent extremism in Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, concluded that women who have subordinate or dependent relationships with "male relatives who are members of violent extremist groups are likely to be recruited by those relatives".[32] They also concluded that at least in the Libyan case, there is strong empirical evidence linking women joining violent extremist groups and having been victims of gender-based violence. Thus, the narratives surrounding MENA women's recruitment are based around traditional gender roles ascribed to women as subordinate and dependent – if not directly victims – of men.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ennaji, Mona (2016) "Recruitment of Foreign Male and Female Fighters to Jihad: Morocco's Multifaceted Counter-Terror Strategy", *International Review of Sociology* 26(3): P. 551.

[31] Zineb Benalla, Director of Eirene Associates Think Tank, Skype Interview, 14 June 2020; Natalia Sancha, International Correpondent, Skype Interview, 5 June 2020.

[32] Johnston, Melissa and True, Jacqui (2019) "Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco", UN Women, https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/01/gender-equality-and-violent-extremism-in-north-africa-studies

4. REGIONAL COUNTER-NARRATIVE INITIATIVES

Several MENA regional organisations have established initiatives directly aimed at challenging DAESH narratives and have used a gender lens in their counter-narrative work. The Counter Narrative Library, run by CVE Think Tank *Hedaya* since 2015, offers a remarkable collection of counter-narrative initiatives in the MENA region that aim to challenge DAESH and other violent extremist narratives.[33] Here one can find national initiatives that can have regional impact – particularly due to their distribution in Arabic on YouTube or other popular platforms – such as the Community Media Network videos produced in Jordan on how women can become radicalised by accessing violent extremist material online.[34] Another telling example is the YouTube satirical cartoon, of unknown source, called "The Bigh Daddy Show", offering a parody of the life of the late DAESH leader al-Baghdadi.[35] The show has a very clear gendered narrative, with Bigh Daddy being manipulated by his Instagram-obsessed cellphone-holding wife.

Beyond the Counter-Narrative Library, regional organisations such as Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have also engaged in counter-narrative initiatives. The OIC launched in 2016 "a counter-messaging platform dedicated to delegitimising extremist discourse on social media and the Internet".[36] The platform, known as the Center for Dialogue, Peace and Understanding or Sawt Al-Hikma (The Voice of Wisdom) has promoted "the inclusion of women [by] involving female Muslim preachers and/or experts in a number of multimedia, graphics and animation clips that aim at correcting the concepts used by terrorist groups in justifying their actions".[37] Saudi Arabia along with the United States and other actors also established the Global Center to Combat Extremism, Etidal, in 2017, which uses technology to combat violent extremism. In 2018, they launched a "Life Without Extremism" campaign that "highlighted the role of women in protecting community security".[38]

Despite these initiatives and other national ones throughout the region, most analyses agree that considerable more attention needs to be given to women's role in

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[33] https://www.cn-library.com/

[34] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_41nUIUELtU&index=7&list=PLYWsGgoVQIfVRpc0g6muu1cq6ExZ-lYra

[35] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtGjdrpcakgWdfAYKd2b4aw

[36] Elsayed, Lilah (2019) "Counter-Messaging For Countering Violent Extremism in the Middle East and North Africa: Using a Gender Lens", in Zeiger, Sara *et al* (eds) (2019) *Enhancing Women's Role in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)* Amsterdam: IOS Press. (P. 98).

[37] Ibid.

[38] https://etidal.org/en/life-without-extremism/

violent extremism, whether in terms of participating or countering it. "Issues that women face within the region are not given enough attention, and gender is not often considered in P/CVE efforts in the region", a recent analysis using a gender lens to study counter-narratives in the region concluded.[39] This is also true of initiatives aimed at women returnees in the region. "Women come in at the last point of the agenda", lamented Ambassador Shalaby. "The region is on high alert for returnees, but there is hardly any mention of women".[40]

Thus, although one cannot denote a regional narrative on women returnees, it can be argued that there is a dominant narrative about MENA women who joined DAESH and that there are some counter-messaging initiatives that have focused on women, although not returnees, in the region. One must therefore move the level of analysis from the regional to the national level to find dominant narratives on women returnees and examine the policy implications these narratives have had at national level. The two case studies examined here – Morocco and Tunisia – demonstrate how two neighboring countries can have such different dominant narratives and the important implications this has in terms of policies.

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[39] Elsayed, 2019: P. 96.
[40] Shalaby Interview.

5. CASE STUDY: MOROCCO

The return of women from previously DAESH-held territories has been largely uncontroversial in Morocco. Indeed, there appears to be general consensus among government, CSOs, and news outlets that most of the women who traveled to Syria and Iraq do not represent a security threat to the country. As such, they should be allowed to return to their homes as free citizens.

Such a lack of debate, however, does not mean that the reasons behind this dominant narrative are not gendered or that such narratives do not have important policy implications. Following an initial broad stroke review of Morocco's terrorism and counter-terrorism situation, this first in-depth case study will examine the dominant narrative surrounding women returnees and the implications of this narrative, look at some of the minority narratives countering the dominant one, and finally examine some of the initiatives aimed at engaging with the issue of women returnees. As will become clear, the "victim" narrative is very strong in Morocco and has clear policy implications in terms of how women returnees are dealt with. The few initiatives working with women returnees – largely run by CSOs – are based on the dominant narrative although some elements of examining women are having more agency than simply "victims" can be noted.

These narratives have policy implications beyond the immediate, as successfully managing the return of all persons from Syria and Iraq - men, women, and children – is key to ensure a continued low incidence of terrorist violence in Morocco. Indeed, the question of recidivism is important as of at least 1,600 Moroccans known to have travel to Syria/Iraq to fight for violent extremist organisations, nearly 15 percent had already been sentenced for terrorist-related crimes in Morocco.[41] Furthermore, policies regarding returnees and their success will have implications in the region and beyond. They impact on the Maghreb and Sahel regions, as a failure in returnee policy could push the returnees to move to other countries, potentially strengthening violent extremist movements there.[42] Furthermore, Moroccan strategies for returnees impact on dual nationals – particularly those who have dual Moroccan citizenship and a European citizenship – and their decisions on where to return to.

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[41] Rezrazi, El Mostafa (2018) "Réflexions sur l'Approche Marocaine dans la CVE-PVE/Déradicalisation", *Al Irfan* 4, P. 116.

[42] Benlabbah, Rachid and Rezrazi, El Mostafa (2018) "La Menace Jihadiste (EI): Impacts sur la Reconfiguration Géopolitique de l'Espace Arabe de le Maroc", *Al Irfan* 4, PP. 57-82.

Contextual factors for Morocco's Women Returnees

Morocco has had a very low incidence of terrorism over the past 17 years. Indeed, since the Casablanca attack in 2003 – when suicide bombers struck Jewish, Spanish, and Belgian targets, killing 33 civilians in addition to the 12 attackers and injuring over 100[43] - Morocco only witnessed a handful of attacks, including one major in 2011 that killed 17 people in Marrakech. This is a regional outlier considering that the Magreb region overall saw a 47-fold increase in terrorist incidents between 2011 and 2014.[44] Much of this success is attributed to the country's three-part counter-terrorism strategy, based on eradication, de-radicalisation, and rehabilitation.[45]

The Central Bureau for Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) was established in 2015 leading all counter-terrorism investigations. Since then, 98 cells have been dismantled and more than 570 people have been detained.[46] Despite this success at home, at least 1,600 Moroccans are known to have left to join violent extremist's organisations in Syria and Iraq, mostly DAESH (900+) but also AQ-linked groups. Of these some 1000 were men, more than 270 were women, and some 370 were children.[47] Most left between 2013 and 2015 and departures appear to drop in 2015 with a slight uptick in early 2016.

Once in DAESH-controlled land, most analysts agree that these foreign terrorist fighters were confronted by harsh realities and thankless roles. "The fate of the Moroccans of DAESH was not enviable. Their life did not consist of counting the bounty" and by the end of 2017, 596 had already died in Syria/Iraq.[48] Returns began to increase and by the end of 2017, 213 Moroccans (143 men, 52 women, and 15 children) are known to have returned home.[49] As of December 2019, official Moroccan

[43] Botha, Anneli (2008) "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism", *Institute for Security Studies*, https://issafrica.org/chapter-3-terrorism-in-morocco

[44] Rezrazi, El Mostafa (2018) "Insights into Morocco's Approach to Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism", in Vidino, Lorenzo (ed.) *De-Radicalization in the Mediterranean: Comparing Challenges and Approaches,* Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing (P. 82-3).

[45] Zeiger, Sara *et al* (eds) (2019) *Enhancing Women's Role in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)* Amsterdam: IOS Press.

[46] https://www.monitordeoriente.com/20181012-marruecos-ha-desarticulado-183-celulas-terroristas-desde-2002/ updated through internal research.

[47] https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2018/06/248813/religious-tolerance-morocco-terrorism-bcij-abdelhak-khiame/; Rezrazi, reflections, P. 116.

[48] Kenza, Kathya (2020) "Dealing with Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Insights from the Moroccan Experience", European Eye on Radicalization, https://eeradicalization.com/dealing-with-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters-insights-from-the-moroccan-experience/

[49] Renard, Thomas (2019) "Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia", Egmont Paper 107, http://www.egmontinstitute.be/returnees-in-the-maghreb/; Kenza, 2020.

figures state that 280 women, 391 children and an unknown number of men remain in Syria/Iraq in camps (women and children) or prisons (men).[50] Actual figures for all cases – departed, dead, returned, and remaining in Syria/Iraq – are likely to be higher.

Dominant and Contending Narratives

As argued in the Section One, the narratives on women returnees – the stories told about why they traveled to DAESH-controlled territories, the situation they are in, why they want to return, and most of all how one should feel about their return – are crucial to ascribing meaning to the women returnees. They become a guide for how to perceive these women and for the policies to adopt toward them. In Morocco, there exists a clear dominant narrative on women returnees, which can be summarised as follows:

Women who traveled to DAESH-controlled territories are victims. They did not choose to go to Syria/Iraq but followed their husbands as expected of them by traditional understandings of women's roles. Once there, they existed exclusively in their capacity as wives and mothers and did not participate in any illegal activity. They should be allowed back into Morocco as they do not represent a security threat and because they are in danger if they remain in camps in Syria. They need to be saved. Once back in Morocco, and following the necessary checks that they are not indeed a threat, they can go back to their families.

This narrative is not related to one woman returnee in particular but rather is built on stories told by women returnees and who wish to return and on stories about these women by government officials, CSOs, and the news media. Such a narrative can be clearly – and unsurprisingly – found in the testimonies of Moroccan women returnees and women who want to return. For example, a Moroccan woman said: "Me, I didn't want to come here, I lived well in Meknes… He pressured me to join him [in Syria]. He used to say: 'Come, don't stay far away from me with the children. People live well here'".[51] Or another woman trying to return from Syria, "Hamida", is described as "neither radical, nor interested in DAESH. She realised she was manipulated by her husband and by the Emir of DAESH" (al Baghdadi).[52] In her words: My husband "destroyed me and destroyed my future. He tricked me. I was his slave

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[50] https://www.hespress.com/societe/454398.html
[51]   https://www.rts.ch/info/monde/10203514-le-difficile-retour-des-familles-de-djihadistes-etrangers-en-syrie.html
[52]   https://www.h24info.ma/monde/cette-veuve-dun-combattant-de-daesh-veut-rentrer-au-maroc/

and he betrayed me".[53] Numerous other testimonies stress this role of victim of their husbands. Indeed, "all the women tell us the same story" a senior Moroccan official is quoted as saying, "rejecting any responsibility, claiming ignorance of their actions and blaming their husbands or an external situation".[54]

However, this narrative becomes dominant because it is reflected and reproduced beyond the testimonies of the women themselves in those of government officials, CSOs and the news media. For example, mainstream Moroccan Newspaper, Assabah, wrote repeatedly of the race "to save about 200 Moroccan women and children from 'ISIS' families from execution or their deportation to areas of Syria" where fighting is ongoing.[55] CSOs such as the Northern Observatory for Human Rights similarly argued that "several Moroccan women and their children are living a nightmare in the detention and refugee camps in North-Eastern Syria".[56]

Most importantly, government officials also stressed these women's innocence and the role of the state – represented often as a protective father – in saving these women from their fate in Syria. The key statement along these lines was made by Abdelhak al Khayam, head of the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ), Morocco's key counter-terrorism unit, in October 2019. Indeed, El Khayam said: "We will not prosecute these women upon their return, simply because they did not fight. They went there to accompany their husbands and purely for family reasons". He went on to say: "Their repatriation and that of their children is currently being engaged with and should benefit from particular measures, such as for example programmes of social integration to facilitate their reintegration into society".[57]

As outlined in Section One, narratives never completely control a field and there are always competing narratives. In Morocco, competing narratives recognise that some women who traveled to join DAESH may have done so for ideological purposes and may still be radicalised. As reported by Assabah newspaper, "The Moroccan intelligence services are watching the families of the 'ISIS' who wish to return to Morocco, especially since their intentions are unknown, and since they have refused to declare "repentance and remorse" from fighting in the ranks of the terrorist

[53]   https://www.h24info.ma/monde/cette-veuve-dun-combattant-de-daesh-veut-rentrer-au-maroc/

[54] https://institute.global/policy/complex-challenge-female-isis-returnees

[55] https://assabah.ma/306691.html

[56] https://assabah.ma/347481.html

[57]   https://fr.le360.ma/politique/daech-en-syrie-elles-sont-280-les-epouses-des-jihadistes-marocains-seront-exemptees-de-poursuites-201257;   https://www.h24info.ma/monde/cette-veuve-dun-combattant-de-daesh-veut-rentrer-au-maroc/

organisation, or may have received instructions to carry out attacks in their countries of origin".[58] This competing narrative also found resonance in the testimonies of women who had returned to Morocco: "We will bring up strong sons and daughters and tell them about life in the Caliphate [...] Even if we hadn't been able to keep it, our children will one day get it back".[59]

However, the dominant narrative has not been undermined by these contesting narratives and is further strengthened by empirical evidence. El Mostafa Rezrazi, a leading Moroccan Counter-Terrorism expert who had spearheaded one of the country's main rehabilitation programmes (discussed below), stated that Moroccan authorities were allowing women returnees back in only after investigations are carried out to ensure that they did not engage in violent acts for DAESH and that they do not represent a threat for the country today.

Furthermore, research based on surveys and interviews carried out for UN Women underlines that women were largely recruited through their relationships with male relatives to whom they were "subordinated to and/or dependent on".[60] Indeed, for Zineb Benalla, CSO leader in de-radicalisation and countering violent extremism programmes in Morocco, "most women went to join their husbands. But why? This is linked to patriarchy and subordination to the male. These women are disempowered economically, intellectually, and critically".[61] Strengthening the dominant narratives is also the argument that if left in camps, this can lead to further radicalisation of Moroccan nationals as well as their entourage who might feel abandoned by the state.[62]

Even more important than the empirical foundation of the dominant narrative is its implications in terms of policies and practices. First of all, no woman returnee has indeed been tried or imprisoned in Morocco. Due to this, none of them has gone through the state-run de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes, which are open to prisoners.[63] After being investigated by security services, most women were

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[58] https://assabah.ma/306691.html

[59] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-jihadist-plan-to-use-women-to-launch-the-next-incarnation-of-isis/2017/11/26/e81435b4-ca29-11e7-8321-481fd63f174d_story.html

[60] Johnston and True, 2019, P. 1

[61] Benalla, Skype Interview 14 May 2020.

[62] https://www.maghrebvoices.com/2019/11/02/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4

[63] Rezrazi, Skype Interview 3 June, 2020; Benalla, Skype Interview 14 May 2020.

"given back to their families", said Benalla. This can be seen a gendered process that potentially reinforces the subordination of the women to their families, which may have led to their travel to join DAESH in the first place. A second implication of this narrative, according to some security experts, is that women intent on carrying out attacks in Morocco or doing other work for DAESH once back, are using the "victim narrative" to evade capture. Moroccan daily newspaper Assabah reported that there are fears that DAESH leaders will "exploit the women who had been trained in weapons and explosive belts, knowing that security forces were not focused on monitoring them, especially since most of them were accompanied by children".[64]

Finally, the narrative has led to the Maghreb countries having a reputation of greater leniency than European countries that is used as a rationale for DAESH-affiliated women with dual nationality in the camps in Syria to seek to return to their Maghreb citizenship countries. "There are rumors in the camps that in the Middle East, you are allowed to go to your families and villages and don't go to jail", said Natalia Sancha, an international journalist who has interviewed several women in the Syrian camp of al-Hol.[65] The dominant narrative has thus clear and important implications in terms of the choices these women make but also in terms of the options that are made available to them and their treatment by the state and other actors.

Counter Narratives on Women Returnees

As noted in the introduction of this paper, there are few specific initiatives aimed at women returnees in the region, and Morocco is no exception. Women are also largely excluded from the programmes in place for men returnees. Indeed, since women have not been imprisoned upon their return, they have not benefited from the state-sponsored Mosalaha or "reconciliation" program that offers male prisoners sentenced for terrorism-related crimes psychological, social, and religious engagement to help them reconcile with themselves, religion, and society. [66] This gendered narrative does therefore have real implications in terms of the kind of support women returnees are offered.

However, despite this lack of official programmes aimed at or even including women returnees, some social and psychological support for women returnees has been offered by CSOs in Morocco. According to experts and practitioners Rezrazi and

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[64] https://assabah.ma/342481.html
[65] Natalia Sancha, Skype Interview, 5 June 2020.
[66] Rezrazi, Interview; Rezrazi, reflections, P. 122-123.

Benalla, some women returnees have reached out to CSOs for psychological support, assistance in reintegrating society, and help for their children to integrate the school system. "After a month or so, they start wanting to re-launch their life and they start looking for support NGOs and CSOs", said Rezrazi.[67] Importantly, Benalla notes that this allowed for the assistance to be catered to each woman and her specific situation and conditions. "You need to establish a human relationship. You need to find what was exploited by the terrorist organisation to radicalise the person and work on that", Benalla specified.

This civil society engagement leads to an interesting counter-narrative that may be constructive in helping other women returnees and in challenging disempowered narratives of women. Indeed, Rezrazi pointed out that women are the ones spearheading the families' reintegration efforts. "The feeling is that women are working hard to reintegrate, while men are expecting external assistance", noted Rezrazi.[68] Women are also seen as playing the key role in bringing their families back from Syria. A news report noted that it was women in the camps who had contacted human rights organisations seeking help to avoid being sent to Iraq for trial.[69] This counter-narrative restores some agency to women who are seen as taking charge of their lives in their attempt to return home, and once there, reintegrate into society.

This is particularly important considering how DAESH narratives surrounding the role of women in the "Caliphate" drew women into the organisation by emphasising their chance at engaging in meaningful action and having agency. Supporting women "to break the clichés at play in the majority of society" – what can be called countering the dominant narrative – can be part of an effective counter-radicalisation strategy.[70]

Experts note that one way to strengthen initiatives to support women returnees is to allow for the greater involvement of women practitioners – social, psychological, and religious – in programmes. In Morocco for example, programmes for women returnees could be carried out by the Mourchidates, women trained as religious scholars and preachers, who already play an active part in the country's P/CVE programmes. Charged with promoting religious moderation and tolerance to

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[67] Rezrazi, interview.
[68] Rezrazi, Interview.
[69] https://assabah.ma/306691.html
[70] https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/02/292988/moroccan-foundation-celebrates-release-of-10-former-extremists/

"counter extremist ideology", the Mourchidates work in mosques, communities and prisons.[71] Such a greater involvement of women practitioners could also further strengthen this counter-narrative of agential women. "Women can attract the returnees, divert their ideology. The only person who can do this is another woman", stated Ambassador Shalaby.[72]

6. CASE STUDY: TUNISIA

If the "victim narrative" became dominant in Morocco and has largely governed policy, the same cannot be said of neighbouring Tunisia. Indeed, comparing these two countries of the Maghreb underlines the importance of context as a factor in determining which narratives come to dominate a country. The security context and more specifically the incidence of terrorism within Tunisia and the prominence of Tunisian nationals in DAESH-related terrorism abroad are considerably different from what has been examined in Morocco above.

Firstly, Tunisians are widely believed to have formed the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Syria from the MENA region, including some high profile women.[73] Tunisia also suffered from a series of high-profile attacks in the 2010s claimed by DAESH and its regional affiliates. Since 2013, Tunisia has indeed suffered 22 terrorist attacks, in which 140 people have been killed and 86 others wounded.[74] These attacks included a suicide bomb attack by a woman in 2018 that injured 20 people in central Tunis.[75] Particularly relevant to the country's attitude toward returnees is the fact that several perpetrators of the attacks are believed to have been trained abroad (in particular Libya) prior to the attacks.

Finally, the proximity to the Libyan conflict itself further impacted on attitudes. It is in this context that this section that examine how the dominant narratives in Tunisia regarding women returnees were based around security logics that saw the women as dangerous threats to be kept out of the country. This narrative has slowly

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[71] Couture, Krista (2014) "A Gendered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Women in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention Applied Successfully in Bangladesh and Morocco", *Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence at Brookings,* https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Women-CVE-Formatted-72914-Couture-FINAL2.pdf

[72] Shalaby, Skype Interview, 10 June 2020

[73] Vidino, Lorenzo (ed.) (2018) *De-Radicalization in the Mediterranean: Comparing Challenges and Approaches,* Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing

[74] Based in open sources and updated through internal research.

[75] Zelin, 2018: 1.

evolved toward a more humanitarian one that is largely based around the need to save children – with or without their mothers.

Tunisian Women Returnees in Context

As noted above, Tunisia is widely believed to have had the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Syria/Iraq. Of the up to 7,000, an estimated 90% were men, and 10% were women.[76] Such a high numbers means that today there are at least 100 women and some 200 children claiming Tunisian nationality who are living in camps "most in Syria and neighbouring Libya and some in Iraq".[77] Crucially for the analysis here, Tunisian women were not only numerous in the Caliphate, some of them also took on prominent roles within DAESH's structures, leading to a mythologizing of these women.[78] Three Tunisian women in particular have gathered much attention. Umm Rayan al-Tunisi founded in 2014 the notorious al-Khansaa Brigade, the "moral police" that violently enforced women's adherence to DAESH stringent rules governing women's behavior and relations between genders, and then went on to establish a similar force in Libya. Also infamous were Umm Hajr al-Tunisi, who headed sharia classes and helped recruit women for the organisation's education and health units, and Umm Abdul-Rahman al-Tunisi, who helped facilitate marriages for DAESH.[79] For Aaron Zelin, "Tunisian women helped shape the vision of Islamic State society".[80]

The incidence of terrorism in Tunisia and the high visibility for Tunisian women has meant that the question of women returnees has been from the start a politically sensitive question, particularly in a country undergoing a democratic transition. "This issue is very divisive. It is a political not a technical issue", noted Bouraoui Ouni, Senior Project Manager for Tunisia for Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international NGO that runs de-radicalisation projects in Tunisian prisons.[81] Such a politicisation of the issue is lamented by Tunisian counter-terrorism officials, such as Mokhtar Ben Nasr, the president of the National Commission for the Fight Against Terrorism (CNLCT), who accused some sections of the media of creating

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[76] Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, 2016: 13; https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/hundreds-of-tunisian-women-join-jihadists-in-syria-minister-1251239
[77] https://reliefweb.int/report/tunisia/tunisia-scant-help-bring-home-isis-members-children-enar
[78] Similar gendered myths can be found in narratives of violent extremism elsewhere (see Brown, Toros and Parashar, 2020).
[79] Zelin, Aaron Y. (2018) "Tunisia's Female Jihadists", The Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisias-female-jihadists
[80] Ibid.
[81] Bouraoui Ouni, Search for Common Ground, Skype Interview, 17 June 2020.

controversy around the question of returnees.[82] Indeed, despite repeated denials from authorities, rumors have continued to circulate that returnees were being allowed secretly back into the country raising fears of new attacks in Tunisia and increasing opposition to allowing returnees into the country.[83]

Dominant and Contending Narratives

This context and politicisation has led to the emergence of a dominant narrative that understands women returnees primarily as security threats. "Generally public sentiment is very resistant to allow what they consider terrorists to be allowed back in," notes Leo Siebert, Tunisia Country Manager for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).[84] More specifically, the dominant narrative derived from an analysis of statements on women returnees in the mainstream Tunisian press as well as in statements of officials and other public figures, can be summarised as such:

The return of Tunisian women is a complex security threat. These women have chosen to join DAESH and in some cases taken on leadership roles in the terrorist organisation. They are guilty of terrorist violence and are likely to carry out more violence in Tunisia if they return. They have given up their Tunisian citizenship by choosing to join another "state" and thus have lost their right to return.

This narrative was sustained in statements by politicians, as well as framing of the issue in news articles. Described as "not Tunisians, but monsters" who "have no nationality" as "they have decided to go",[85] their return is described in one media account as a "nightmare".[86] As noted by the Maghreb Economic Forum Think Tank, these narratives "have distracted the public and created an atmosphere driven by fear and anger that strips society from its collective reasoning capacity".[87] This dominant narrative has been further sustained by the testimonies of women returnees themselves. Khadija al-Humri in an interview said she went to Syria for "jihad, for

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[82] https://lapresse.tn/35904/les-tunisiens-de-retour-des-zones-de-conflit-seront-judiciarises/
[83] https://lapresse.tn/35055/retour-des-terroristes-plans-de-destabilisation-et-video-accusant-certaines-personnalites-autopsie-dune-manipulation-averee/
[84] Leo Siebert, Skype Interview, 30 June 2020.
[85] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k3GrGNwFMs
[86] https://lapresse.tn/11553/tunisie-aucun-rapatriement-denfants-de-djihadistes/
[87] https://www.slideshare.net/MAGEF/the-acceptance-of-tunisian-returnees-from-a-social-point-of-view

Sharia and the Islamic State".[88] Other reports emerged of women being trained in using weapons and explosives supporting the narrative of security threat.[89]

Families of women and CSOs supporting their return have put forward a contending victim narrative, similar to the one examined in Morocco. "We see these young men and women as victims, they are tricked and allured", according to the Rescue Association for the Tunisians Trapped Abroad (RATTA), adding that "the lion knows how to recruit his prey".[90] Women are seen as twice victimised – by DAESH but also by their husbands whom they had to follow. Family members have stressed that they left as "child brides" or were "very obedient" to their husbands.[91] In the case of Tunisia however, this contending narrative was unable to effectively challenge the dominant narrative of security threat. Indeed, one family member told Human Rights Watch, "We went to everyone, but no one responded".[92]

The public debate was also dominated by the threat narrative. In 2016, a proposal for an amnesty for returnees by then President Beji Caid Essebsi was met with street protests and was retracted by authorities who have since insisted that all returnees – men and women – will face justice.[93] Thus, a clear policy implication of the threat narrative is the state's policy that all returnees will be put through a judicial process: "There is nothing to worry about", stated Ben Nasr of the CNLCT in November 2019. "I want to reassure the entire population that it is out of the question that even a single Tunisian citizen will enter the national territory without going through a judicial process".[94]

Interestingly, from end of 2019 onwards, this narrative has been accompanied by a new narrative that focuses on the fate of children returnees, and women *as their mothers.* "A more security response has now turned into a more humanitarian one", reflected Ouni of SFCG.[95] Media reports focused on "children living in inhuman and

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[88] https://www.saramanisera.com/2017/09/29/i-came-for-the-jihad-women-tell-of-life-in-the-islamic-state-syria-deeply/

[89] https://www.alhurra.com/different-angle/2018/11/09/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3

[90] https://www.pbs.org/video/what-happens-when-tunisian-born-isis-fighters-return-home-1494890448/

[91] Human Rights Watch (2019) "Tunisia: Scant Help to Bring Home ISIS Members' Children", https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/12/tunisia-scant-help-bring-home-isis-members-children

[92] Ibid.

[93] https://lapresse.tn/35904/les-tunisiens-de-retour-des-zones-de-conflit-seront-judiciarises/; Human Rights Watch, 2019.

[94] https://lapresse.tn/35904/les-tunisiens-de-retour-des-zones-de-conflit-seront-judiciarises/

[95] Ouni Interview.

dangerous conditions" in camps in Syria and Libya, some pointing out that at least three children under the age of two had "recently died of cold and hunger".[96]

The mothers of these children are largely invisible from this narrative and when they are mentioned, the perception of these women as threats has remained. Indeed, the humanitarian narrative focusing on children returnees has led to a debate on whether the children should be repatriated without their mothers and in some cases against the will of their mothers.[97] One media report even presented women as "hindering" to the return of their children – thus as obstacles to the safe return of the vulnerable children.[98] The argument that the children should be returned without their mothers has gained so much traction that Human Rights Watch in a recent report stressed that "children should not be separated from their mothers or other relatives unless there is compelling evidence that their separation is in the best interest of the child".[99]

The humanitarian narrative on children has thus further reinforced the threat narrative on women returnees, a narrative that has not only potentially contributed to a policy of criminal proceedings against all returnees but has also contributed to policies that favor the return of children, at times without their mothers. Crucially, the uncovering of gendered narrative of women returnees is arguably key to understand how current policies on returnees have come about.

Initiatives and Counter-Narratives

Although apparently there are no specific programmes aimed at women returnees in Tunisia, several sources pointed out that some state support was available for them. CSOs note that state policy has been one of "control/care", with the women being "under security control and receiving social care" to help with their reintegration.[100] Few details are available on the support available to women returnees, possibly because of the particular sensitivity of the question. Aside from the political

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[96]   https://lapresse.tn/51286/plus-de-140-enfants-tunisiens-sont-bloques-dans-les-zones-de-conflit/
[97]   https://inkyfada.com/fr/2019/08/30/retour-tunisiennes-etat-islamique/#:~:text=Les%20revenantes%20%3A%20retourner%20en%20Tunisie%20apr%C3%A8s%20l'%C3%89tat%20islamique,plusieurs%20Tunisiennes%20et%20leurs%20enfants; Human Rights Watch
[98] http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/271936
[99]   https://inkyfada.com/fr/2019/08/30/retour-tunisiennes-etat-islamique/#:~:text=Les%20revenantes%20%3A%20retourner%20en%20Tunisie%20apr%C3%A8s%20l'%C3%89tat%20islamique,plusieurs%20Tunisiennes%20et%20leurs%20enfants.
[100] Ouni Interview.

divisiveness surrounding the question of returnees, the question of "women jihadis is especially sensitive as their choice involves a moral and a sexual component. A woman leaving to fight is thus considered far more shameful" noted Monia Arfaoui, a Tunisian journalist who specialises in studying radicalisation of women.[101]

Some programmes are nonetheless available for prisoners sentenced under terrorism charges, and thus are available for returnees, men and women. The country's National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism based on four pillars – prevention, protection, prosecution, and response – includes rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for released prisoners.[102] Interesting, the strategy approved in 2016 includes gender mainstreaming at various stages, such as recognising that women can be radicalised, but also that they "represent the front line and can be providers of community resilience to violent extremism".[103] Women, for example, can "prevent recruitment by terrorist groups by identifying vulnerable people and detecting early signs of behavioral change that can lead to radicalisation for early treatment that can prevent them from acting out".[104] Thus, although there are no specific state programmes aimed at women returnees, there is the recognition in the national strategy that women can be radicalised/de-radicalised, and can play a key role in the radicalisation/de-radicalisation and in the prevention of others.

The Tunisian Ministry of Cultural Affairs has also utilised positive and alternative narrative initiatives in P/CVE. Its national program, the "Mubd'eon men ajl al hayah/Createurs…Pour la vie", aims at preventing radicalisation and countering violent extremism through arts activities. A significant number of women – seen as role models for younger generations - have participated in promoting the core message of the program through music, theatre, dance, cinema and arts exhibitions.[105]

Such initiatives offer counter-narratives of women as creators rather than destroyers. Aside from these state strategies, NGOs and CSOs have also developed programmes that can support women returnees, particularly if they enter the judicial system. Search for Common Ground (SFCG), for example, launched in 2015 its "De-

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[101]   https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisian-mothers-grief-two-daughters-lost-islamic-state#:~:text=Rahma%20Chikhaoui%2C%20a%20Tunisian%20girl,going%20on%20for%20a%20week.
[102] https://www.magef.org/item_portfolio/tackling-youth-radicalization-through-inclusion/
[103] Feki, Neila (2019) "Roles of Women in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in Tunisia" in Zeiger, Sara *et al* (eds) (2019) *Enhancing Women's Role in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)* Amsterdam: IOS Press (P. 25).
[104] Feki, 2019: P. 24.
[105] Sara Zeiger *et al*, 2019.

radicalisation in Tunisian Prisons through Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes" which aims to "prevent engagement with violent ideologies among adult and young Tunisian detainees during and after" detention.[106] Outside the judicial system, USIP has launched a project in Douar Hichar outskirts of Tunis to support women who are affiliated with foreign terrorist fighters or prisoners reintegrate communities by using a local youth club to sponsor social events and conversations with other women in their community.[107] This kind of initiative could be expanded to include women returnees, Siebert noted. "When you have a group like this that is sensitive to the issues that is willing to help, it could be a space for women returnees to find emotional support but also usable skills that can help them reintegrate economically."[108]

Despite these existing programmes available to women returnees – primarily if they are imprisoned – there is general agreement that an increase in programmes primarily aimed at returnees, and specifically women returnees, would reduce the chances of recidivism and increase the chances of their reintegration. For Ouni of SFCG, there are three steps that could strengthen such provisions: the strengthening of the security capacity to deal with returnees; the strengthening of social care provisions for returnees; and the greater inclusion of CSOs in interventions to help returnees. Most importantly, however, Ouni noted that that the issue of returnees and particularly women returnees needs to be depoliticised.[109] Such a de-politicisation will likely come with an effective challenge of the dominant narrative of women returnees as simply threats to be excluded or as hindrances to the return of innocent children, toward a counter-narrative that places their return into the larger framework of human security and welfare.

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[106] https://www.sfcg.org/deradicalization-tunisian-prisons/
[107] Siebert, Interview.
[108] Siebert, Interview.
[109] Ouni, Interview.

CONCLUSIONS

Narratives on women returnees in the MENA region are profoundly gendered, telling stories of either women as victims of their husbands who need to be rescued or as threats, deviously using the victim narrative to bring DAESH's fight back to their home countries. As examined in this project, these narratives have real impacts on the public attitudes toward returnees and on policies put in place to prosecute and/or reintegrate the women.

Two principal conclusions have been reached following an analysis of narratives of and on women returnees and on interviews with key experts and practitioners in the field. Firstly, although dominant narratives can be identified on MENA women – that their joining DAESH is a consequence of their subordination to and/or victimisation by men – no narrative on women returnees has dominated the region as a whole. This project clearly indicates a need at the national level to discern dominant narratives on women returnees as well as contending narratives challenging them. The two case studies examined here, Morocco and Tunisia, indicate that national political and security contexts are determinant in which narratives dominate a political landscape. Markedly different narratives on women returnees have dominated these two countries: a strong victim narrative in Morocco; a clear security threat narrative in Tunisia. These in turn contributed to environments that led to very different policy responses with Morocco favoring a reintegration strategy largely through families and Tunisia focusing on a criminal justice response.

Secondly, both case studies have highlighted that more attention needs to be given to the fate of women returnees in the MENA region. Women returnees often fall through the cracks of state and NGO/CSO initiatives in the area of P/CVE, primarily because they often avoid prison where most state rehabilitation and reintegration programmes occur. Experts point out the necessity to assess the needs and support the reintegration of women returnees once they have been investigated by national authorities. In numerous cases, ministries of women's affairs already have representations on the main counter-terrorism committees. [110] As such the institutional frameworks are already in place to support greater focus on women returnees pointing to a greater need for collaboration between state and NGOs/CSOs in devising long-term reintegration programmes.

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[110] Siebert, Interview; Feki, 2019.

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