NATO STRATEGIC
DIRECTION-SOUTH HUB

September, 2021

Women's Roles in Terrorist Groups in the Middle East and North Africa

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This particular study navigates a complex terrain of ideology and narratives which are shared by those who engage in and support terrorist activity. Therefore, readers should bear in mind that the term '*jihad*' when used in this study refers only to the interpretation given to it by the terrorist organisations who employ it. This study should not be taken as acceptance of or agreement with their interpretation of the term nor its use in the current period to justify their violence.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's participation in terrorist activity has grown over time and the roles that women play in terrorist groups (TGs) have evolved, diversifying and at times progressing from supportive roles to more operational ones. For example, over the last few years, security forces have dismantled all-female cells that were plotting and planning terrorist attacks, while some TG's have openly called women to arms under the pretence of 'defensive *jihad*'[1] and strategic necessity. This should certainly not detract from the roles that women play in preventing and countering radicalization and terrorism, or the ways in which TG's perpetuate gender-based inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls.

In spite of these developments, the overall understanding of the complexity and variety of motivations behind the radicalisation of women tend not to have been adequately incorporated into counter-terrorism policies and practices. This has led to stagnation when it comes to understanding women's involvement in terrorism, the ways in which TG's employ them and the strategic ramifications associated with these trends.

This study contributes to a more comprehensive and strategic understanding of the potential security threats associated with women's current and future participation in terrorism. Failure to account for how and why women radicalise, enlist and operate, both offline and online, cedes the initiative to extremist groups, ultimately influencing the effectiveness of efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism. Overlooking the involvement of women in terrorism or downplaying their influence is not only an analytic but also a strategic blind spot.

Looking ahead, security actors could make greater efforts to anticipate and prepare for a range of possible scenarios. These might include an increase in the number of women participating in online activities, fundraising and facilitating logistical operations, and seeking to engage in 'martyrdom operations' as part of all-female cells. Throughout the meteoric rise of Daesh, women have certainly contributed and it is likely that their participation will continue to play an important role in the survival, expansion and resurgence of its affiliates across the globe, directly or indirectly sustaining the ideology, preserving their operational capabilities and, at times, committing violence.

To contend with these and other future challenges, relevant stakeholders must ensure gender-sensitivity across all efforts to prevent and counter terrorism – from collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data, to developing evidence-based policy responses and acquiring the requisite gender expertise in enforcement, investigation, prosecution and rehabilitation capacities.

[1] The term 'jihad' is referred to in line with the terrorist organisations who deploy it. This does not confer agreement with their interpretation of the term and its use in the current period to justify their violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many gaps and questions persist when it comes to understanding women's participation in terrorism, the multiple ways in which Terrorist Groups (TGs) employ them, as well as the strategic ramifications associated with these trends. For example, is the rise in women's participation in terrorism symptomatic of wider trends and, if so, what does it entail for the future? As al-Qaeda (AQ) and Daesh have adjusted their narratives on the permissibility of female fighters, will their rhetorical shifts reverberate for years to come, possibly paving the way for additional participation of women in the so-called global jihad?[2] None of this should be confused with nor detract from the roles that women play in preventing and countering radicalization and terrorism, or the ways in which TGs perpetuate gender-based inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls.

There would appear to be a significant gap in current understanding in policymaking circles about the scale, nature and impact of this phenomenon, about the reasons and circumstances when TG's open the door to women to actively engage in violence, and about how these evolving trends might influence ongoing and future counter-terrorism efforts. Going forward, it is important to ensure adequacy of our counter-terrorism knowledge and efforts, to highlight the lessons learned so far, and to sharpen awareness of the emerging security challenges through a gender-sensitive lens.

In recent years, women's participation in violent extremist acts and their involvement in TGs has increasingly gained attention among policymakers, in academia, as well as the media. Some among them have argued that women's deployment as combatants can be understood as a feature of contemporary terrorism.[3] Others have contended that female offenders have merely become more visible due to increased reporting on women's involvement in TGs.[4]

Indeed, for years, *Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad*, commonly referred to as Boko Haram, made global headlines for recruiting women and girls among its ranks – sometimes through kidnapping and coercion – and for deploying them as suicide bombers. Between 2011 and 2018 more than half of the Boko Haram suicide bombers are said to have been women and girls, some as young as 7 years old.[5] Likewise, from its inception, Daesh attracted large numbers of female recruits. Women from the West as well as the Middle East and North Africa

[2] As mentioned, for the purposes of this paper, the term *jihad* is referred to in line with the terrorist organisations who deploy it. This does not confer agreement with their interpretation of the term and its use in the current period to justify their violence. The term, like that of terrorism, is hotly contested. For further discussions and contextualisation please refer to this brief text: Bonner, M. (2009) *Jihad in Islamic history*. Princeton University Press.

[3] On the claim that women's participation is a feature of new terrorism please refer to Laster, K. & Erez, E. (2015) *Sisters in Terrorism? Exploding Stereotypes*, Women & Criminal Justice, 25:1-2, 83-99; Jacques, K. & Taylor, P. J. (2013) *Myths and Realities of Female-Perpetrated Terrorism.* Law and Human Behaviour, 37(1), pp. 35-44.

[4] There is a lengthy and unresolved debate about definitions of terrorism and who or what counts as a terrorist organisation. For the purposes of this paper, terrorist groups included are those armed non-state actors who wish to disrupt the status quo in their relations with the state and populations, and they also have faith that violence will be a successful method in achieving this change in the state of affairs. For a lengthier discussion please refer to: Brown, K. E. (2017) "Gender and Terrorist Movements" in Duncanson, C. and Woodward, R. (Eds.) *Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave). Pp.419-435.

[5] Markovic V. (2019), S*uicide squad: Boko Haram's use of the female suicide bomber*, Women & Criminal Justice. Available at: 10.1080/08974454.2019.1629153.

(MENA) region were enlisted to perform a wide range of roles, which were deemed crucial for the Daesh state-building project. While estimates vary, over 4,700 women are thought to have joined Daesh.[6]

In addition, several all-female extremist cells have been dismantled in recent years, including a group of four women engaging in preparations for terror attacks in London and a group of ten women suspected of recruiting and plotting suicide attacks in Morocco.[7] The persistence of all-female Daesh cells is particularly visible in the camps for displaced people in Syria and Iraq. In the al-Hawl camp, for example, where approximately 80% of the more than 62,000 residents are women and children, there have been multiple reports of terrorist radicalization, fundraising, training and incitement.[8] Many of the women in al-Hawl and other similar camps are suspected of being family members of Daesh male fighters, ideological adherents and/or former combatants themselves. Experts have warned that the camps risk creating a new generation of extremists, as the Daesh ideology has continued to spread uncontested among the female residents and their children.

This paper is structured in three parts. Firstly, it provides data on the scale and manifestations of women's participation in terrorism, outlining the various roles played by women in support of TG's in MENA. References will occasionally be made to other regions, for comparative purposes, but also in view of the transnational nature of this phenomenon. Next, this paper highlights some of the main drivers of radicalization and recruitment tactics, as well as the strategic advantages to recruiting women. While doing so, the authors briefly explore the rhetorical evolution behind the gendered narratives put forth by AQ and Daesh –the two major global TG's – including distinctions and similarities among their affiliates vis-à-vis the role of women. The paper concludes by discussing the policy implications for policymakers, practitioners and researchers who seek to curtail women's participation in terrorism.

Before examining this topic further, it is important to lay out some of the concepts underpinning this analysis, as well as the limitations behind this approach. First of all, there is a lengthy and unresolved debate about definitions of terrorism and who or what counts as a terrorist organisation. For the purposes of this paper, terrorism refers to the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property, in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.[9]

Secondly, there are several challenges and limitations when it comes to understanding the role and motivations of women in TGs. Accessing reliable and verifiable information about

[6] Cook J. and Vale G., (2018), *From Daesh to 'diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State,* International Centre of the Study of Radicalisation. Available at: https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf.

[7] Deutsche Welle, (2016), *All-Female 'Islamic State' Cell Arrested in Morocco*. Available at: http://dw.com/en/all-female-islamic-state-cell-arrested-in-morocco/a-35948566. See also Khomami N. (2018), *How London teenager plotted attacks with all-female terror cell. The Guardian. Available at:* https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/how-london-teenager-plotted-attacks-with-all-female-terror-cell.

[8] UN Security Council Press Release (2021), *ISIL Must Be Defeated in Cyberspace, Under-Secretary-General Tells Security Council, as Terrorist Group Takes Advantage of Pandemic-Related Disruptions.* Available at: https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14433.doc.htm.

[9] See the official NATO Terminology Database, available at: NATOTermOTAN.

terrorist organisations is a security risk and an ethical dilemma, meaning that only a few independent or insider sources are available for public analysis.[10] Compounding this problem is the fact that only a few state actors, international organisations or NGOs disaggregate their data by gender. Furthermore, the diversity of TGs (e.g., causes, longevity, wider socio-political contexts, etc.) across the MENA region makes it difficult to establish a taxonomy of women's roles. Last but not least, categorising the roles that women play in terrorist organisations is difficult because these functions tend to change over time, as terror tactics evolve to achieve operational success.[11]

Bearing in mind all of the above, this analysis builds on the existing body of knowledge, while incorporating targeted contributions from several external subject matter experts[12]. Based on primary and secondary source analysis, the paper also draws on the Daesh and al-Qaeda propaganda materials. The paper is intended to provide a more comprehensive and strategic understanding of the potential security threats associated with women's participation in terrorism since failure to account for how women radicalise, enlist and operate offline and online cedes the initiative to extremist groups, ultimately impacting the effectiveness of efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism.

[10] Exceptionally, Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D. (2020). "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13(1), pp. 82-127.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.1.1791

[11] For example, the role of women in the FLN in Algeria changed; initially not involved beyond caring duties, over time women would dress in more European styles (contrary to FLN gender ideals) so women could move about more freely and carry explosives, weapons, or messages to places where men could retrieve them. Macmaster, N. (2020). "The FLN and the role of women during the war". In *Burning the Veil: The Algerian war and the 'emancipation' of Muslim women, 1954–62*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press. Also, Hamas initially resisted women's active participation in violent activities, but after a woman from the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade carried out a successful attack, they changed their stance. Ahmad, A. (2019) "We Have Captured Your Women": Explaining Jihadist Norm Change. *International Security*; 44 (1): 80–116.

[12] The NSD-S Hub would like to thank and acknowledge the following scholars and practitioners, from the MENA region and beyond, who have contributed their valuable expertise throughout the development of this product, namely: **Ms Zineb Benalla**, CEO Eirene Associates Int., Visiting Professor, Alakhawayan University; **Dr Katherine E. Brown**, Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Birmingham; **Ms Jessica Davis**, President & Principal Consultant, Insight Threat Intelligence; **Prof Amel Grami**, Professor of Gender Studies and Islamic Studies at The University of Manouba-Tunisia.

II. KEY TRENDS THROUGH A GENDER LENS

The scarcity of gender-disaggregated data hinders efforts to systematically assess the scale, breadth and nature of women's participation in terrorism. Without this type of data, it is virtually impossible to measure the level of women's involvement in each TG, across certain regions, or as part of the global terrorist landscape. Even though the picture that emerges so far is limited, the section below attempts to identify and highlight some of the key patterns and trends, which may have important implications for ongoing and future counter-terrorism efforts.

Increased involvement of women in terrorism over time

Globally, the number of deaths from terrorism has been declining in recent years, while there has been a resurgence of terrorist activity in the Maghreb and the Sahel.[13] In these regions and on the African continent more broadly, the terrorist threat continues to evolve, driven by a host of political, socio-economic and ideological factors, some of which have been exacerbated in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions brought on by the pandemic inadvertently gave internet users more time to interact online, including coming into contact with violent extremist content. Likewise, the loss in employment opportunities and the ensuing socio-economic difficulties created a fertile ground for recruitment, with many violent extremists portraying the pandemic as a divine punishment for the deeds of 'non-believers'[14]. Meanwhile, on average, there has been a decline in terrorist activity across the MENA region in recent years, mostly on account of decreasing levels of conflict in Syria and Iraq.[15]

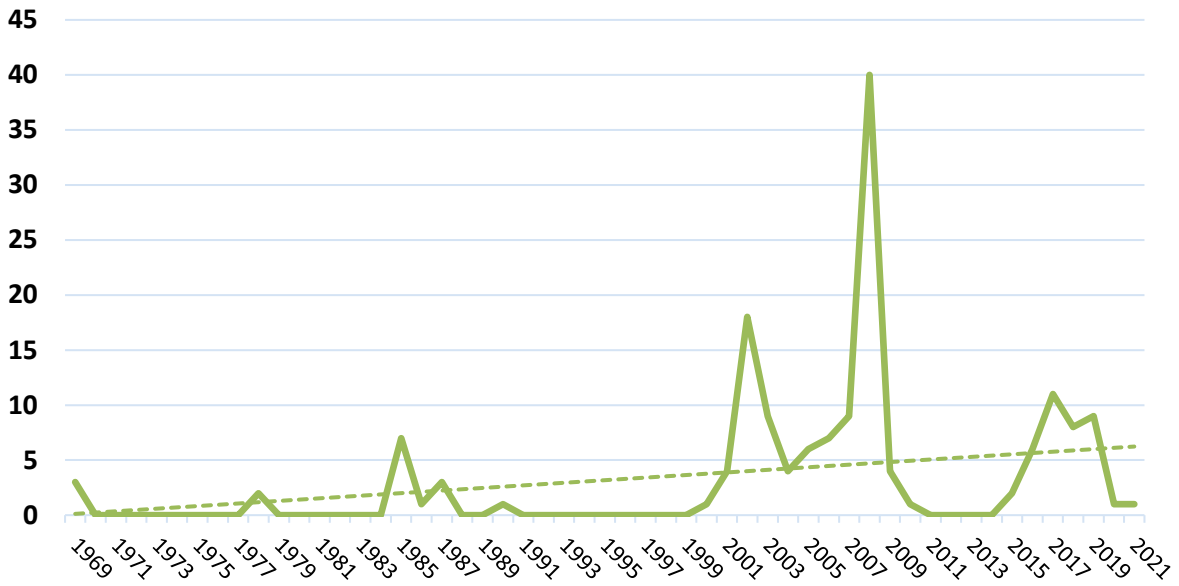
Against this background, some of the available data suggests that terrorist organisations are increasingly recruiting women. For example, one study found that more women (34%) than men (15%) born after 1990 joined the Western branches of AQ in Western Europe, North America, and Australia.[16] Controlling for age at radicalization, the study noted a possible increase in women's involvement in AQ-inspired networks across these regions during 2006-2017.[17]

In MENA too, women's participation in terrorist activity has been increasing over time, as illustrated in Figure 1. This data – which is a compilation of terrorist incidents involving women such as attacks, disrupted plots, and arrests for terrorist activity – represents a snapshot of women's involvement in terrorism in the region.[18] While not exhaustive, it demonstrates an increasing trend of women's involvement in terrorist activity. Women have joined various groups in the region, such as AQ, Daesh and others.[19] Terrorist events with female

[13] Institute for Economics & Peace (2020). *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. Available at: https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf.
[14] Crump, J. 2020. *Terrorism and security threat trends in 2021*. Available at: https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/94219-terrorism-and-security-threat-trends-in-2021; See also: Smith, J*., 2020. Terror threats in 2021: No time for complacency*. Control Risks. Available at: https://www.controlrisks.com/riskmap/analyst-picks/terror-threats-in-2021-no-time-for-complacency.
[15] Institute for Economics & Peace (2020).
[16] Brugh, C. S., Desmarais, S. L., Simons-Rudolph, J., & Zottola, S. A. (2019). *Gender in the jihad: Characteristics and outcomes among women and men involved in jihadism-inspired terrorism*. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, *6*(2), 76–92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000123.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Davis J. (2017).
[19] Davis J. (2017), *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, 50.

participation have been recorded in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, although women have likely been involved in terrorist activity in many other countries in the region as well. While some countries have seen less female terrorist activity (such as Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen), others have seen more expansive use of women to conduct attacks, especially Iraq, but also Lebanon and Syria.[20]

Figure 1: Female Terrorist Incidents 1969-2021

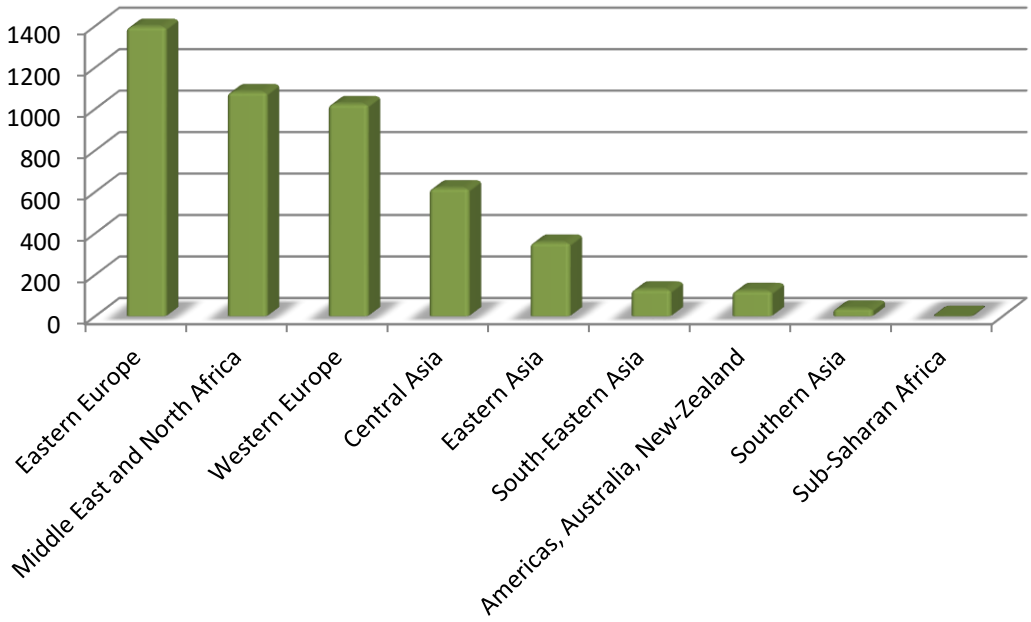


Source: Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*.

The scale and scope of women's involvement in terrorist activity has become more visible in the aftermath of Daesh. Since the establishment of its self-proclaimed 'Caliphate' in Iraq and Syria in 2014, Daesh recognized the importance of women for its 'state-building' exercise and attracted female followers from around the world in an unprecedented fashion. Out of the 41,490 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) thought to have joined the group in Syria and Iraq, approximately 13% were women.[21] As illustrated in Figure 2, most of the women originated from Eastern Europe, MENA and Western Europe.[22] Among the European women, the majority had left from Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, while Belgium, Austria and Sweden witnessed the highest per capita rate.[23]

Figure 2: Estimated number of women who joined Daesh by region

[20] Davis J. (2013), *Evolution of the Global Jihad: Female Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 36, no. 4 (April 1, 2013): 279–91. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.763598.
[21] Cook J. and Vale G., (2018).
[22] Ibid.
[23] European Parliament (2017), *Radicalisation and violent extremism – focus on women: How women became radicalised, and how to empower them to prevent radicalisation.* Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2017)596838.



Source: Cook J. and Vale G., (2018), *From Daesh to 'diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State,* International Centre of the Study of Radicalisation

As Daesh has lost control of territory in Syria and Iraq, the uncertain status of many of these women and their future is a source of continued concern. Tens of thousands of women remain in camps for displaced people in Syria, with the al-Hawl refugee camp being described as a mini-state hosting IS-affiliated members and families.[24] Therein, female Daesh members are reportedly enforcing the group's ideological requirements in the camps, including through reliance on 'moral police' and punishments. In the first half of 2021 alone, 47 people have reportedly been killed in the al-Hawl camp by suspected Daesh cells.[25] Women in the foreign annex (which hosts about 10,000 women) have attacked each other with knives and there has even been a beheading attempt.[26]

Several European Union (EU) Member States indicated that the number of female nationals of their country placed in camps and prisons in north-east Syria increased in March 2019.[27] Only months later, in October 2019, an estimated 100 women and children escaped from the Ain Issa displacement camp when the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) withdrew some of the troops guarding the premises.[28] In al-Hawl too, more than 700 escape attempts were

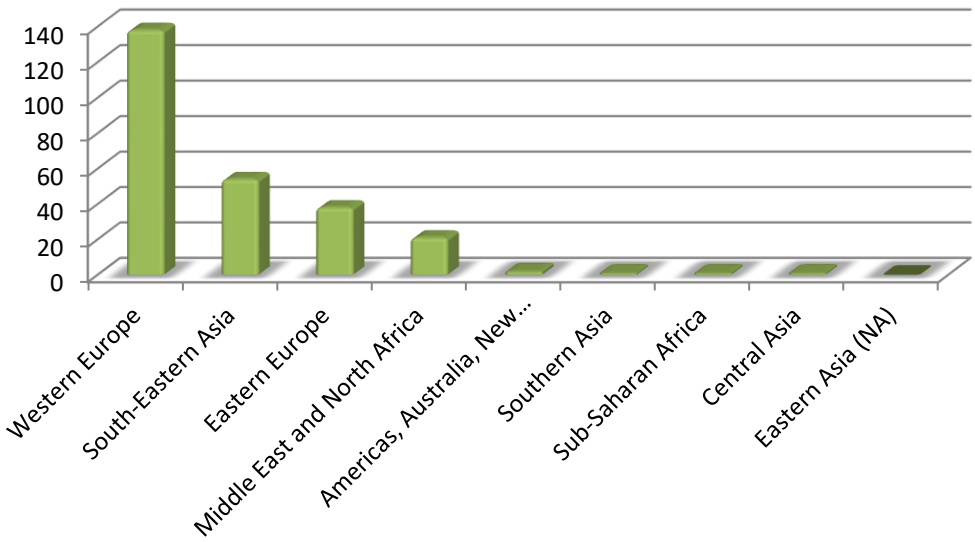
[24] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, (2021). *"Al-Hawl mini-state". Available at: https://www.syriahr.com/en/217731/.*
[25] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, (2021).
[26] McKernan B., Mironova V. and Graham-Harrison E., (2021). *How women of Isis in Syrian camps are marrying their way to freedom.* Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/02/women-isis-syrian-camps-marrying-way-to-freedom?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.
[27] European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, (2020). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020.* Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020.
[28] Reuters (2019), *Syrian Observatory: 100 people escape camp holding Islamic State relatives.* Available at:

reportedly thwarted between March 2019 and September 2020.[29] These attempted getaways point to the insecure detention conditions in the camps and, with the cost of exfiltration estimated between $10,000 and $35,000, they also suggest the perpetuation of support networks that can provide the necessary financing.[30]

In fact, a recent Guardian investigation indicates that this practice continues unabated, with hundreds of female detainees being smuggled out of the al-Hawl camp with the bribes gifted by husbands they met online.[31] Testimonies suggest that some of the female escapees stay in the Idlib province, bidding their time until the 'Caliphate' rises again, while others might be trying to make their way back to their home countries.[32]

Officially, the number of Daesh women returnees in their home countries has been limited, compared with that of minors and men. As Figure 3 shows, most of the women returned to Western Europe, with significantly smaller numbers of returnees recorded in the other regions. Following the fragmentation and displacement of Daesh, there is a lingering fear that some of the women formerly associated with the group could be instrumental in carrying forward its ideology and legacy.

Figure 3: Number of Daesh women returnees by region



Source: Cook J. and Vale G., (2018), *From Daesh to 'diaspora': Tracing the women and minors of Islamic State,* International Centre of the Study of Radicalisation.

https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-camp-report-idUSKBN1WS06L.

[29] Renard T. and Coolsaet R., (2020), *From bad to worse: The fate of European foreign fighters and families detained in Syria, one year after the Turkish offensive*. Available at: https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2020/10/SPB130_final.pdf?type=pdf.

[30] Talley I. and Faucon B. (2020), *Islamic State, Defeated U.S. Foe, Still Brims with Cash, Ambition*, *Wall Street Journal*. Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-defeated-u-s-foe-still-brims-with-cash-ambition-11600464409.

[31] McKernan B., Mironova V. and Graham-Harrison E., (2021).

[32] Ibid.

In Europe, there is also a continued risk that other women will be inspired by violent extremist ideology and seek to perpetrate attacks. According to the most recent available Europol data, women accounted for 22% of the people arrested on suspicion of religion-related terrorism in 2018, as compared to 16% in 2017 and 26% in 2016.[33]

Fluctuating escalations in female suicide bombings

Incidents involving female suicide bombings have fluctuated over the years, with temporary escalations noticeable around the world, including in Russia between 2002 and 2004, in Palestine during the second intifada, and across Nigeria and Cameroon between 2014 and 2018.[34] The trend of female suicide attacks has intensified in recent years, although they still constitute only a small percentage of the overall terrorist attacks. Globally, since 1985 until 2018, there were over 300 suicide bombings involving at least one female terrorist.[35] These attacks resulted in over 3,000 deaths, which amounted to 5% of deaths from suicide attacks since 1985.[36]

Between 2013 and 2018 in particular, female suicide attacks increased globally by 450%, while those perpetrated by men decreased by 47% over the same period.[37] The increase was largely attributable to Boko Haram, with the group being responsible for approximately 80% of the attacks. Between 2014 and 2016, Boko Haram also resorted to utilising underage girls, who perpetrated 75% of the attacks involving children.[38] In the first half of 2017 alone, a total of 55 underage girls were used in suicide attacks, presumably involuntarily in the case of younger girls.[39] However, even when excluding Boko Haram, there has been an upward trend since 2013, with female suicide attacks increasing globally by 200%, primarily on account of TGs operating in the Middle East and North Africa.[40] Once again though, the overall escalation appears to have been temporary, especially as Boko Haram shifted its tactics from bombings to armed assaults, hostage taking and recruiting children.[41]

Decreasing lethality of female perpetrators

Prior literature has suggested that female suicide attacks tend to inflict greater casualties than those carried out by men. A study comparing attacks conducted between 1981 and 2008 found that the average number of victims resulting from individual attacks conducted by women was 8.4, versus 5.3 killed in the aftermath of attacks perpetrated by men.[42] Also, during this period,

[33] These figures are calculated excluding data contributed by the UK and partially Belgium, which are not broken down to type of terrorism. See: European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, (2019), Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2019-te-sat.
[34] Institute for Economics & Peace (2019). Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. Available at: http://visionofhumanity.org/reports.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019), Handbook on gender dimensions of criminal justice responses to terrorism. Available at: Handbook on Gender Dimensions of Criminal Justice Responses to Terrorism (unodc.org).
[39] Ibid.
[40] Institute for Economics & Peace (2019).
[41] Institute for Economics & Peace (2020). Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. Available from https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf
[42] Lindsey A. O'Rourke (2009) What's Special about Female Suicide Terrorism? Security Studies, 18:4, 681-718, DOI: 10.1080/09636410903369084. See also: Burcu Pinar Alakoc, (2020), Femme Fatale: The Lethality of Female Suicide Bombers, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 43, no. 9. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1505685.

women were associated with deadlier team attacks, which produced more casualties than the attacks perpetrated only by men.[43]

Factors accounting for this increased effectiveness were tied to the prevalence of certain social norms and gender stereotypes, which meant that women generated less suspicion, were subjected to more relaxed security measures and were able to conceal explosives with more ease. In some situations, the lethality of the attacks may have also been influenced by the (in)accessibility of the targets. For example, while female Boko Haram attackers killed more than 1,200 people between 2014 and 2018, they mostly targeted civilians through the use of *suicide belts* or *vests*.[44] By contrast, male Boko Haram attackers were used to assault hardened government, police, and military targets through vehicle-borne suicide bombings.[45]

The most recent survey of female and male perpetrated attacks conducted between 2005 and 2016 found that these were, by and large, similarly lethal.[46] As security forces adapted to terrorist tactics and the nature of the counter-terrorism response evolved, female suicide attacks appeared to be less deadly than those carried out by their male counterparts. Variations, of course, still persist across different contexts and time periods, as illustrated by developments in Iraq. In 2008, after al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was driven out of its sanctuaries in Baghdad, 39 female suicide bombers killed at least 363 individuals and wounded 974 others in Iraq, most of whom were military personnel.[47]

Young, educated, unemployed women more at risk

Exploratory studies have identified linkages between women's participation in terrorist violence and their socio-demographic characteristics. For example, some empirical research has found that a higher level of education (i.e., graduating high school) among women is associated with increased engagement in terrorism, whereas the level of gender equality and women's social rights in a country is inversely related to female participation in terrorism.[48] Similarly, other studies have found that support for violent hate crimes (which were deemed by the authors to be closely related to terrorism) does not decrease among those with higher education and that female suicide bombers are rarely as ignorant as they are portrayed to be in the media.[49] These research findings suggest that education *alone* may not effectively reduce women's involvement in terrorism, while also highlighting the importance of promoting gender equality and addressing the underlying motivational factors which lead to the use of

[43] Ibid.
[44] Vesna Markovic (2019) *Suicide squad: Boko Haram's use of the female suicide bomber*, Women & Criminal Justice, 29:4-5, 283-302, DOI: 10.1080/08974454.2019.1629153.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Nyssa Fullmer, Stephanie Lipson Mizrahi & Elizabeth Tomsich (2019) *The Lethality of Female Suicide Bombers*, Women & Criminal Justice, 29:4-5, 266-282, DOI: 10.1080/08974454.2018.1548409.
[47] Bryson R. (2017), *Female Suicide Bombers May Be New For ISIS, But They're No Stranger to Iraq.* Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Available at: https://institute.global/policy/female-suicide-bombers-may-be-new-isis-theyre-no-stranger-iraq.
[48] Dalton, A., & Asal, V. (2011). *Is it ideology or desperation: Why do organizations deploy women in violent terrorist attacks?* Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 34,* 802– 819. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.604833.
[49] Krueger, A. B. and Malečková J., (*2003). Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?* Journal of Economic Perspectives*,* 17 (4): 119-144. See also: *Zedalis D. D. (2004), Female Suicide Bombers.* University Press of the Pacific.

terrorist violence. Such findings are particularly relevant in the MENA region, which is home to seven of the ten countries with the largest gender gaps in the world.[50]

Furthermore, many studies have revealed that emerging/young adulthood (18–28 years old) is a critical age for the radicalization of both women and men.[51] Empirical investigation into religion-related terrorism has also concluded that women involved in such incidents were more likely than men not to have had recent employment, while also committing significantly fewer crimes prior to radicalization.[52] Taken together, these findings suggest that the criminal justice system may not be able to address women's radicalisation and that counter-terrorism strategies might be more effective by targeting at-risk unemployed women through social service programmes.[53]

Meanwhile, investigations into the socio-demographic profiles of Western women who joined Daesh have found that they were mostly second- and third-generation migrants.[54] This points to the importance of devising policy tools that promote a sense of cultural identity, as well as the integration of migrant communities in the socio-economic and political spheres of the host Western societies. Therefore, counter-terrorism strategies that target women at risk of involvement in religion-related terrorism should incorporate messaging around societal acceptance, cultural belonging etc.

[50] World Economic Forum, (2020), *Global Gender Gap Report 2020.* Available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

[51] Klausen, J., Morrill, T., & Libretti, R. (2016). The terrorist age-crime curve: An analysis of American Islamist terrorist offenders and age-specific propensity for participation in violent and nonviolent incidents. *Social Science Quarterly, 97*(1), 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12249.

[52] Brugh, C. S., Desmarais, S. L., Simons-Rudolph, J., & Zottola, S. A. (2019).

[53] Ibid.

[54] Peresin A. (2015), *Fatal Attraction Western Muslimas and ISIS*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9, No 3, pp. 21-28. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297379?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

III. UNDERSTANDING FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN TERRORISM

Individual and organizational motives are both relevant to understanding why female terrorism has increased and diversified over time. The section below outlines some of the known drivers of radicalization and recruitment tactics, while providing examples on the types of roles that women have assumed so far. It also traces the rhetorical evolution behind the gendered narratives put forth by AQ and Daesh, noting the distinctions and similarities among their affiliates vis-à-vis the role of women. Subsequently, this section highlights the ways in which the recruitment of women furthers the strategic objectives of TGs, especially in the context of Daesh, a group whose meteoric rise has coincided with a leap in women's participation in the so-called 'global armed struggle to defend Islam.'

Drivers of radicalization and recruitment tactics

Generally speaking, radicalization – for both women and men – is driven by a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors.[55] Common 'push' factors include dissatisfaction with the political and socio-economic status quo; being subjected to abuse or humiliation by security forces; or associating the death and abuse of a family member with the behaviour of state actors.[56] On the other hand, factors 'pulling' women and men towards radicalization revolve around the ideological aspirations promoted by TG's, the rejection of 'Western' values, and the various social and financial incentives provided by TGs. At the same time, gender-based violence, discrimination and inequality – including the social stigmatization of rape victims – may also act as specific drivers in women's radicalization.[57]

Interviews with female returnees, defectors and prisoners from Daesh have also highlighted prior trauma, poverty, family conflict and discriminatory practices as 'push' factors, while the desire to pursue their interpretation of a religious identity appeared to serve as a 'pull' factor.[58] When documenting individual stories of radicalization of women, Arab media has sometimes referred to a 'quartet' of ingredients, namely revenge, faith, ignorance or poverty.[59]

In the case of Daesh, female affiliates were also 'drawn in' by their perceived religious 'duty' to migrate in the so-called 'Caliphate'.[60] Some of the women are said to have travelled to Syria in obedience to fatwas calling for ostensible marriages in support of *jihad*, though the scope of the practice has been disputed.[61] Therefore, understanding female participation in terrorism through a gender-sensitive lens is premised, first and foremost, on acknowledging the complexity of women's underlying motivations and their diverse circumstances.

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[55] For more information on the push-pull model, refer to: Council of Europe, Committee of Experts on Terrorism (2016), *The roles of women in Daesh,* and European Parliament (2018), *Radicalisation and counter-radicalisation: A gender perspective.* See also*:* Dr. L. Sjoberg (2015), *People, not pawns: women's participation in violent extremism across MENA*, USAID.

[56] Dr. L. Sjoberg (2015).

[57] Brown, K. E. (2019) *Gender Mainstreaming, Principles, Dimensions and Priorities for PVE*. UN Women. New York; Brown, K. E (2018) "Gendered Violence in the making of the proto-state Islamic State" in Parashar, S. et al. (Eds.) *Revisiting Gendered States*. Oxford: OUP. pp.174-190.

[58] Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D., (2020).

[59] Journalists for Arab Investigative Journalism, (2011). « استقصائية صحافة أجل من إعلاميون غرباء قتلة ظلال تحت انتحاريات :الموت أجيال » عربية (أريج) (arij.net).

[60] Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D., (2020).

[61] *Al Hurra, (2018). The women under the ISIS banner. Available at:* Alhurra قناة الحرة- حقيقة جهاد النكاح| Facebook .

When it comes to the difference between male and female radicalization and their engagement with terrorist activity, it would seem that women are much more likely to have a direct introduction (through a friend or family member) to the terrorist milieu.[62] Notably, there have also been instances where women have been coerced into joining TG's. When considering women's roles in these groups, it is important to keep in mind the nuances of agency and coercion, and how this is a spectrum rather than a black or white distinction (i.e., voluntary or involuntary).[63]

The Maghreb region, for example, illustrates the difficulty of unpacking the mix of personal motivations and the socio-cultural vulnerabilities dictated by gender power relations. Many women in this region are said to have joined Daesh largely due to their affiliation with male relatives who were members of the group or were seeking to join it – kinship and social norms involving female subordination in marriage, forced marriage, hierarchical mother-son relations, discrimination against girls etc. played an important role in the recruitment of women from Libya and Morocco.[64] Vulnerable and socially disadvantaged women and girls (i.e., widowed, divorced, unmarried) were particularly targeted for recruitment.[65] Similarly, about half of the Western female Daesh recruits are thought to have travelled to Syria and Iraq with their husbands, or in order to join them in Daesh-controlled territory.[66] This strategic outreach resulted in different kinds of women joining Daesh from overseas – to begin with, women were often married and travelling as part of family units to Iraq and Syria to be part of the so-called 'Caliphate'; later, younger women travelled independently, sometimes against their family's wishes, to establish a 'new life' for themselves.

In attempting to understand why women 'choose' to join TG's, it is also important to recognise that the notion of 'empowerment' differs substantially depending on the religious and cultural lens through which it is viewed.[67] Many women, for example, joined Daesh to assert their independence, be it in relation to their families or with respect to Western ideas about feminism and equality.[68] Some of the women FTFs who joined Daesh rejected what they perceived to be sexualised expectations and enthusiastically accepted more conservative roles, which they believed were unattainable in the West.[69]

Likewise, it is also important to factor in the recruitment tactics pursued by TG's to elicit sympathy for their cause among women and to enlist them. Online, terrorist recruiters have targeted young girls and women through social media accounts, internet forums, open source

[62] Davis J. (2017). See also: M. Bloom (2015), *The changing nature of women in extremism and political violence*, F3 magazine. Available at: http://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=1093.
[63] Jessica Davis, "The Future of the Islamic State's Women: Assessing Their Potential Threat," *ICCT Policy Brief*, June 2020, 16.
[64] Johnston M, True J. and Benalla Z. (2019), *Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya,* Monash University's Gender Peace and Security Centre and UN WOMEN. Available at: https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2019/11/monash_genderequality_violentextremism_paper_art2.pdf?la=en&vs=638.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Gaub, F. and Lisiecka, J. (2016), *Women in Daesh: Jihadist «cheerleaders», active operatives?,* European Union Institute for Security Studies. Available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_27_Women_in_Daesh.pdf.
[67] Women in Islamic State Propaganda Roles and Incentives, Europol.(14 June, 2019) https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/europol-specialist-reporting/women-in-islamic-state-propaganda
[68] Pearson, E. and Winterbotham, E. (2017). *Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation.* The RUSI Journal, 162, 60 - 72.
[69] Loken, M., & Zelenz, A. (2018). *Explaining extremism: Western women in Daesh*. European Journal of International Security. Cambridge University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.13.

publications etc., preying on their vulnerability, capitalizing on their grievances and luring them with the promise of 'empowerment'. Raising awareness about the perceived grievances of religious minorities around the world has often been a key component of the radicalization process, as it encourages female audiences to reflect on the state of their own societies and to take responsibility for making a difference by being part of 'something bigger' than themselves. Offline, terrorist recruiters take advantage of family structure, peer-pressure and religious beliefs, while also resorting to other tactics, including but not limited to, deception, intimidation, coercion and kidnapping.

Women's multifaceted roles in TG's

Supporters and enablers

As mentioned previously, an element that is often downplayed and/or understudied is the reality that, just as for men, women often fulfil essential roles in terrorist organizations without directly participating in violent attacks. For example, women have been arrested for terrorist activities such as financing and logistical support.[70] In other cases, they have taken on the roles of recruiters and propagandists.[71] Women have also been convicted of distributing information pertaining to the making and use of explosive devices, in furtherance of planned attacks.[72]

There are also reports that women have acted as couriers, go-betweens and weapons smugglers since the fall of Mosul, transporting supplies to Daesh fighters in underground cells, and reportedly maintaining communications links between desert/rural-based Daesh cells and networks in villages and camps.[73] While available evidence suggests a fairly limited role for women (either as supporters or as attackers), these reported roles within TGs are probably evolving, and likely span the range of terrorist activity. This evolution demonstrates both a shift in how TGs see women, but also a likely shift in how women themselves want to be utilised by the groups they join.

Where TG's seek to transform society, they also require their enforcement mechanisms to include women involved in overseeing and upholding gender norms. In Daesh, this enforcement was carried out by the so-called 'morality police' (*Hisbah*, or the *Al-Khansaa* Brigade). Although only a small percentage of women were employed in this brigade, they had a significant impact on governing through fear. This level of control is also on display across

[70] Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinian Authorities Thwarted an ISIS Terror Attack in Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2019, https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Palestinian-authorities-thwarted-an-ISIS-terror-attack-in-Israel-report-590669.

[71] Alexandra Sims, "Sally Jones: Isis Recruiter 'issues Series of Terror Threats against UK Cities' over Twitter | The Independent," *The Independent*, May 25, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/sally-jones-isis-recruiter-issues-series-of-terror-threats-to-uk-cities-over-twitter-a7049066.html.

[72] The United States Department of Justice (2021), *Woman Sentenced to 198 Months in Prison for Teaching and Distributing Information About Weapons of Mass Destruction.* Press release. Available at: https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/woman-sentenced-198-months-prison-teaching-and-distributing-information-about-weapons-mass.

[73] Coles, I. and Nabhan, A. (2019) "Islamic State Enlists Women as Covert Operatives in Survival Bid", *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 January, https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-forced-underground-turns-to-women-to-survive-11548856800.

the internal displacement camps in Iraq and Syria, where some of the women continue to exact punishments on those who do not comply with the Daesh dress and behavioural code.[74]

When it comes to the strategic direction of TG's, women's engagement is constrained by explicitly patriarchal gender norms. Therefore, female roles are generally limited to upholding, promoting or following predetermined ideas and actions of the male leadership. While some women may be increasingly vocal in demanding change (i.e., opportunities to fight on the front line), they are still appealing to an established hierarchy of men. Likewise, even though there have been instances when separate women's functions and institutions have been established to govern women members, such (restricted forms) of female leadership were seemingly determined by their husband's or fathers' status, rather than acquired on the basis of their own skills and 'career.'[75]

Daesh, in particular, at first tended to emphasize the role of women as 'supporters' in its gendered messaging. Once in the 'Caliphate', women acquired what was deemed to be a 'holy' purpose, fulfilling their roles as mothers of the next generation of fighters, supportive wives and members of an everlasting sisterhood - "*As for you, O mother of lion cubs. . . . And what will make you know what the mother of lion cubs is? She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men.*"[76]

Even though such actions were framed by Daesh as deliberate, thereby empowering women's choice, in fact, when it comes to terrorist propaganda, academic research suggests that women are seldom the producers of such content. More commonly, they repackage or reframe media outputs, distribute them in their networks, and act as recruiters of other women through the online space.[77] When they are directly engaging in social media, it is often in support of men's violence, providing advice to other women, affirming their supportive duties and asserting traditional gender roles and ideologies.[78] For example, when the propaganda machine of Daesh was still at its apex, the *Al-Shamikha* magazine routinely provided 'tips' to women on anything from childrearing future *mujahideen* and praising martyrdom, to 'chastity etiquette' and waging so-called electronic *jihad*. In addition, women's propaganda in Daesh also served to emphasize the masculine, desirable qualities of male fighters, while mocking enemy and civilian men for their emasculation at the hands of the state or wider society.[79]

However, there are also notable exceptions to these trends, inasmuch as certain female propagandists have been described as 'role models' for their ability to disseminate ideology

[74] Vale, G. (2109). Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps. ICCT. https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/10/Women-in-Islamic-State-From-Caliphate-to-Camps.pdf

[75] For example, the career of Umm Sayyaf (who was responsible for IS slaves) is largely dependent on her husband (Fathi Ben Awn Ben Jidi Murad al Tunisi). See: Criminal Complaint and Arrest Warrant, USA vs Nisreen Assad Ibrahim Bahar, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Case No: 1:16-mj-63, 2016, https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2706157/Sayyaf-Charges.pdf.

[76] Al-Muhajirah, U. S. (2015). *A jihad without fighting.* Dabiq, 11, 40–45.

[77] Pearson, E. (2018), *Online as the New Frontline: Affect, Gender, and ISIS-Take-Down on Social Media*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*,* 41(11), 850-874; Brown, K. E. & Pearson, E. (2017) *The Online-world, Social Media and Terrorism* in Silke, A. (Ed.), *Handbook of Terrorism and Counter-terrorism* (Routledge) pp.149-164

[78] Huey, L., Inch, R., & Peladeau, H. (2019) *@ me if you need shoutout": Exploring Women's Roles in Islamic State Twitter Networks*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 42(5), pp. 445-463

79 Ingram, K.M. (2021), *An Analysis of Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda Targeted towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency, Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1919637.

on the web and to inspire others to follow suit. Malika El Aroud, for instance, saw herself as a female warrior for Al-Qaeda, urging men to fight and women to join the cause: "*I have a weapon. It's to write. It's to speak out. That's my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb*."[80] Similarly, Ahlam Al-Nasser, nicknamed "the poetess" of Daesh and "Osama's Damascene Mother" glorified the 'Caliphate' life in her writings: "*The first store I entered in Raqqa was the Azza al-Jihad weapons store. Wow, he gave me a sound bomb, a dagger, a doshka shot and an ISIS flag*" […] "*I have lived the caliphate and the heights ... And felt joy and release.*"[81]

Going forward, it might be increasingly important to monitor female virtual operatives, even as significant losses in Daesh territory, infrastructure, manpower and capabilities have depleted the group's ability to produce propaganda. While some commentators have noted that there has been a sweeping reduction in overt pro-Daesh activism across online space,[82] others expect that Daesh "will survive – if not thrive – in the virtual realm."[83] This is all the more relevant as previous analyses have found that female Daesh recruiters used to have higher social network connectivity than men and that women's participation improved the longevity rate of online pro-Daesh groups.[84]

Female operatives

Women's frontline roles in TG's worldwide are linked to the longevity and attrition of terrorist and state campaigns, as well as the changing nature of asymmetrical warfare.[85] There is evidence to suggest women are more likely to be used in martyrdom attacks where the group is under tactical pressure or in retreat, because: a) they are less likely to be caught, meaning a higher success and kill ratio; b) they generate more media attention; and c) they rarely occupy leadership positions, so they are viewed as more expendable than men.[86]

Besides the female attackers used by the *Riyad us-Saliheen* Brigade in Chechnya and Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Qaeda in Iraq was a trailblazer when it came to mobilising women for terrorist attacks. In 2005, the AQI leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, released a statement where he noted that women were required to take a more proactive role given the occupation in Iraq

[80] Sciolino, E. & Mekhennet, S., (2008). *Belgian woman wages war for Al Qaeda on the Web.* The New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/world/europe/28terror.html?pagewanted=1.
[81] Hamza M., (2018). *Ahlam Al-Nasser. Isis poet's motto is "Terrorism is life". Available at:* **المرجع: أحلام النصر.. شاعرة «داعش» شعارها «الإرهاب هو الحياة»** (almarjie-paris.com).
[84] Conway, M. Khawaja, M., Lakhani, S., Reffin, J., Robertson, A. & Weir, D. (2018). *Disrupting Daesh: Measuring takedown of online terrorist material and its impacts*. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 42(1-2), pp. 141-160. See also: Ingram, H., Whitside, C., and Winter, C. (2021) Retransmitting the Caliphate. Available at: https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IIJO-Invited-Perspective_Retransmitting-the-Caliphate_FINAL.pdf.
[85] Clarke C. and Winter C., (2017), *The Islamic State May Be Failing, but Its Strategic Communications Legacy Is Here to Stay*. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/the-islamic-state-may-be-failing-but-its-strategic-communications-legacy-is-here-to-stay/.
[86] Pedro Manrique et al., (2016) *Women's Connectivity in Extreme Networks*, Science Advances 2, no. 6. Available at: http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/2/6/e1501742.
[87] Raghavan, S. V. and Balasubramaniyan, V. (2014). Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?. Journal of International Women's Studies, 15(2), 197-211. See also Israelsen, S. (2020) *Why Now? Timing Rebel Recruitment of Female Combatants*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43(2), pp. 123-144.
[86] Speckhard A., (2008). *The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 31:11, 995-1023. Available at: 10.1080/10576100802408121

and the pressure Sunni Muslims were facing.[87] Declaring that "*the mujahidah woman is she who raises her child not to live, but to fight and then die*", al-Zarqawi added that "the many *mujahidah* sisters" in the Land of the Two Rivers [Iraq] were "*requesting to perpetrate martyrdom-seeking operations*."[88] Indeed, during 2003-2009, women committed approximately 48% of all suicide attacks in Iraq, playing an instrumental role in the insurgency.[89] In 2007, AQI leadership also announced the creation of a female 'martyrdom battalion'. Most of the members were presumed to be relatives of AQ fighters and there was reportedly a targeted effort to also recruit women from the West.[90]

In later years, women in the MENA region went on to engage in terrorist activity by using a greater range of tactics, including stabbing attacks and vehicle ramming attacks, particularly in Israel.[91] These attacks, however, represent a deviation for the region, as they appear to be lone-actor attacks, or at least unaffiliated or undirected by a TG.

As far as Daesh is concerned, offensive actions and combat were originally very low on the list of duties and responsibilities assigned to women. In the manifesto authored by the *Al-Khansaa* Brigade, titled *Women of the Islamic State*, Daesh emphasized the importance of women as wives, childbearers and homemakers. Some exceptions to this 'convention' were acknowledged, inasmuch women could and should engage in the armed struggle "*if the enemy is attacking her country, the men are not enough to protect it, and the ulama have given a fatwa for it*".[92] Addressing the matter of women who are "jealous and envious" of the obligations bestowed onto their male counterparts, Daesh reassured its female followers that "*the absence of an obligation of jihad and war upon the Muslim woman – except in defence against someone attacking her – does not overturn her role in building the Ummah, supporting men, and sending them out to the fierceness of battle*."[93]

Evidence shows that Daesh women were given basic training in self-defence and in so-called martyrdom efforts, in line with the Daesh theological position that women could only participate in defensive combat where their home or cities were under direct attack. At the same time, a select few women were reportedly given advanced training in explosives, combat and weapons training. In Speckhard's report, 2.6% of women claimed that they had received training or saw their roles as 'suicide bombers', while none of them portrayed themselves as

[87] Winter C. and Margolin D, (2017), *The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State,* The CTC Sentinel*,* August 2017, Volume 10, Issue 7. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/the-mujahidat-dilemma-female-combatants-and-the-islamic-state/.
88 Ibid.
[87] Davis, Women in Modern Terrorism, 121.
[90] Eggert J. P., (2015), *Women fighters in the „Islamic State" and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A comparative analysis.* Available at: 11__FW_2015-3__Eggert__.indd (brismes.ac.uk).
[89] David Rosenberg, Terrorist Stabbing Attack Reported in Jerusalem - Defense/Security, Israel National News, February 21, 2020, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/276313; David Rosenberg, Female Terrorist Brandishing a Knife Nabbed in Hevron, Israel National News, accessed June 15, 2021, https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/260485; Palestinian Woman 'with Knife' Killed by Israeli Forces, France 24, June 12, 2021, 24, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210612-palestinian-woman-with-knife-killed-by-israeli-forces.
[90] Winter C. (2018), ISIS, Women and Jihad: Breaking With Convention. Available at: https://institute.global/policy/isis-women-and-jihad-breaking-convention.
[91] Al-Muhājirah (2016) "A Jihad Without Fighting," Dabiq 11, p. 44.

fighters (in contrast to over 30% of men who identified themselves as fighters and 1.6% as suicide attackers).[94]

However, certain developments over the last few years might be signalling the emergence of a new trend. Libya, for example, saw the creation of an all-female brigade, reportedly set up by the former *al-Khansaa* Brigade leader, Umm Rayan al Tunisi, who fled Syria. The first suicide bombing attack perpetrated by a Daesh female fighter was also confirmed in Libya and, by some estimates, as many as 1,000 women had joined the Daesh affiliate in the country by the end of 2016.[95] Meanwhile, in Iraq as well, as the battle for Mosul reached its endgame in 2017, Daesh resorted to tactics reminiscent of those of its AQI predecessor, unleashing more than 20 female suicide bombers against Iraqi soldiers.[96]

While these developments could be conceived as the start of a new trend for some of the Daesh affiliates, it is worth noting that, in the past, attacks perpetrated by women have caused dissent, friction and ideological confusion among its followers, with some members refusing to call the women "*mujahadeen"* in their eulogies. This ideological tug-of-war will likely play out for years to come and it is difficult to foresee the outcome– while some observers argue that Daesh has broken with the terrorist 'convention' by mobilising women for battle,[97] others contend that Daesh has yet to normalise women's combat and that the obligatory call to action should be understood as Daesh encouraging women to actively and directly support men's actions.

Rhetorical and tactical evolution in al-Qaeda and Daesh

While many TG's, particularly in the MENA region, resist the idea of women assuming operational roles in terrorist activity, in practice, TG's usually deploy women to meet their strategic and tactical needs. Terrorist propaganda regularly emphasizes a limited role for women, but when pressed, TG's tend to do what is expedient, not what is prescribed in doctrine.[98] Furthermore, the doctrine itself has also evolved throughout the years, with the religious interpretation of women's participation in the armed struggle being tied to the goals of the groups, as well as the changing security and socio-political landscape in which they operate.

Generally, TG's have proclaimed that women should not engage in combat, with exceptions to be explicitly granted only under certain circumstances. The doctrine has been revisited and revised by certain ideologues. In the 1980's, for example, Abdullah Azzam, chief ideologue for the earliest incarnations of al-Qaeda, paved the way for female combatants, stating that combat operations aimed at protecting the lands from invaders were an obligation for all men and women, and further clarifying that women should fight only when the objective was

[94] Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D. (2020).
[95] ANSAmed, (2016). Libya: Female Suicide Bombers in Sirte for First Time. Available at: http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2016/08/18/libya-female-suicide-bombers-in-sirte-for-first-time_9356ca88-8106-49c9-b088-58d89cf8c953.html. See also: L. Khalil (2019), *Behind the veil: women in jihad after the Caliphate*. Available at: Behind the Veil: Women in jihad after the caliphate (lowyinstitute.org).
[96] Ibid.
[97] Winter C. (2018).
[98] Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*.

unambiguously defensive.[99] Similarly, the al-Qaeda ideologue *'*Abd al-Qadir bin 'Abd al-'Aziz argued that women should receive military training, but only with a view to acting in self-defence against the enemies of Islam.[100] In spite of these pronouncements, al-Qaeda's core leadership did not encourage female participation on the battlefield, focusing instead on women's roles as fundraisers and supporters of the *mujahideen*.[101] In 2016, for example, Al Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine prescribed a limited role for women in their so-called jihad: "*We guide and advise our mujahedeen brothers in the west not to allow our Muslim sisters to participate in any lone jihad operation*."

At the same time though, al Qaeda's affiliate organizations and their supporters have had "fewer qualms about activating women to conduct all manner of operations."[102] In 2004, the *Al-Khansaa* magazine, published by the 'Arabian Peninsula Women's In-formation Bureau' and tied to Al-Qaeda, published an article on the female *mujahedeen,* noting that *"We will stand, covered by our veils and wrapped in our robes, weapons in hand, our children in our laps […]*."[103] It also specified the roles of women in the family (i.e., mother, wife, sister and daughter) and in society (e.g. educator, propagator, preacher of Islam, female warrior), stating that when "*jihad becomes a personal duty, then the woman is summoned like a man, and need ask permission neither from her husband nor from her guardian*."[104] Accordingly, the woman "*wages Jihad when she bears arms to defend her family […] when she shows patience and fortitude with her husband who is waging Jihad [...] when […] she calls for Jihad in word, deed, belief, and prayer*."[105] As mentioned earlier, when AQI came under unprecedented military pressure, its leader al-Zarqawi also spoke about *mujahidah* sisters wanting to perpetrate martyrdom operations, foreshadowing the subsequent militarization of women in suicide bombings.

By comparison, Daesh did not stray away for many years from the conventional terrorist position, with its propaganda conveying the message that women are expected to stay at home, support the cause through money and words, and have children, including after remarriage once their husband was killed on the battlefield. In 2015, the *Zawra* Foundation treatise of female combatants elaborated on the highly specific circumstances when women would be allowed to engage in the armed struggle – "*first, if a woman is raided in her house, she may defend herself; second, if she is in a hospital or a public place attacked by the kuffar … and she has a [suicide] belt with her, she can detonate it; third, if she is in a solitary place and has been ordered by the amir, she may use a sniper rifle; and, finally, martyrdom operations are permissible for women but only if the amir has permitted it, and it is for the public good*."[106] The Daesh magazines *Dabiq, Rumiyah* and *al-Naba* also doubled down on this position.

[99] Winter C. (2018).
[100] Winter C. and Margolin D, (2017).
[101] Lahoud N. (2014), *The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad*, Terrorism and Political Violence 26, no. 5 (2014): 780–802, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.772511.
[102] Bloom M., (2011). *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[103] Al-Khansaa, (2004). Available at: https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/519/.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Winter C. and Margolin D, (2017).

Similarly to AQI, when Daesh started haemorrhaging territory, the group changed its narrative from 'offensive' to 'defensive' operations, and in late 2017 it explicitly called for women's participation in jihad. An article published in *Rumiyah* called on women to *"rise with courage and sacrifice in this war […] not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice […] and their desire for Jannah*." The article emphasized that women's roles would be of increased importance, as "*ahead of us await times of intense trials and extreme hardships, and times of severe battles.*"[107] Furthermore, in a video released by the *Al-Hayat* Media Center in 2018, Daesh ostensibly showed for the first time female members engaging in combat activity, praising the "*chaste mujahid woman journeying to her Lord with the garments of purity and faith, seeking revenge for her religion and for the honour of her sisters".*[108]

The rhetorical evolution of Daesh and AQI illustrate the ways in which TG's adapt to the changing requirements of their operational landscapes. When they started losing territory, both groups called women to arms under the pretense of strategic necessity. Going forward, it will be important to continue tracking the theological and pragmatic evolution of TG's, to better understand when the conditions are ripe for women's participation in terrorist violence. In parallel, security actors should not overlook women's supportive roles, which are no less important to for the survival of terrorist organisations, the maintenance of their operational capabilities and the perpetuation of their ideological tenets.

Strategic advantages to recruiting women

There are a number of theories about why male-dominated TG's in the MENA region and beyond choose to recruit women, but very little empirical evidence to support those theories. It may be a strategic choice, a reaction to a lack of other resources (specifically male fighters), or a response to hardened targets.[109] While we lack compelling explanations about why groups choose to use women in terrorist attacks, we do know that women are often deployed against both soft and hardened targets, and that female suicide bombings can be particularly deadly. However, in other circumstances, women are incorporated into TG's for their ability to provide logistical and financial support, as has often been the case in Al Qaeda, and to facilitate state-building programs, like Daesh in Syria and Iraq. At times, therefore, women may provide a tactical edge for TG's, whereas in other circumstances they might be instrumental to their rise and survival.

Legitimacy and longevity

For Daesh in particular, motherhood, wifehood and sisterhood assumed a strategic role, as these 'duties' were critical for the establishment and the longevity of the 'Caliphate.' For starters, the female recruits and the promise of marriage helped to draw in men, especially those who struggled with unemployment in their home country.[110] Daesh even set up a

[107] Our Journey to Allah (2017), Rumiyah. Issue 11, released July 13.
[108] Lahoud, N, (2018), *Empowerment or Subjugation: A Gendered Analysis of ISIL Messaging*. UN Women.
[109] Martha Crenshaw, (1987). *Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches*, Journal of Strategic Studies 10, no. 4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398708437313.
[110] Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D., (2020).

marriage bureau in Raqqa and a welfare system to help the new families settle in.[111]The promise of support for families of fighters served to incentivise both men and women to join and remain with the group. Women in the 'Caliphate' were, therefore, "fully commoditized and used to recruit, reward, retain male fighters and, ultimately, reproduce. […] In so doing, women were systematically exploited as a means of starving off ISIS' declining rate of recruitment and presenting a bulwark against defection […]Having a wife, a child, and a house were strong incentives not to leave ISIS territory".[112] This is also why Daesh established polygamous marriages and encouraged swift remarriage for the widows who lost their husbands in battle.

The importance of motherhood to Daesh is reflected in the significant number of children born to Daesh-affiliated women. The latter raised the children they had brought with them to the 'Caliphate' and gave birth to approximately 6,500 more children as part of a strategy to grow the 'Caliphate'.[113] In recent interviews with women affiliated with Daesh, 97.4% of them said their role was as a mother or wife.[114] Just as importantly, women were entrusted with educating and indoctrinating their children, thus assuming a key role in raising future Daesh leaders, fighters and supporters.

Even as Daesh has been weakened, some women continue to perpetuate its doctrine, including in the camps for internally displaced people, which have been described as incubators of radicalization and extremism. [115] Daesh women in the camps still enjoy significant influence among their fellow detainees and the group's virtual followers, while their online activism suggests that they are very much intent on keeping the Caliphate' dream alive. Women claiming to be detained in al-Hawl camp have issued several videos and letters in multiple languages, denouncing their dire circumstances and warning that the imprisoned women are a "ticking bomb".[116]

In addition, TG's can also strategically utilize gender in order to enhance perceptions of organizational legitimacy. Daesh and its affiliates, for example, have highlighted gender-based violence in their propaganda, using discrimination against women, violations of women's rights and instances of *Islamophobia* in the "treacherous West" as justifications for their own actions. While posing as a 'protector' of Muslim women, Daesh vilified 'enemy (non-Muslim) women' and denounced the 'rape culture' in the West to make the case for enforcing strict gender segregation and 'traditional' family roles.[117]

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[111] Ibid.

[112] Bloom, M. and Lokmanoglu, A. (2020). *From Pawn to Knights: The Changing Role of Women's Agency in Terrorism*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759263.

[113] Cook J. and Vale G., (2018. It is also worth noting that the experience of children born to ISIS parents is varied, and with a significant difference between girls and boys. There are also examples of children rebelling against ISIS and refusing to accept their indoctrination. See also: Cook and Vale (2019) *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.* CTC Sentinel 12(6) https://ctc.usma.edu/daesh-diaspora-challenges-posed-women-minors-fall-caliphate/.

[114] Speckhard, A. and Ellenberg, M. D. (2020).

[115] Other women may have also attempted to maintain 'ordinary family' lives even as spouses and other family members joined Daesh. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise that 'all mothers' or 'all wives' affiliated to Daesh were/are supporters.[115] Mere association through marriage is not a crime. It is also worth noting that some of the women may have been subjected to domestic violence and may have been fearful of leaving their husbands. See also Spalek, B. (2016) "Radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation in relation to families: Key challenges for research, policy and practice" *Security Journal* 29, pp. 39–52. See also UN CTED (2020) "The Prosecution of ISIL Associated Women." *CTED Analytical Brief*.

[116] Vale, G. (2109).

[117] Lahoud, N. (2018) *Empowerment or Subjugation: An Analysis of ISIL's Gender Messaging* https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/6/empowerment-or-subjugation ; Jacobsen, S.

Notably, when Daesh enslaved and abused 'enemy women' (i.e., non-Muslim), the complicity and participation of Daesh women in this violence served to 'normalize' these and other gruesome acts (e.g., enforcing the dress code and community rules; searching women during house raids; guarding Yazidi sex slaves and hostages, running brothels, etc.). Since women are oftentimes seen as pacifists, their support for such terrorist violence implied a purposeful 'social revolution', at least in the eyes of certain audiences.[118] Therefore, women's support for these gender norms and the group's broader goals helped shore up the Daesh ideology and bestow a semblance of societal legitimacy onto these inhumane tactics.

Stealth, shame and sensationalism

The recruitment of women and their participation in terrorist violence has been used to shame men into taking up arms. In 2004, for example, al-Zarqawi declared that the "*war has broken out, the caller to jihad has called for it, and the doors of heaven have been opened! So if you don't want to be of the knights, then make room for the women to wage war, and you can take the eyeliner*."[119] Daesh propaganda has also shamed men for failing to engage in the global armed struggle and for not fulfilling the heroic, protective functions that are expected of them: "[…] *for he who wears the cloak of […] dissuasion, I say […] if there were any good in you, you would have worn clothes of war and come to guard the outskirts of Mosul to thereby protect your "sisters," but not in the least…May Allah disfigure the turbans of the PKK's women, yet they have more manhood than your likes*!"[120]

Likewise, weaponizing the female body in suicide bombings has also served strategic terrorist aims, generating sensationalist media coverage, sustained public attention, increased fear and in some cases greater sympathy for the terrorist cause.[121] For example, in the aftermath of the first female Palestinian suicide attack recorded in 2002, the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Sha'ab* taunted, "*It is a woman, a woman, a woman who is a source of pride for the women of this nation and a source of honor that shames the submissive men with a shame that cannot be washed away except by blood*."[122] The Jordanian daily *Al-Dustour* commented "*Oh Wafa Idris, mercy upon you and shame upon us*."[123] On average, female attackers are said to receive eight times more media coverage than their male counterparts, thereby drawing the attention of a wider audience. [124] Furthermore, for TG's that have been weakened and pushed underground, female operatives might prove to be a valuable asset in terms of stealth and resilience. Many of the female supporters are presumably less visible publicly than their male

(2019). *Calling on Women: Female-Specific Motivation Narratives in Danish Online Jihad Propaganda*. Perspectives on Terrorism, 13(4), 14-26.

[118] Brown, K.E (2020) *Gender, Religion and Extremism: finding women in anti-radicalisation.* Oxford: OUP.

[119] Winter C. and Margolin D, (2017).

[120]. Ingram K. M., (2017). *IS's Appeal to Western Women: Policy Implications*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2017.2.04.

[121] Hearne, E. B. (2009). *Participants, enablers, and preventers: The roles of women in terrorism*. Research Paper presented at the British International Studies Association, Leicester, UK. Retrieved from https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2010/MVZ203/Gender___Terrorism__BISA__Hearne__Dec_2009.pdf.

[122] MEMRI, (2002). *Wafa Idris: The Celebration of the First Female Palestinian Suicide Bomber - Part II.* Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 84. Available at: https://www.memri.org/reports/wafa-idris-celebration-first-female-palestinian-suicide-bomber-part-ii.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Bloom M., (2011). *The rise of the female suicide bomber*. Available at: The rise of the female suicide bomber | New Humanist.

counterparts, which could be a key advantage in their ability to evade the gaze of the authorities and to covertly raise continued support.

IMPLICATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

While we know a great deal about the roles and activities of women in some groups, especially Daesh, there is far less information about the roles of women involved in terrorism with other groups, including AQ affiliates. In fact, the majority of countries and groups in the MENA region – particularly in North Africa – are understudied. On account of these gaps, the section below lays out the key implications for policy, practice and subsequent research, especially in relation to Daesh, a terrorist organisation that has transitioned to a global insurgency with over 14 affiliates across the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia.

The existing body of knowledge seems to suggest an evolution in women's terrorist activity and their roles within TG's (i.e., from more supportive roles to more operational ones). However, while these roles and activities have been expanding in the MENA region over the last thirty years, research suggests that counter-terrorism policies and practices have stagnated with regards to understanding and countering women's involvement. Furthermore, broadly speaking, there is still a tendency to downplay the participation and influence of women in relation to terrorism. To a degree, this might be caused by Western viewpoints being overly focussed on the fact that contemporary TG's tend to be patriarchal in their structures, with women largely kept outside the sphere of decision-making processes. As stated previously, the limited data available almost certainly diminishes comprehensive understanding of the variety of motivations, and the inherent complexities, of radicalisation of women. Also possible is that female influence in terrorism might be understated because, in most contexts, societal and gender norms still portray women as inherently less violent and less dangerous.

Such an approach, however, can easily overlook how effectively TG'sutilise women. For certain TG's, individual female attackers are more expendable than the men who serve in leadership positions. For others, women as a whole are key to birthing the next generation of terrorist fighters, to legitimizing and advancing their violent extremist goals, and ultimately to serving as a strategic marketing tool. For Daesh, in particular, women were the cornerstones of the 'state' it sought to create, crucial to its project of establishing a permanent society with roots.

In addition, minimising women's roles in terrorism means that societies are ill-prepared to address the ramifications of this phenomenon in the future. This is especially pertinent in the case of Daesh. In its latest propaganda, the TG has emphasized its commitment to its alleged 'jihad' in Africa, while urging fighters to expand on multiple fronts. Daesh media has also praised the 'offensives' and 'victories' achieved by the *mujahideen* in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the *Congo*, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and elsewhere. However, in spite of these significant developments, very little is known about the female supporters and soldiers of the 'Caliphate' in Africa. Although there is little by way of information on women's role in terrorism in the Sahel, it is clearly not realistic to suggest that women play virtually no role in the region in relation to this phenomenon. The question is how, and to what extent, do they provide support in ways that remain largely undetected and/or undocumented? Equally clear,

it would seem, is that more concerted efforts will be needed to understand the prospects, if any, for increased female participation in terrorism across this region of interest.

Similar questions linger with respect to women's involvement in terrorism outside of the Sahel region. Analysts, for example, have debated whether instances of female suicide bombings associated with Daesh are the result of depleting numbers of male militants and their final pockets of resistance, or whether they represent the beginning of a broader trend of female militancy. Neither prior research nor the current Daesh propaganda offer definitive answers in this regard.

Research suggests that TG's are more likely to recruit and deploy female fighters when they come under mounting pressure. In line with this, Daesh propaganda has in fact portrayed women as vitally important for responding to personnel losses, defeat on the frontline and dwindling resources. However, going forward, it is difficult to predict whether there will be an even greater participation of Daesh women in what they deem to be violent jihad. Were this to happen, such developments would have a profound influence on the terrorist threat, as well as on counter-terrorism efforts and rehabilitation programs.

When looking ahead though, security actors can anticipate with a view to preparing for a range of possible scenarios. In the future, experts believe that there will likely be continued participation of Daesh women in one-off attacks and it will be important to monitor whether Daesh propaganda praises them as female fighters or reinforces the 'conventional approach' that these were exceptional martyrs who made a sacrifice for the cause. Above and beyond such one-off attacks, such an eventual increase in women's participation in terrorist violence would require changes in how terrorist networks position themselves, their long-term objectives and their organisational structures. What is clearer though is that women will certainly play an important role – symbolically and operationally – in any Daesh resurgence and/or its transformation from a governance project into a global terrorist movement.

Evidence available to date and current research suggests that women will contribute to the staying power of the Daesh brand, maintaining networks and ties among its sympathizers, sustaining the myths and memory of the group, and sometimes committing violence in the name of their ideology. In particular, as some Subject Matter Experts contend, the women returning from conflict zones to their home countries will be essential for keeping the memory alive, unless they can be effectively deradicalised and rehabilitated. This also means that we may see an increase in women-produced media content, emphasising their new roles as 'witnesses of Daesh.'

At the same time, as Daesh fails to validate the 'Caliphate' as a safe and well-governed place, we will likely see fewer women travel overseas to join Daesh; instead, we might see an increase in the number of women participating in online activities, supporting domestic terrorist actions and acting as part of all-female institutional structures. In doing so, women could potentially play a major part in (re)fuelling the jihadist cause in the West. Meanwhile, in MENA, it is possible that all-female cells might become more autonomous (following the operational trajectory seen in Libya), with women engaging more actively in so-called martyrdom operations and other activities.

Outside of these specific all-female units, the women of Daesh might be expected to comply even more with strict gender norms and roles, to demonstrate the continued strength of the group's ideology. This, in turn, would entail fewer opportunities for women to take on leadership roles or to participate in fighting, coupled with an increased focus on family functions and supportive activities (e.g., fundraising, facilitating logistical operations, etc.). These functions will be increasingly important for Daesh, if it continues towards an ever more clandestine existence. Furthermore, the punishment of women perceived as 'corrupting influencers' could extend outside of the camps for displaced people, in which case terrorist attacks might target locations where women disregard the Daesh gender order (i.e., participating and mixing in public events).

Options for policy development and future research

Should these, or modified versions of these, potential future scenarios come about, the options outlined below could serve to inform the future directions of policy, practice and research in relation to women's participation in terrorism:

- **Conduct more targeted research on female terrorism.** Additional research is needed to understand the dynamics leading to women's increasing involvement in terrorist activity, especially in those groups that remain understudied to date. Further research is also needed to assess the effectiveness of counter-terrorism responses, including differential and biased effects based on gender.

  Furthermore, as this paper has noted, certain exploratory studies suggest that education does not have a direct, causal impact on terrorism. Given the fact that education has long been deemed central to preventing young people from being drawn to violent extremist ideologies and terrorist organisations, it is important that future research investigate this topic further, in a comprehensive and systematic fashion.

- **Document, disseminate and heed lessons learned.** Over the past few decades, there have been many efforts to anticipate, prevent and respond to female terrorism, including when it comes to reintegrating women FTF's. This collective experience has surely generated valuable lessons, which should be captured and incorporated into policy and practice. Likewise, independent evaluations of programmes aimed at preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism could also enhance our collective understanding of what works (and what does not) in relation to women's engagement in these phenomena.

  At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the adaptive learning that takes places in terrorist organisations, as they strive to grow, expand and survive. Evidence shows that TG's are sharing their own 'lessons learned' on how to successfully conduct media campaigns, recruit online, fundraise etc., all while evading detection. Therefore, efforts to monitor and counter these adaptive processes should also integrate gender perspectives.

- **Conduct gender-sensitive analysis and threat assessment.** Incorporating gender perspectives into the analysis of terrorism trends should become the norm across the board. In addition, there should be a robust framework for evaluating the terrorist threats that women pose, including the risks associated with the early release of a female terrorist.

- **Ensure gender-sensitivity across all efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.** This starts with addressing gender-specific barriers to women's participation in the security sector and improving the recruitment, retention and advancement of women therein. It further entails developing the requisite gender expertise in enforcement, investigation and prosecution capacities. At the same time, regular consultations with women leaders to shape prevention, de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs are important. Law enforcement officers should also benefit from tailored training on the design and implementation of prison and rehabilitation programmes for women. Likewise, training for law enforcement should emphasize the need to involve women (in culturally-appropriate ways) in community-police dialogues on counter-terrorism.

  Furthermore, efforts should be made to provide pathways for women to exit TG's. Counter-terrorism policies should be comprehensive in nature, accounting for the fact that women can be victims and perpetrators (or a combination thereof), as well as agents of change and prevention. Last but not least, promoting gender equality, women's rights and human rights will be key to the success of long-term prevention and counter-terrorism efforts.


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