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## CHAPTER 5

# The Role of Women in Post-IS Jihadist Transformation and in Countering Extremism

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*Anita Perešin*

### Introduction

Many jihadist organisations have recognised the importance of women in jihad and have systematically used them for their activities for decades. Female jihadists can be found in different jihadist organisations – from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Palestine to Syria, Iraq and the African continent – where their role is viewed as being as important as that of their male counterparts. The presence of female jihadists in Western countries is also on the rise.

With the proclamation of the Caliphate of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, the role of women in jihadist organisations received global publicity. By presenting and encouraging women as essential for the establishment of the new Muslim *umma* and preserving its longevity, IS introduced a new phase in its employment of women for the jihadist cause. The group succeeded in attracting more women from the West, both convert and born Muslims, than any other jihadist group had been able to do in the past. It also introduced a broad spectrum of roles that could be filled by women, not only in the territory where IS had gained control but also in their home countries. By giving the same importance to *muhajirat*<sup>1</sup> and domestic female jihadists, and by promoting both passive and active roles for them in jihad, IS created a new generation of female jihadists and a “network of sisters”, motivated by a sense of empowerment and willing to support the group’s long-term objectives.

Strategically planned female jihadist activities, supported by a continuous promotion of their roles via the Internet, have made it possible for IS to continue to employ women for its global operations, even after the collapse of the Caliphate. The transformation of the group and its loss of “credibility” in governing the so-called Islamic State did not, in fact, diminish or extinguish its attractiveness for women. The group has given women the ability to keep their roles in the post-IS transformation era and has afforded itself the capacity to continue to be a prominent actor on the global jihadist scene. Such global promotion of women in jihad can motivate other jihadist groups to increase the employment of female cadres for their cause or to motivate radicalised women to act as lone wolves.

There are already many examples of women’s engagement in jihadist activities in Western countries. According to the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (EUROPOL, 2017: 22), one in four people arrested in 2016 for terrorism-related offences were women. The 2017 report of the Dutch Intelligence Service (AIVD) on jihadist women warns that the threat women pose should not be underestimated (AIVD, 2017). A report from The Heritage Foundation in the same year also notes “a marked jump in the involvement of women in terrorist plots in Europe over the previous two years”<sup>2</sup> (Barret, 2017: 24). Such dramatic growth of female involvement in jihadist terrorism leads to the “feminisation of jihad” (Brill Olcott and Haqqani, 2004),<sup>3</sup> a trend that is expected to rise in the future. But it also offers the opportunity to take advantage of the presence of women in the counter-terrorism field, to more effectively counter jihadist narratives and plans, thanks to the former’s better insight into the mentality and approaches of the female terrorists.

## The Prospect of Female Fighters

The role of women in jihad is a topic that has long been debated among the jihadist community. Classical and contemporary Muslim religious literature leaves much room for different interpretations and open questions due to its lack of clarity on the subject. There is no consensus on the role of women in combat within the Islamic community as well as within the most prominent jihadist organisations. There are some sources showing examples of women companions of the Prophet Muhammad who participated in battles alongside men. However, the information concerning the nature of their participation is limited and shows them in predominantly supporting roles, “usually by accompanying the fighters,

encouraging the men, or by providing medical care and assistance after the fact.” (Cook, 2005: 376).

Classical religious authorities, while being fairly negative on women participating in violent jihad except in extraordinary circumstances, did not explicitly forbid it. This ambiguity regarding jihadist female fighters provides theological space for women to fill militant roles in the modern jihad (De Leede *et al.*, 2017). Using Muhammad Khayr Haykal’s<sup>4</sup> explanation, Cook (2005: 378) distinguishes between two types of jihad: *offensive jihad* (defined as a community obligation, or *fard al-kifaya*) and *defensive jihad* (defined as an individual obligation, or *fard al-‘ayn*). In the first case, there is no necessity for women to fight, but women should have that option if they wish to volunteer. Under the condition of the latter, girls and women have to fight, even without parents’ or husbands’ permission.

There are a handful of jihadist terrorist groups which have long supported the idea of women playing an active role in jihad. These groups, such as Hamas in Palestine and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been trying to associate women more closely with actual fighting in many conflict zones. In Article 12 of its Covenant (1988), Hamas clearly states that women are expected to play such role in jihad:

Resisting and quelling the enemy becomes the individual duty of every Muslim, male or female. A woman can go out to fight the enemy without her husband’s permission. (Hamas, 1998)

As such, the women of Hamas have actively carried out this role in the field for decades.

Others argue that even in extreme circumstances, when the necessity for jihad is incumbent upon the entire Muslim community, women fighting remains an option, not an obligation (Cook, 2005: 381), placing the supportive role of women in front of an active one. Even within a group, there can be disagreements regarding the place of women in jihad, as was the case with al-Qaeda’s leadership. The only jihadist leader who formally addressed the jihadist community on women’s role in jihad and explicitly called on women to take part in fighting is Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq until he was killed in 2006. From his statements it is clear that al-Zarqawi believed that women should take a more active role in jihad and even requested them “to perpetrate martyrdom-seeking operations” (cited in Winter and Margolin, 2017: 24). His

call on “systematic militarization of women” resonated with a Belgian woman, Muriel Degauque, who attacked a US military convoy near Baghdad in 2005, acting as the first European female suicide bomber.

However, al-Zarqawi did not exclude the importance of female supporting roles, such as raising children and encouraging their husbands and sons to fight jihad. Thus, Lahoud (2014: 788) argues that al-Zarqawi’s statement “If you [Muslim men] are not going to be chivalrous knights in this war (*fursan al-harb*), make way for women to wage it”, could rather be interpreted as his attempt to shame Muslim men who had not taken up jihad than as genuinely calling on women to enter the battlefield. The then number two and current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has never shared al-Zarqawi’s standpoint. In response to a female questioner during an open interview with jihadist forum members in April 2008, he clearly advocates that there is no role for women in al-Qaeda and that the women of the *mujahidin* should only have a domestic role:

Al-Qaeda has no women, but the women of the *mujahidin* do their heroic part in taking care of their homes and sons in the roughness of the immigration, movement, unity, and expecting the Crusader to strike (cited in INSITE, 2008).

There is no indication that al-Qaeda will officially change its stand in the near future. However, al-Zarqawi is still perceived as one of the most influential jihadist ideologists whose speeches still inspire many from various jihadist organisations and lone actors who are attracted by the jihadist ideology.

IS, on the other hand, with no clear statement of its leadership on this issue, successfully combines both passive and active female roles by deploying female jihadists in varying capacities as deemed desirable. In the document entitled “Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto on Women by the *al-Khansa*’ Brigade,” IS demonstrates the group’s position on the role of women and endorses their participation in both supportive and active roles (Winter, 2015).<sup>5</sup> However, in this document it is clarified that the designated role of women under IS is primarily domestic: to raise the new generation of jihadists. A combat role for women is not excluded, but only in extreme situations of an enemy attack against the country, an insufficient number of available men to engage the enemy, or a fatwa issued by an imam. The image of IS female fighters promoted online should primarily be seen as an IS propaganda tool to lure Western women. However, the efforts IS invests in women by providing them with training on how to use and

fabricate weapons and carry out suicide bombings prove the group's intention to have women ready to take active roles when the need arises.

The fact that the women's right to play an active role in jihad is not fully accepted among conservative Muslims does not prevent IS from attempting to legitimise such a possibility, as they did in 2015 with the IS's Manifesto and the introduction of an example of IS' marriage certificate. This certificate, approved by both parties, gives the woman the right to impose conditions on accepting the marriage. It is written that the husband would not deny the wife's wish to carry out a suicide attack if the IS leader approves it: "If the leader of the faithful [al-Baghdadi] consents to her to carrying out a suicide mission, then her husband should not prohibit her" (cited in Saul, 2015). This shows how the decision over her life or death relies upon the IS leader.

In August 2015, the IS-linked al-Zawra'a Foundation released a treatise entitled "Valuable Advice and Important Analysis on the Rules for Women's Participation in Jihad" (Winter and Margolin, 2017: 26). It clarifies the conditions in which women may engage in combative jihad, but advises them rather to be focused on female domestic roles. IS has continued intensively to discuss the role of women in combat in various publications like *Dabiq*, *Rumiya* and *al-Naba'*, making clear that women should prioritise their support for the jihad carried out by the Islamic State. The arguments against the use of women in combat – such as disapproval of the mixing of sexes on the battlefield, the sufficiency of male fighters and the inability to protect the honour of women – were put aside in extraordinary circumstances, as in recent times when IS has continued to lose territory in Syria and in Iraq. The July 2017 issue of the IS magazine *Rumiya* endorses the prospect of female combatants whose time had come to take up arms in combative jihad and "to rise with courage and sacrifice in this war," (Winter and Margolin, 2017: 24) not due the lack of male fighters, but rather due to their religious obligation and the desire for heaven. In addition, in February 2018, the first IS video praised women for their contributions in combat by promoting female fighters who were fighting alongside men on the front lines (Gartenstein-Ross *et al.*, 2018).

These calls provoked many negative reactions and comments among IS male sympathisers on social networks and did not get much attention in IS publications. A prompt reaction came from al-Qaeda with the headlines in the new women's magazine entitled "Baytuki" ("Your Home") showing al-Qaeda's position on the role of women in jihad: "Prepare the food that your husband loves, prepare his bed after that and do what he wants" (cited in Svirski, 2018).

From the Islamic jurisprudential point of view, any obstacle to women actively participating in *defensive jihad* could be a double-edged sword for jihadist organisations. Lahoud (2014: 781) warns all the groups who have either purposely refrained from calling on women to fight alongside men or have explicitly excluded such possibility that such exclusion represents “the Achilles’ heel of jihadist ideology.” With the exclusion of women from combat, Lahoud elaborates, jihadists would lose the credibility of the *defensive jihad* they have declared they are waging and have justified through classical religious doctrine. On the other hand, she argues, the call on women to join men in combat could cause the loss of sympathy from conservative Muslims and distract possible male recruits.

The IS experience shows that jihadist organisations will not refrain from using female fighters in the future in exceptional circumstances and that the tactical successes and benefits of using female fighters will prevail over negative attitudes towards them among more conservative cadres. Their limited usage, as was the case in the final battle for Mosul in 2016–2017, did not “compromise the group’s power system” (Peresin and Cervone, 2015: 506), nor provoke “a sexual revolution that would supplant jihad” (Lahoud, 2014: 798), as was previously feared. Thus, the future involvement of female fighters in conflict zones could be expected to rise, even within jihadist organisations that attribute more conservative gender roles to women. While some jihadist organisations show no indication of possible change in accepting female fighters, IS, by accepting them even in a limited way, will keep the image of the most attractive jihadist group for women.

## The Rise of Female Suicide Bombers

Martyrdom operations are perceived differently from fighting, and also require religious legitimacy. Jihadist ideologues and leaders, while not being so open as to call on women to join them on the battlefield, more openly support women who volunteer to carry out martyrdom suicide operations. Lahoud (2014: 783) explains that the role of female suicide bombers can be easily justified because a martyrdom operation can be carried out by a woman without having to be in the company of a male who is not her *mahram*,<sup>6</sup> to avoid accusations that jihadists permit sacrificing or violating women’s honour. Although it has been mainly associated with the conflicts in Chechnya and Palestine, or amongst the so-called more progressive jihadists, currently the participation of women in



suicide missions has become greatly exploited by more active jihadist terrorist organisations in different areas. In the past few years, we have witnessed a rise in the number of martyrdom operations carried out by women in the name of various jihadist organisations.

According to Bloom (2014) there are four primary changes within the jihadist terrorist organisations which support such a rise: (1) an ideological shift with the issue of fatwas on women's obligation for jihad; (2) the change in the structure of terrorist organisations, which now host numerous regional affiliates that are more open to employing women for such operations; (3) a change from hard to soft targets that are more accessible to women; and (4) a new mobilisation strategy where the use of women helps to mobilise men into terrorist organisations.

The pursuit of martyrdom is as desirable for female jihadists as it is for males, even though the reward aspect of female martyrs is different from that of males and therefore significantly less attractive. The employment of women in suicide attacks could not be seen as an act of desperation, due to the lack of male suicide attackers, but most probably as the desire of a jihadist organisation to skew the profile of the typical suicide attacker and to spread more fear and uncertainty among the population. No less important is the fact that female suicide bombers receive much more media publicity than male ones, which brings significant benefits to the jihadist cause without compromising their conservative credentials.

Among the jihadist terrorist groups which deploy women in suicide missions, Boko Haram, also known as the Islamic State in the West Africa (ISWA), has proven to be more notorious than any other organisation. Research conducted by Warner and Matfess (2017) finds that Boko Haram is the first terrorist group in history to employ more women suicide bombers than men. According to this research, since 2011 at least 244 of the 338 attacks were carried out by women. In 2017 alone, Boko Haram sent 80 women on suicide missions. If the current trend continues, Boko Haram is expected to quadruple its female suicide bombing attacks from previous years. A rationale behind using more women than men, according to a former militant for this research, is that "women are cheap, angry for the most part, and using women saves male fighters" (Warner and Matfess 2017: 29).

IS has regularly attracted and deployed female suicide bombers not only in Syria and Iraq, but also in other regions either through its own branches or through its affiliates, including in Western countries. The 26-year-old Hasna Aït Boulahcen, the cousin of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected IS mastermind



of the Paris attack in November 2015, became the first female jihadist suicide bomber in Europe.

Even so, women's martyrdom operations remain controversial among jihadist terrorist organisations, including both IS and al-Qaeda, and are not always officially supported and approved. Such was the case of Amina, the wife of the prominent jihadist cleric Anwar al-'Awlaqi.<sup>7</sup> After the latter was killed, her intention to carry out a martyrdom operation was thwarted by Sheikh Abu Basir, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Abu Basir was concerned that such an operation carried out by a sister "would bring a lot of problems for them [AQAP]" (Lahoud, 2014: 784). Similar to this was the official reaction of IS after the Mombasa attack in 2016. Carried out by three female suicide bombers, the attack was at first approved and welcomed by IS, even though it belittled the role of the women, describing them not as "female soldiers" of the Islamic State but only as "supporters," in contrast with how they had embraced male suicide bombers. However, a stricter reaction followed in a subsequent issue of the IS newspaper *al-Naba'* (2016 Issue 50), with a message addressed to all women, using the Qur'anic verse (33:33): "O [Wives of the Prophet], sit still in your homes" (Lahoud, 2017: 68). The author of the essay clearly wished to remind readers of IS's position on women's main role in society.

Despite such inconsistency in public support and approval of the use of female suicide bombers, jihadist organisations, including IS, will not be likely to abandon the benefits female martyrs can bring to jihad. They consider it irrational not to exploit the undisguised desire of some women to die a martyr's death, repeatedly expressed in public. All these facts, which foster the revival of a female suicide bomber phenomenon, will fuel its tendency to rise in the future.

## The Feminisation of Jihad

Pictures posted online of female jihadists carrying Kalashnikovs and suicide belts have flooded social networks and internet platforms – calling out to women to become female martyrs and providing explicit directions to women returnees to be prepared for jihadist missions in their home countries. They have promoted women as important actors in modern jihadism. By giving women the same roles as men and importance in the Caliphate and in their home countries, IS has identified women as essential jihadist players and has assured long-term

support of women for the jihadist cause. Combined with the rising need to have more women in jihadist ranks, the ever-growing number of both convert and born Muslim women who willingly join terrorist jihadist organisations shows a trend towards the “feminisation of jihad” and the creation of a new generation of female jihadists. These women are empowered to fill at once both passive and active roles that jihadist organisations now offer, and to act globally in such roles.

More women on the jihadist scene could translate to more power and increasingly more important roles for women. The rise in their number would lessen the diversity between passive and active roles and give women the opportunity for more active participation. This will especially be the case with women who are interested in participating as lone actors for the jihadist cause, without strict ties to any one organisation.

Female jihadists present a new security challenge for western countries. As is the case with male terrorists, the possibility that IS will send female operatives to carry out terrorist attacks once they return home cannot be ruled out. Gartenstein-Ross *et al.* (2018) see three main future threats from IS female returnees: (1) plotting external operations, since women are still considered in many countries as less threatening or capable of violence than men. This notion could be easily exploited in the case of female returnees who may play the role of naïve victims and as such avoid the scrutiny of security checks or prosecutions; (2) radicalising and recruiting others in their home countries and serving as a connection or conduit between the newly radicalised and established jihadists; (3) assisting lone actors or small group attackers as “virtual planners” by supporting attacks through conceptualisation, target selection, timing and direct technical assistance.

There is ample evidence to suggest that women are prepared for such tasks, from weapons training for women in the IS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq to calls for home-grown attacks in the West. Yet in 2016 in France, the first all-female terrorist cell emerged, composed of women who had plotted to set off a car bomb near the Cathedral of Notre Dame of Paris (Allen, 2016). Recently, a Belgian foreign fighter testified how IS had trained three women, one Dutch and two Belgians, to commit terrorist attacks in Europe (Pieters, 2018). At the same time, Western female IS sympathisers continuously express a degree of frustration on the lack of active roles for women in the West. A French letter posted on the Telegram channel on 2 February 2018 and attributed to the women of IS expressed a desire for physical participation in jihad and the pursuit of martyrdom. In their message addressed to IS leader al-Baghdadi, Umm Abdullah

and Umm Abd al-Rahman affirm women's aspirations to receive the same status jihadist men have and to become martyrs, and to earn paradise:

[O]ur problem is that we are girls! But we are not like other girls! ... Death for us is life ... and life for us is jihad! ... We want a path to jihad! And our biggest hope is for death in martyrdom. And do not say 'you are girls' because we know this! But we are girls with the souls of men! (cited in Maza, 2018)

Additionally, women are aiming to take over from men the task of coordinating jihadist networks across Europe. Female jihadists are trying to fill the gap left by their detained husbands and to take over their roles in establishing and coordinating jihadist networks during their detention. This trend can be seen within the most radical Salafist communities, such as the one in Germany. German authorities identified an Islamist network made up of approximately 40 women in North Rhine-Westphalia which follows "a strict Salafist doctrine – from how to raise children and cook ingredients to how to interpret Islamic rules and stir up hatred against the so-called 'non-believers'" (Deutsche Welle, 2017). For the same source, the German Head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) confirmed that the Islamist women's network is also active in advertising and proselytising an extremely conservative Salafist ideology on the Internet. Moreover, they indoctrinate children from an early age to follow their ideology and way of life. These women won the approval of their male counterparts for this role, who have noticed that "women can network much better and are therefore more capable of expanding the scene and keeping it active."

The idea of the Caliphate and the extreme IS ideology will live as long as the group has the support of sympathisers who will spread its ideology. The role of jihadist sisters, mothers and wives is crucial in this process due to the influence women have on their family members, especially on children. The collapse of the IS Caliphate will not diminish jihadist ideology and goals, as long as there are women like Zarah, a former member of *al-Khansa'* Brigade from Morocco. After she returned home from Syria, she promised that jihadist women "will bring up strong sons and daughters and tell them about the life in the Caliphate." Even if the enemies of the Caliphate try to destroy it, Zarah is convinced that "it will live on as long as we spread the idea of the Islamic State. Even if we had not been able to keep it, our children will one day get it back" (cited in Mekhennet and Warrick, 2017).

## The Role of Women in Raising Jihadist Children

The women of IS are constantly reminded of the importance of their direct contribution to IS goals through motherhood and spousal support. Moreover, this domestic duty has been repeatedly glorified in all propaganda materials and promoted as a spiritually righteous obligation of women. As declared in the Manifesto on Muslim Women “the greatness of her position, the purpose of her existence is the divine duty of motherhood” (Winter, 2015: 18).

IS ideologists have demonstrated a clear vision of the importance of women in its ranks. From the time of the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014, they have been systematically trying to lure women from the West, both those who were willing to move to the IS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq and those unable to travel but willing to support IS goals in their home countries. First, it needed wives for thousands of Western foreign fighters, to keep them in the IS-controlled territory and to raise their children – a new generation of jihadists. At the same time, they also needed wider support from mothers abroad – to raise children in the spirit of the jihadist ideology or to support those who are willing to wage jihad. There are many examples of how mothers supported violent actions of their children in the IS-held territory and abroad (both minors and adult children), and even co-opted them in terrorist actions.

Since the proclamation of the Caliphate, IS has constantly promoted the importance of children<sup>8</sup> for the existence and the future of the Caliphate. Exposure to and growing up in cultures of violence promotes the desensitisation to and acceptance by children of violence and even the need for violence as a value-based justice system. Of the 41,490 international citizens from 80 countries who became affiliated with IS in Iraq and Syria, up to 12% are recorded to be minors (Cook and Vale, 2018: 3). Current findings show complex and multi-layered processes through which children were recruited, enlisted, trained, and deployed by IS, quite often with the support of their parents. Barret (2017) declares that from 2014 to 2016, IS recruited and trained more than 2,000 boys between the ages of 9 and 15 as “Cubs of the Caliphate”. IS has invested heavily in the indoctrination and weaponisation of jihadist children in order to create a generation of radicalised youngsters and provide the organisation with the trans-generational capability to support a protracted jihad. IS hoped that children who were either indoctrinated through familial ties or otherwise recruited to be the next generation of jihadists would outlive the impending collapse of the Caliphate and would carry on its vision.

Their success in doing so was displayed in video materials featuring children, who look no older than five, executing prisoners or child soldiers fighting on the frontline alongside adult fighters. On social networks, mothers or both parents sometimes publicly supported such actions of their children or expressed the pride they would feel if their children were martyred one day. Such was the case of a 10-year-old son with his mother Sally Jones, a British Muslim convert who was on the list of the world's most wanted female terrorists before she was killed by a US drone strike in June 2017. After she denied that one of the child executioners was her son, she publicly declared how she "would be very proud" if it was him (Dearden, 2016). There are more such examples of how mothers dreamed of martyrdom for their children, their sacrifice for the Islamist cause and, in their eyes, the reward of paradise.

The deployment of children as suicide bombers is an alarming new phenomenon. The death of Hudhayfa al-Badri, the son of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reported to be 14 years old in a suicide mission in July 2018, was used in the editorial page of the pro-IS magazine *al-Anfal* to encourage other parents to support children's martyrdom. His suicide mission was promoted as a jihadist role model on how important it is to eschew worldly pleasures for jihad, even for children:

Have a good example in your brother Hudhayfa. So roll up your sleeves and declare the mobilisation. Shake from yourselves laziness and weakness. Join your brothers the *mujahidin*, and if you cannot, then do not hesitate in supporting them (al-Anfal, 2018).

As IS continued to lose territory across Syria, there are also many examples of shifting of women's roles to a more militant stance. A trend is that mothers take children to die with them in suicide bombings. Parents co-opting their own children to carry out attacks is an even more worrying trend present not only in IS-held territory, but also in other areas under IS influence. On 13-14 May 2018, in Surabaya (Indonesia's second largest city), three families linked to the Indonesian IS affiliate *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* carried out attacks in which the attackers used their own children as suicide bombers. The children were aged between 9 and 18. Some authors see what could be considered a parent's rational choice at the root of the decision to take children into a terrorist attack. The decision is based on the religious belief that the reward for their '*amaliya* (the term jihadists use to refer to field action) is waiting for them in the afterlife and in the promise

of heaven for the entire family. Others explain that as women are taking a more active role in terrorism, mothers will find it hard to leave their children without being able to ensure that they will follow jihadist ideology. Therefore, they choose to do the *'amaliya* together with their children (Rohmah, 2018).

Several cases illustrate the willingness of mothers to act together with their children or to encourage them to carry out terrorist attacks in Western countries. For instance, in the UK, a mother and her two daughters pleaded guilty to the preparation of terrorist acts as part of the country's first all-female terrorist cell (BBC, 2018). Similarly, the mother of one of the most wanted jihadists in Bosnia and Herzegovina posted a video in July 2016 in which she called upon Muslims worldwide to kill Christians. She said she was proud of her jihadist son, and could not wait for him to become a martyr. "If I had ten more sons, they would go to jihad and fight for Allah," she added for the local newspapers (cited in Slobodna Dalmacija, 2016).

These examples show not only a shift in women's roles in violent extremism but also in supporting terrorist activities by family members, including children. Women and minors affiliated with or inspired by IS have already established their prominence as a security threat, with numerous foiled and successful attacks plotted and carried out globally. Therefore, the mothers' influence on the future activities of their jihadist children should not be underestimated. Their influence could, however, be felt in both directions, either in further radicalisation or in de-radicalisation. As such, the latter requires further analysis and commensurate reactions.

## Women in Counterterrorism

While they are valuable for the jihadist cause, women can also be precious partners in counter-terrorism efforts. Their potential aid in the prevention of radicalisation and countering violent extremism is yet often ignored or underestimated. In many countries, traditional counter-terrorism efforts still do not recognise the advantages of the involvement of women just as some still do not recognise the real threat female jihadists pose to the society.

Women, mothers and sisters are recognised in many cases as the main force behind men's decisions to join jihad. They support the actions of male jihadists, encourage other women to join the ranks, raise jihadist children and are willing to die as martyrs themselves. As a result, female jihadists show a

face incompatible with stereotypes depicting women as tender and delicate in contrast to men.

On the other hand, there are women who were first lured by the jihadist propaganda and joined militant jihadist groups but were later disillusioned. They decided to leave and to cut former connections with jihadist networks. These women – with personal experience of having lived among jihadist communities – could be the most valuable contributors to successful counter-terrorism efforts. Those who understand the mind-set of female jihadists can be invaluable in the creation of measures used to cut a “fatal attraction among women and jihadism” (Perešin, 2015) – and thwart female jihadists in carrying out their particular roles. The strong position women have within the family unit may also be used to challenge extremist narratives at home, at schools and in society. They may prove to be instrumental in the character formation of their children and key to influence the decisions and actions of other family members. The Vienna-based NGO Women Without Borders conducted a study entitled “Can Mothers Challenge Extremism?” Based on 1,023 interviews with mothers in Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland and Nigeria in 2013, this study shows how women’s position within the family allows them to detect early signs of radicalisation, to recognise unusual behaviours or signs of impending violence and to change the radical mind-set of family members. This NGO later developed its Mothers’ School Model which is the first-ever family-centred counter-radicalisation platform (Schlaffer and Kropiunigg, 2016).

However, existing studies on these topics are still limited. Despite differing viewpoints as to whether women indeed have a “unique” role in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) (Fink *et al.*, 2016), most experts agree that women can offer diverse perspectives on problem solving and provide different approaches that can complement counter-terrorism efforts (Haynie and de Jonge Oudraat, 2017). This can be particularly useful in de-radicalisation processes and in anti-extremism and anti-violence campaigns. Counter-narratives against jihadist propaganda can be disseminated more effectively among families and communities by women. Thus, more efforts have to be made to empower women and to leverage their ability to recognise critical signs and challenge extremist narratives in domestic, educational and social environments. When it comes to hard measures against terrorism, female security officials can be mission-critical by having access to populations and sites that men do not, by improving the perception the local communities have towards law enforcement and, in turn, by enhancing the ability of the latter to provide security.



Examples of women's involvements in terrorist activities, as in the 2015 San Bernardino attack, convey how women are influential in whatever capacity they may serve. It is therefore critical to recognise their potential, assess their capabilities and involve them in both terrorism prevention and resolution. Such necessity is already recognised in various UN Security Council resolutions (UN/SC/R 2013, 2014), which ask to ensure effective implementation of comprehensive, integrated legislation and P/CVE strategies. Addressing the role of women and girls is an essential part of those efforts. This encourages Member States to develop strategies, through empowering women, to counter violent extremist narratives that can incite terrorist acts and to address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism.

The same happens with attempts of individual countries to strengthen counter-terrorism efforts. Many countries, in cooperation with non-governmental organisations, support networks and programmes to promote the role of women in countering violent extremism. There are already a few good examples of P/CVE initiatives, such as Mothers for Life in Germany, The Women and Extremism (WaE) programme in the United Kingdom, Austrian Women Without Borders (WWB) and its global SAVE – Sisters Against Violent Extremism campaign, Stop-Jihadism campaign in France, etc.<sup>9</sup> They consult women, involve them in programme design and implementation, carry out gender-specific programmes, have programmes specifically aimed at women, ensure gender indicators in programme monitoring and evaluation, and promote gender equality. In addition, recent recommendations on how to incorporate women into national counter-terrorism strategies include using the potential of women to prevent or mitigate the radicalisation of family and community members, promoting women's participation in military and law enforcement roles to improve security operations and maximising intelligence gathering, and promoting women's participation in security efforts.

Thus, any national level approach that addresses the role of women in terrorism should be similar to other strategies that equally honour the concepts of law enforcement, crime and punishment along with the criminological study of causation, management and prevention, all the while embracing a viable model for diversion and rehabilitation. This measured approach – one that recognises the reality and the consequences of women as both potential perpetrators and potential pacifiers – is vital for the safety and security of a world plagued with the threat of militant jihadism.

## Conclusion

Modern terrorism is not the exclusive purview of men, nor can it be so for the efforts to eradicate it. Jihadist organisations recognise the importance of women. They deploy them to motivate and recruit new members, both male and female, to provide supporting roles and logistics for the actions, and to serve as active members. Women have proved to be especially effective as recruiters and contributors to IS propaganda efforts, the most effective jihadist propaganda ever witnessed. It succeeded in attracting more foreign fighters and domestic supporters from all around the world than any past efforts to do so by other terrorist organisations.

Many female sympathisers of the jihadist ideology see the possibility of empowerment of women in the current jihadist propaganda, and especially in creating a new generation of female jihadists that will bring more women to the global jihadist scene. Calls on women to prepare themselves to play an active and not just a passive role in jihad additionally spread such thoughts. Some terrorist organisations, notably those headed by IS, show signs of an intent to distance themselves from other jihadist interpretations on the subject of combatant women and female martyrs, even if this provoked negative reactions from the religiously conservative Muslim audience. Active roles for women are still not officially fully accepted by all jihadist organisations due to their dubious compliance with Islamic law. Nevertheless, women's expectations of playing active roles in jihad are supported when it comes to gaining an advantage over enemies or in extreme cases of lack of male cadres and desperation. It is expected that jihadist organisations will continue to interpret the classical legal doctrine in a way that allows them to deploy women in the capacity the groups will need: as fighters, suicide bombers or passive supporters. However, public support and celebration of the first two activities will remain low.

With the aim of retaining support from more conservative circles, jihadist organisations will officially continue to give more publicity to women as female supporters of jihadist husbands and mothers of the future jihadists than as female fighters and suicide bombers. This leads to the conclusion that in the future activities of jihadist organisations there will be more differences between the publicly pronounced policies and the real operations that take place in the field. However, by greatly expanding undisputed active roles for women in jihad, the post-IS era will likely introduce the combination of both roles. Female jihadism

will hence most probably transform from a limited and occasional phenomenon into a new normal.

IS female sympathisers, by being empowered with larger and more significant functions, seem to become important actors on the global jihadist scene. They will be more involved in encouraging male jihadists to take action, in supporting them as planners and companions and in keeping jihadist networks alive during men's detention. By instilling in their children the spirit of the Islamic State and the moral obligation to revive it, jihadist women will hold the key to the success of the jihadist agenda in future, "or could be the reason for its failure" as warned by Yusuf al-'Uyayri, the founding leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (killed in 2003), who strongly believed in women's prominent role in the affairs of the *umma* today (Lahoud, 2014: 787).

Women currently play a mixture of passive and active roles in contemporary jihad. After they return to their home countries, they are more likely to play extended roles whose spectrum is yet to be known. Therefore, the limit of the extent to which women can further the jihadist cause is still hard to anticipate. Counter-terrorism efforts can neither misjudge nor ignore the threat the female jihadists pose. Nor they can risk the advantages and better results that women's participation in various counterterrorism fields can bring.

## Notes

- 1 *Muhajirat* is the Arabic word for the "women who made *hijra*." It denotes the women who migrated from the "lands of infidels" to the "Caliphate" of IS.
- 2 In the first five months of 2017, 23% of the total terrorist plots in Europe involved women. It is a significant increase over 2014 and 2015 when the numbers had been only 13% and 5% respectively.
- 3 The term "feminisation of jihad" was first used by Dr. Alexei Malashenko in a panel discussion on martyrdom and jihad held in Washington D.C. on 1 March 2004 (Brill Olcott and Haggani, 2004). He is the former chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Religion, Society, and Security Program. The recent rising trend in deploying women in jihad has validated his term.
- 4 Written in 1993, Muhammad Khayr Haykal's three-volume Arabic work "Jihad and Fighting According to the Shar'ia Policy" presents a detailed discussion of jihad and killing in various Islamic legal perspectives.
- 5 This Manifesto was purportedly developed by the media wing of al-Khanssaa Brigade, an all-female policing unit of IS operating in Raqqa, as a recruitment tool. It was translated

into English and analysed by Charlie Winter and published by the Quilliam Foundation in February 2015.

- 6 *Mahram* is any male relative whom it is unlawful for a woman to marry, such as her brother or father.
- 7 Anwar al-Awlaki was an American-born Muslim scholar and cleric who acted as a spokesperson for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula before he was killed in a drone strike in Yemen on 30 September 2011.
- 8 The IS Caliphate regards anyone who reaches 15 as “adult”; hence one who has legal capacity.
- 9 For more about these programmes see De Leede *et al.* (2017) which studied how women become radicalised and how to empower them to prevent radicalisation.

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