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Women in the Religious Wave of Terrorism and Beyond: The West Versus the Rest
An analysis of women's motives and agency in Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State

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Spring 2016

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Abstract

As terrorism expands and changes in this globalized world, women's involvement in terrorist groups remains to be an object of fascination, particularly Western women who choose to join terrorist groups in the Middle East. This paper aims to reveal and analyze the motivations that women have for joining terrorist groups, without merely labeling them as delusional or misguided by men. While it is true that women have roles in many different terrorist groups, this paper chooses to focus solely Al-Qaeda and largely the Islamic State as they (and increasingly the Islamic State) are extremely important for today's global security. Furthermore, the paper juxtaposes the differences in the motivations and recruitment between women from the West, and Middle Eastern women who are closer to the conflict areas. Ultimately, this paper finds that there is a vast amount of differing reasons why women choose to join Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, geography and historical context play a large role in these factors, thus showing a difference between motivations of women in the West versus women who are closer to the conflict in the Middle East. Overall, this paper finds that women have diverse and legitimate motivations and reasons for joining terrorist organizations, and female terrorists will continue to need to be researched and analyzed as terrorism evolves.

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I would like to thank all of the people I had the opportunity to talk with and learn from in order to learn more about this topic: Imène Ajala, Carole André-Dessornes, Anne Speckhard, and Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, who also served as the inspiration for this research topic. Furthermore, I would like to thank the SIT staff; Gyula Csurgai, Heikki Mattila, and Aline Dunant for being constructive, supportive, and helpful, to the whole process. I would like to thank my SIT peers who encouraged me to pursue this topic and finally my family and friends back home for giving and showing constant support throughout the research period.

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Introduction:

Terrorism is one of the largest global security threats the world is facing today. While the concept of terrorism is far from new, and examples of terrorist groups and terrorist attacks can be found all throughout the world, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, terrorist organizations in the Middle East have been thrust into the international spotlight at a greater scale than ever. Today, terrorism in the media is just as popular as ever. The rise of the Islamic State and the detailed media coverage of their actions have made the organization known globally. As terrorism becomes increasingly more dangerous for global security, and in turn more researched, there is a specific area that is still under researched: the role of women in terrorism.

Women have been involved in terrorism since it began, in all different forms and capacities. Dating back to 1878, a woman named Vera Zasulich was applauded following a court appearance after harming a police commander who was known to be unfair to political prisoners, in one of the first known acts of terrorism.¹ Today, however, there is still a fascination with female terrorists, something that is further sensationalized by the media. This is further enhanced by the the influx of Western females joining terrorist groups in the Middle East. Women becoming involved with terrorism is seen as scandalous and deviating from the norm. The longstanding cultural norms and views of women in patriarchal societies further fuels interest in women who are involved with terrorist groups in the Middle East.

As feminism and a global movement towards more equal treatment of women continues to grow, the fascination and misunderstanding of female terrorists continues to be stigmatized. The longstanding notion of women being weaker than men and more “gentle” due to societal norms and gender stereotypes make female terrorists an enigma for many and

¹ Rapaport, David. *The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism*. 2004

in turn, a news story. Furthermore, the media continues to focus on the absolute shock of females leaving “comfortable” lives in Western countries, despite reports of brutalities done to women by groups such as the Islamic State. This has led to a fascination with such women and much debate over their motives.

This paper aims to analyze the reason why women in today’s context choose to join terrorist groups. While terrorism exists all around the world with women involved in many different groups, this paper will focus mainly on terrorist groups based in the Middle East and more specifically Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as they have played an extremely crucial role in global security in the past decade and during current times. With recent attacks in Paris and Brussels, it has become apparent that these groups, and more specifically the Islamic State, continue to expand and are more dangerous than ever.

Furthermore, the paper will analyze and juxtapose the differences in recruitment and motivation to join terrorist groups between women living in Western countries and women living in the Middle East, as a plethora of the current literature and news reports focus mainly on women in the West. This is an important topic because women’s roles in terrorism are often very misunderstood, therefore leading to lack of policy to properly address the issue. The current lack of allowing women to have agency for their actions rather than being seen as solely motivated by what men want them to do only serves to harm international security efforts.

Literature Review:

Overall, female’s involvement in terrorism is an under-researched topic, especially when compared to the amount of literature regarding men’s involvement in terrorism. In the future, there will likely be an improvement in the literature as the field is beginning to increasingly expand.

Among those who are leading researchers in this field, some stand out as being well rounded on women's general involvement in terrorism. Mia Bloom is one of the leading experts on terrorism among females, and covers the involvement of women in many different terrorist groups around the world, with her books *Bombshell: the Many Faces of Women Terrorists* and *Dying to kill: the Allure of Suicide Terror* being cited and used by many in their own research. Bloom explores motivations among females to join terrorist groups along with the roles that women play within groups.

Anne Speckhard, a professor from Georgetown University, is another large name in the field. While she has researched women in many different terrorist groups, her current work has shifted to the Islamic State. Speckhard and Bloom are arguably two of the bigger names in this field and their research and work is expansive. Among these women is a general consensus that there are many different motives for women to join these groups.

More and more, there is increased media coverage on this topic, often with articles trying to reason with why Western women join terrorist groups, thus increasing the overall interest solely on women of the West and declining to answer why women from other parts of the world would do so also. There is a vast amount of coverage on the report atrocities committed against women in the territory of the Islamic State, yet a lack of understanding as why Middle Eastern women would choose to stand with these groups.

Overall, the field of research is lacking a concise juxtaposition of Western and Middle Eastern women. Many publications largely focus on one or the other, with many recent reports focusing mainly on Western women, without analyzing the role that sociological and geographical factors could have on motivations and actions, something that this paper aims to do. It is important to understand the motivations of all women involved and not just one group in order to have a better overall comprehension of why women are choosing to join terrorist groups.

Research Methodology:

The main research method used was secondary data. The findings of experts in this field were analyzed and used, and will be found cited throughout the paper. This includes sources such as academic journals, scholarly articles, and books on the subject. Furthermore, because of the current prominence of the topic, articles from reputable news sources were used in order to help answer the research question. Given the context of the paper and constraints such as location, time frame, and lack of funding, the paper mainly uses qualitative data.

While secondary data is largely used throughout the paper, interviews were also conducted as a form of primary data. Each expert was selected for their diverse knowledge on the topic in hopes that they each could add a diverse perspective to the matter. Anne Speckhard, author and professor at Georgetown University, is a leading expert on the topic, and therefore utilized for her vast overall knowledge on the subject. Carole André-Dessornes, who has a doctorate in sociology, provided insight and information on female martyrdom with a specific focus on female suicide bombers.

Imène Ajala is a professor of International Studies and Political Science at Webster University in Geneva, Switzerland. She was selected as an expert due to her insight on Islam in Europe and therefore added a perspective about the role of Western females in modern terrorism.

Dr. Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou is a professor at the Graduate Institute of Geneva, and also the Deputy Director and Academic Dean of the Geneva Center for Security policy. He was selected due to his role in this organization and vast general

knowledge of terrorism and security issues. Furthermore, he served as the inspiration for this paper and therefore also served as a viable source.

Ethical considerations were taken into account when researching and writing this paper. The experts were informed of the objectives of the research and purpose of this paper. They were asked if the content of their interviews could be included in the paper, as well as if their names could be cited in the paper. Furthermore, for the interviews that were recorded, each expert was asked explicit permission to do so.

Women's Involvement in Terrorism; A Brief History

Thus far, there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Some, however, have their own interpretations, and for the purpose of this paper, terrorism will be viewed as acts committed by a group that targets and intends to harm civilians.² As aforementioned, the role of women in terrorism is far from new. They have been seen all throughout the different waves of terrorism, as defined by David Rapaport. He believes that there have thus far been four waves of terrorism, with the current wave being the religious wave; which he believes will end sometime around 2025.³ Others, such as Dr. Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou of the Geneva Center for Security Policy, believe that terrorism may have already eclipsed the fourth wave and even fifth wave of terrorism, with the sixth and current phase being more privatized following the transnational fifth wave of terrorism.⁴

Whether we are in the fourth wave of terrorism, or in fact the sixth wave, women have appeared all throughout these waves of terrorism in many different capacities. In European and Latin American terrorist groups, women have had not only combatant but also leadership roles in many different groups. Even in Asia, there are the Freedom Birds, who are

² Dessornes. In person Interview. 12 March .2016.

³ Rapaport (2004)

⁴ Mohamedou. In person interview. 20 April 2016.

the female faction of the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers and are trained as suicide bombers and assassins, and even given leadership roles. In India, there is a group similar to this called the Naxalites.⁵

There are other groups, such as the well-known Black Widows of Chechnya, who were considered a threat during the Olympics in Sochi, along with the Red Army in Japan. In these groups, however, the women mainly take orders from men and for the most part, the role of women in the Black Widows “is tragically serving as human bombs.”⁶

Increasingly, there have been more reports of young girls committing acts such as suicide bombings for the group Boko Haram. As this is very recent, this too, in the coming months and years, will require research and scrutiny in order to have a better understanding of motives and agency. In the Middle East, with the groups that will be explored in this paper; the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, it is difficult to find women in leadership roles. Due to religious and cultural customs in many Middle Eastern countries, women were not allowed to have much of a role at all in many terrorist groups for a long time.

The Desirability of Women as Terrorists:

Patriarchal societies are known for more suppressive roles of women; responsibilities as wives, child bearers, keepers of the house, and so on. So why the sudden need for women in Middle Eastern terrorist groups? The involvement of women in reality has many benefits for groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. For one, the role of women as wives and child bearers remains crucial for these groups. One defector of the Islamic State, using the name Sophie Kaminski, highlighted that women were used specifically for bearing children

⁵ Lavina, Rachael. "Women In Terrorism: How The Rise Of Female Terrorists Impacts International Law." *Connecticut Journal Of International Law* 30.2 (2015): 241-261. *OmniFile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

⁶ Lavina 2016

when they came to Syria and joined.⁷ However, it is important to note that this is not necessarily the case for all women involved in these groups. While there is a desire to have women produce children to create future fighters for the groups, there also have been instances and reports of women whose husbands request that they take birth control pills. Some fighters were advised not to get their wives pregnant; it was thought that newer fathers would be less inclined to volunteer for suicide missions.⁸ Women who come to Syria never remain single for long; they are expected to marry the fighters. This demonstrates the importance of women as wives to keep the fighters happy.

One of the newer ways that women are becoming useful to terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State is through suicide bombing. To clarify, women have had roles as suicide bombers for other groups in the past, specifically in the aforementioned groups such as the Black Widows. However, the significance in this lays in the fact that in many Middle Eastern groups, it was initially seen as an inappropriate role for women to play. However, groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have figured out that there are many advantages to using women as suicide bombers. The first female suicide bombing for Al-Qaeda took place on September 28, 2005. The woman dressed like a man but it showed a shift for Al-Qaeda on their stance against including women as martyrs.⁹ Before, Al-Qaeda was strictly against this. The eventual inclusion of a suicide bomber who was female shows a realization within the group that women could be advantageous, even necessary.

The manner in which women are often treated in patriarchal societies actually works to the advantage of terrorist organizations in the Middle East. To start, women in these

⁷ Withal, Adam. "Mother Who Fled Europe to Join Isis Says Western Women Are 'just Wombs to Make Babies for Daesh.'" *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 10 Jan. 2016. Web. 27 Apr. 2016

⁸ MOAVENI, AZADEH. "For ISIS Women, Fraught Choices. (cover story)." *New York Times* 22 Nov. 2015: 1. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 2 May 2016.

⁹ Bloom, Mia. *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2011. Print.

societies tend to wear bulkier clothes than the men because of the modest way they dress, often in long robes. It is easier to smuggle weapons and bombs under their robes than it is for men. Some women have even pretended to be pregnant, yet are instead carrying explosives under their robes. Furthermore, because of cultural reasons, men and soldiers are often weary of patting down women; it can be seen as inappropriate.¹⁰ Therefore, oftentimes, a man is more likely to be patted down than a woman at a checkpoint, and thus, a female is more likely to be able to pass through with explosives undetected than a man.

The view of women being weaker further enhances why terrorist groups would want to use women over men for suicide bombings. In general, women have raised less suspicion than men because they are seen as weaker and less likely to carry out vicious attacks. They are seen as mothers, and more gentle, and therefore are often underestimated while in fact, they can be just as dangerous, if not more, than male suicide bombers. This stigma leads to yet another advantage to using women as suicide bombers. In some groups, there is difficulty finding volunteers for these missions; men are unwilling to step forward. Women are sometimes used in suicide bombings to shame men into volunteering for these missions because it is seen as shameful and embarrassing if a woman will carry out a heroic act but the men will not.¹¹

Within groups such as the Islamic State, while women do not have general leadership roles or play a part in the decision making process, some women do have at least have some power over other women in the group. An example of this is the Khansaa Brigade a “morality police” group that is made up solely of women in the Islamic State and located in Raqqa, where the Caliphate has taken over. The women who form the Khansaa Brigade are responsible for bringing women over the Turkish border, reporting women in the Caliphate

¹⁰ Weinberg, Leonard, and William Eubank. "Women's Involvement In Terrorism." *Gender Issues* 28.1/2 (2011): 22. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

¹¹ Dessornes. In person interview. 12 Mar 2016

for “crimes” such as wearing too much makeup or not wearing the proper clothes or niqabs, and punishing the women for committing these offenses.

Overall, women have many different roles in terrorist organizations. Aside from the roles already mentioned, women can be anything from translators, messengers, and bomb makers, to recruiters, song and poet writers, as well as propagandists.¹² However, in Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, women are not making executive decisions, and often have little to no overall power within the group.

Women in the West

While Western females may be attractive to the Islamic State because they are more sensationalized, the question that seems to be on everyone’s mind is why a woman with a supposedly comfortable life in a more egalitarian Western country would ever want to journey to Syria to give up that life. This question is further intensified as more and more reports come of atrocities that women face in the territory of the Islamic State. The mass rape and enslavement of Yazidi women committed by Islamic State fighters is just one of these atrocities.¹³ An American humanitarian worker who was captured, named Kayla Mueller, was raped multiple times, and by “using the group’s only American female hostage, the caliph was setting a precedent one that would revive the long-abandoned institution of sabaya, the enslavement of female infidels captured in battle and their use by jihadists for sex.”¹⁴ Stories such as these only enhance the confusion of motivations of Western women to join the Islamic State.

¹² Speckhard, Anne. "Women and Terrorism: How Do They Become Brides of ISIS." Uni-Mail: University of Geneva, Geneva. 27 Apr. 2016. Lecture.

¹³ Jones, Byron, and Alex Platt. "ISIS Soldiers Told to Rape Women 'to Make Them Muslim'" *CNN*. Cable News Network, 8 Oct. 2015. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.

¹⁴ SHEA, NINA, and FARAHAZ ISPAHANI. "Equal Opportunity Terrorism." *Weekly Standard* 21.6 (2015): 14. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.

Yet, more and more examples of Western women leaving behind their “comfy” lives in the West continue to emerge. Of the foreign recruits from Western areas such Europe, North America, and Australia, about 10% are women, with the majority falling within the age range of eighteen to twenty-five.¹⁵ It is important to note that there are overall two differing groups out of these women who defect from the West. There are some who are Muslim, and who have been Muslim their whole entire lives. There are others, however, who become interested in groups such as the Islamic state and decide to convert to Islam, and in a few cases, from Christianity. An example of this is of a young American woman named Alex, who had originally been a Sunday school teacher. Curious to learn more about beheadings from the Islamic State, she reached out to learn more. Recruiters began to talk to her and used her affiliation with Christianity to speak about religion with her and convince her to join Islam.¹⁶ This exemplifies something that is important to understand about the motivations of women in terrorist groups, whether they have Western origins, Middle Eastern origins, or origins from anywhere else in the world. While there may be similarities in why certain women choose to join these groups, each women will have individualized reasons for doing so.

The Western women are not all from one demographic. There are women from many different parts of Europe, as well as women journeying to Syria to join the cause all the way from America. While many men and women being recruited by groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are young, this is not true in all cases. One such example is that of the woman known internationally as “Jihadi Jane,” who in actuality was a white woman named Colleen LaRose from Philadelphia. LaRose converted to Islam because after living an

¹⁵ Zakaria, Rafia, --. "Women And Islamic Militancy." *Dissent* 1 (2015): 118. *Project MUSE*. Web. 2 May 2016.

¹⁶ CALLIMACHI, RUKMINI, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, and Julfikar Ali Manik. "ISIS and the Lonely Young American. (cover story)." *New York Times* 28 June 2015: 1+. *Newspaper Source*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

extremely hard and traumatic life, she wanted something that made her feel like she belonged. By talking to Al-Qaeda operatives online, LaRose became radicalized and was eventually arrested for creating a plot to kill a cartoonist who had depicted the prophet Muhammad in an inappropriate manner.¹⁷

There are many more stories similar to that of Colleen LaRose, with other Westerners even deciding to make the attempt to venture to Syria. In Britain, there was the famous instance of three young school girls who left their homes for Syria, completely shocking their families in the process. On the outside, they seemed like typical young Muslim women, who excelled in school and had bright futures ahead of them. However, “in this world, the counterculture is conservative. Islam is punk rock. The head scarf is liberating. Beards are sexy.”¹⁸ The expanding globalization of the world has completely changed the face of terrorism.

Recruiting the West

While there are many different methods of recruiting terrorists, thanks to modern technology, social media is now at the forefront of the recruitment process. The Islamic State has taken this online method of radicalization to a whole new level on a scale that has never been seen before. It is crucial to understand and not underestimate the role that social media has played in the recruitment and radicalization of people from all around the world. The Islamic State has taken advantage of the opportunities that social media platforms provide, and have intelligently and cohesively done so. The groups utilize popular websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to spread propaganda and to engage potential recruits one

¹⁷ Pilkington, Ed. "Jihad Jane' Explains Her Strange Journey from Victim to Radical Muslim." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 08 Dec. 2012. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

¹⁸ Bennhold, Katrin. "Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 17 Aug. 2015. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

on one. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are used to directly communicate with potential recruits.

YouTube allows for the Islamic State and any other groups choosing to utilize the internet to post content and videos in order to spread their message and inspire others to join them. Not every person who becomes radicalized has been in direct contact with recruiters and members of a terrorist group. One example is a woman from London named Roshonara Chaudry. In 2009 she began to download sermons from a man named Anwar Al Awlaki who had links to Al-Qaeda. His videos convinced her that every Muslim needed to join the cause and that even women had the right to fight, which in turn led to Chaudry attacking and attempting to kill a local MP named Stephen Timms.¹⁹ This incident was significant because it demonstrated a few notions. To start, it showed that a woman could be violent, and was not acting so based on the influences of a husband or partner. Furthermore, the radicalization of Roshonara Chaudry showed that direct communication is not the only way technology can be used to recruit and radicalize more fighters. The man whose videos she watched, Anwar Al Awlaki inspired her just with his speeches.²⁰ While women are not often seen as having the opportunity to be fighters for groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic state, she interpreted his words as meaning that it was her duty to commit the violent act.

The spread of globalization and the rise of the Internet have helped make terrorism more transnational than ever before. Without it, it is highly unlikely that the Islamic State would be anywhere near as successful in recruiting people from all around the world to come and join the cause. It is important to note that social media is used as a tool to radicalize and recruit both men and women to the Islamic State.

¹⁹ Pearson, Elizabeth. "The Case Of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications For Theory On Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, And The Gendered Jihad." *Policy & Internet* 8.1 (2016): 5-33. *Political Science Complete*. Web. 2 May 2016.

²⁰ ISIS Women, And The Gendered Jihad." *Policy & Internet* 8.1 (2016): 5-33. *Political Science Complete*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

Recruitment Techniques

To be recruited to a terrorist organization in general, there are four main aspects. As Anne Speckhard notes, “terrorists are made not born.”²¹ First, there is a group to be joined. For many this aspect of having a group to belong to is appealing. Secondly, is ideology, which answers why the group is “justified” in attacking civilians. The third component, according to Speckhard, is social support, and this is where social media really comes into creating future terrorists.²² By using social media platforms to communicate with people who could potentially be radicalized, recruiters from the Islamic State are able to remain in constant contact with Westerners, making it easier to make their point and convince them that joining the group is the right thing to do. The fourth component of making a terrorist is individual motivations and vulnerabilities.²³ This highlights the notion mentioned earlier that there is no singular variable that makes someone decide to leave their life behind to become a member of a terrorist group. Yes, there may be similar overlying causes, which will be discussed shortly, but what is going on in each individual’s personal life has an effect on their path to becoming a terrorist or joining and supporting a terrorist group.

Taking all of these factors into account, recruiters from the Islamic State craftily use social media as one of their main recruiting techniques for people from the West and around the world. As mentioned, the Islamic State has recruited Muslims and those who have converted to Islam from the West. Understanding the conditions and context of the lives that many Muslims lead in Western countries helps elucidate why joining or assisting groups like the Islamic State is an option for them. It is no secret that Islamophobia is a problem in many Western countries. Terrorist attacks only enhance this issue and lead to an increase in

²¹ Speckhard, Anne. "Women and Terrorism: How Do They Become Brides of ISIS." Uni-Mail: University of Geneva, Geneva. 27 Apr. 2016. Lecture.

²² Speckhard, Anne. Lecture. 2016

²³ Speckhard, Anne. Lecture. 2016

Islamophobia. Each time a major terrorist attack occurs, there is a significant increase in hate crimes against Muslims. There is a tendency to blame the Muslim community as a whole for the acts of a few. By many, Islam has been painted as a violent religion, with a focus on the word *jihad*. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States alone, crimes against Muslims increased by 1,600%. Similarly, following the attacks in Paris, there was an increase in crimes against Muslims by 281%.²⁴ Islam and the treatment of Muslims has even become a prominent issue in the 2016 United States Presidential elections. Donald Trump, vying for the nomination from the Republican Party has spoken of banning foreign Muslims from the United States, along with bombing the families of members of the Islamic State and surveying Mosques in the United States.²⁵ Ted Cruz, another politician vying for the Republican nomination similarly made comments about Muslims calling for the patrolling of Muslim neighborhoods. Furthermore, he named Frank Gaffney to his foreign policy team, a man known for Islamophobic opinions.²⁶ This shows a worrisome tendency of blaming all Muslims for acts committed by a radicalized few, not just among average citizens, but also among top politicians who, if elected, will have increased power to implement such plans and ideas.

This is not just a problem in the United States, however. Countries such as France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom have large Muslim populations, and in turn, many instances of discrimination against Muslims. There was a large controversy in France when the government decided to ban the niqab, a garment that covers the entire face of the wearer,

²⁴ Mark, Michelle. "Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Have Spiked After Every Major Terrorist Attack: After Paris, Muslims Speak Out Against Islamophobia." *International Business Times*. N.p., 18 Nov. 2015. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

²⁵ Johnson, Jenna. "Trump's Rhetoric on Muslims Plays Well with Fans, but Horrifies Others." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 29 Feb. 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

²⁶ Pilkington, Ed. "Ted Cruz Campaign's Anti-Muslim Propagandists Called 'terrifying'" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 25 Mar. 2016. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

something that Belgium had also previously put into motion. The French government gave reasons for this such as increasing security, the rights of women, and promoting face to face interactions. The concept of female Muslims wearing headscarves exemplifies a different challenge that Muslim women face over Muslim men. Yes, Muslim men are discriminated against. However, not all Muslim men wear or show signs of being outwardly Muslim. While it is true that not all Muslim women choose to wear headscarves of some form, there still are many who choose to. Wearing a headscarf makes these women stand out as being Muslim, and it is therefore easier to target them to be victims of hate crimes. Women tend to be the victims of Muslim hate crimes more often than men are.²⁷

For Muslim women, many choose to wear the headscarf. Western feminists and women often have a hard time understanding the reasoning behind this. It is often written off as being a symbol of suppression, and something that should be frowned down upon. This further increases the negativity and scrutiny that women who choose to wear head coverings and traditional wear deal with.

This environment of discrimination and hatred is not a healthy environment to live in for Muslims, and creates a larger problem than there was to begin with. This environment helps lead to radicalization; it is an ongoing cycle. It would be unfair and completely untrue to say that all Muslims who have been discriminated against will become radicalized and become terrorists. However, an environment that constantly demeans and discriminates against a group will be more likely to lead to radicalization.

The Islamic State plays on all of these issues when they use social media to recruit women from the West to come and join them. They know that young Muslim women can feel isolated and disenchanting with life in the West. Recruiters from the Islamic State promise

²⁷ Ajala, Imène. Personal Interview. 19 April. 2016

these women a life that is an escape from the issues back home. They are told there will be sisters to welcome them with open arms into a loving community, where they can dress in traditional wear without being mocked.²⁸ Furthermore, female recruiters are used to talk to the women in order to convince them to join the cause. One example is a woman who goes by the name of Uum Layth, who is responsible for a handful of girls deciding to make the journey to Syria. She helps instruct girls on what to bring, along with what their lives will be like when they arrive, encouraging that they will “raise the next generation of lions.”²⁹ The Islamic State craftily uses women such as Uum Layth to appeal to Western women and convince them that they will have better lives with the Caliphate. Whereas Al-Qaeda focused on promises in the afterlife as a persuasive technique, the Islamic State makes promises about an improved life now.³⁰ For many, this prospect is more appealing.

Women from terrorist groups are not the only ones who engage with potential female recruits. Often, men talk to the young girls and flirt with them, sometimes making the girls believe that they are in love. In 2009, a manual called “A Course in the Art of Recruiting” that was written by Al-Qaeda was discovered by forces from the United States in Iraq. In the manual, it gave instructions such as to spend as much time as possible with the person who is the target of the recruitment, teach the basics of Islam (but be careful not to bring up jihad), and to overall be a good listener to the potential recruit.³¹ The strategy is exemplified by the attempted recruitment of a woman who was actually a journalist named Anne Erelle. After posting a jihadi video, members of the Islamic State reached out directly to her. The recruiters proved to be persistent and she was “contacted, complimented, and seduced daily--

²⁸ Zakaria, Rafia, --. "Women And Islamic Militancy." *Dissent* 1 (2015): 118. *Project MUSE*. Web. 2 May 2016.

²⁹ REITMAN, JANET. "THE CHILDREN OF ISIS. (Cover Story)." *Rolling Stone* 1232 (2015): 40. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

³⁰ Reitman (2016)

³¹ CALLIMACHI, RUKMINI, Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, and Julfikar Ali Manik. "ISIS and the Lonely Young American. (cover story)." *New York Times* 28 June 2015: 1+. *Newspaper Source*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

shown concern and care, while being promised material wealth, fame, belonging, and purpose if she were to join ISIS.”³² The constant attention and affection for many, can be hard to resist.

Specifically, young women are more easily drawn into the recruiters’ web. For anyone, the teenage years can be a time of confusion, rebellion, and falling in love. While this paper argues that it is important to give women more agency in their motivations than being manipulated and persuaded by men, it is still true that lack of wisdom and maturity too can play a role in young girls deciding they want to join a terrorist group. For some, it is hard to resist the men who contact them and shower them with flattery and feelings of adoration. Additionally, many who choose to join the Islamic State show a lack of knowledge of Islam itself. Therefore, they are more susceptible to believing claims made by the Islamic State even if they are not directly in line with the actual values and beliefs of Islam. Such was the case of a young Swedish girl who followed her boyfriend to join the Islamic State and later admitted that before joining, she had no idea what the Islamic State or even Islam were.³³ Lack of knowledge can be dangerous as many of these women do not fully understand what they are getting themselves into before it is too late.

Finally, for many of the women in West who make the decision to join a terrorist organization, it is because they could not bear to stand by and watch what they viewed as the murder of their Muslim brothers and sisters. The recruiters who speak with them through social media convince both men and women that it is their duty to come and help out their brothers and sisters who are otherwise suffering and dying.³⁴ This works as a very strong

³² SPECKHARD, ANNE. "Brides Of Isis." *USA Today Magazine* 144.2844 (2015): 18. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 2 May 2016.

³³ Rubin, Alissa J. "A Swedish Girl, ISIS, and a Cautionary Tale of Globalism." *The New York Times*. N.p., 2 Mar. 2016. Web.

³⁴ Reitman (2016)

persuasion technique. It helps give potential recruits a cause they want to fight for and helps them justify the actions of terrorist groups.

While Al-Qaeda was able to use the internet as a means of recruitment to a certain extent, the Islamic State has taken the power of the world wide web and social media to a whole new level. For Muslim women in the West, the Islamic State utilizes the discrimination that many Westerns face because of their religion, along with playing on one's sense of duty, and occasionally using romance and flirting to persuade women to come and join the Islamic State. Social media is one of the Islamic State's most powerful tools, something which they show a keen understanding of and have fully utilized to their own advantage.

Women and Terrorism: The Middle East

While there is a large interest and often focus on women in the West joining terrorist groups, it is crucial to take into account the women who are not geographically distant from terrorist groups. Thus far, there have been about six hundred Western female recruits to the Islamic State, however the number of non Western females who join is much larger. For example, over seven hundred women from Tunisia alone have joined the Islamic State.³⁵ Similar to women from the West who decide to support and join terrorist organizations, it is wrong to say that Middle Eastern women all have the same motives for joining. Due to both stereotypes and cultural traditions, women in the Middle East especially face a loss of agency in the analysis of why they join terrorist groups. Many write them off as either being merely manipulated or forced into it by male companions such as their husbands. However, just like Western women, Middle Eastern women have a vast amount of reasons for why they would decide to partake in terrorist activities.

³⁵ Huckerby, Jayne. "Why Women Join ISIS." *Time.Com* (2015): N.PAG. *Business Source Elite*. Web. 12 Apr.2016.

For some women, joining terrorist organizations is a means of survival. An example of this is a group of women from Raqqa, Syria. This city has essentially become the central area for the Islamic State Caliphate. Before the arrival of the Islamic State to the area, women in Raqqa could lead decently free lives, something that quickly changed. For three young women; Dua, Aws, and Asma, the decision that made the most sense was to marry fighters in order to keep their families safe. While not every woman was fortunate with the man she was married off to, Dua and Aws actually cared for their husbands. However, upon the deaths of the fighters, they were expected to quickly marry another. Eventually becoming disillusioned and horrified with the actions of the Islamic State, the three women fled to Turkey.³⁶ Two of these girls had even been a part of the Khansaa Brigade. This is important because it highlights that for women who are not coming from the West or other parts of the world, they do not necessarily all join because they agree with the mission or actions of terrorist organizations. For some, but certainly not all women who are involved with terrorist organizations, it is a means of survival and a way to keep their family safe.

For other women, however, joining a terrorist group is something they want to do on their own free will. The historical context of this region plays a big role in understanding why men and women in general would be eager to join groups who are known for killing and hurting innocent people. Oftentimes, there is a habit of viewing terrorist groups and related conflicts in a very black and white manner. Terrorists are labeled as the “bad guys” and written off as that. While harming innocent civilians is never acceptable, it is important to remember that terrorist groups have specific reasons for doing so. To them, their actions are justified because of this. Between wars, invasions, and takeovers, the Middle East has faced many challenges and times of turmoil throughout the years, with many innocent lives lost in

³⁶ Moaveni (2016)

the process. Many women living in these conflict zones have seen the destruction that has been caused first hand. For some women, the loss of a loved one can lead to a need for vengeance, while for others, even if someone they know has not personally been killed or hurt from attacks, they feel it is their duty to step in.³⁷

Suicide Bombings: A More Active Role for Women

As mentioned earlier in the paper, suicide bombings are one of the roles that women are increasingly playing in suicide groups. However, it is rare for the Western women to be a part of a suicide bombing. The first and very rare instance of a Western female suicide bomber was Muriel Degauque in 2005, who drove her car with explosives into an American convoy in Iraq.³⁸ Due to the fact that she was from Belgium and had converted to Islam after marrying her husband, there was much attention given to the fact that she was Muslim and the involvement of her husband.³⁹ Muriel, however, is a rare case. There are reports that the Islamic State is recruiting Arab women to be suicide bombers but the same cannot be said for Western women.⁴⁰ This has a few implications.

To start, it suggests that women who are closer to the conflict have more deeply personal reasons to volunteer to be suicide bombers. For example, and as mentioned before, a woman could want revenge for the loss of a loved one, or believe that it was her duty and a role she could play to help save future Muslims. However, there are also more cultural implications with a direct relation to gender. In many Middle Eastern cultures, a woman's "honor" is very important and in many instances necessary for her well-being. There have been instances of rape that have been pre-arranged. When a woman is raped and no longer

³⁷ Dessornes. In person interview. 12 Mar. 2016

³⁸ Laster, Kathy, and Edna Erez. "Sisters In Terrorism? Exploding Stereotypes." *Women & Criminal Justice* 25.1 (2015): 83-99. *SocINDEX*. Web. 3 May 2016.

³⁹ Bloom, Mia. *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2011. Print.

⁴⁰ Speckhard. In person informal interview. 27 April 2016

considered a virgin, that is often seen as a loss of honor and can make a woman completely lose any standing she had in that society. After, they are convinced to take part in a suicide mission because they believe there is no hope and that they have no future prospects.⁴¹ This shows that yes, sometimes manipulation is involved when recruiting female terrorists.

Feminist Implications?

In groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the men take on the roles of the fighters and therefore play a very active role in the cause. For some women, taking a suicide belt is the only manner in which they can directly join the action. While some women do want to join for reasons of personal revenge and some are manipulated, it is possible for women to want to join the fight much like men do. While this paper focuses on many gender specific reasons that women join terrorist organizations, they share many of the same motivations that men do.

This is true for both Western and Middle Eastern women. Yes, men and women face different challenges and at times face different experiences due to their gender. However, women can be equally as devoted to joining terrorist groups as men are. In groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, aside from suicide bombings, women are not given the opportunity to play an active part in the action. This does not mean, however, that there are not women who want to or that all women will have completely different motivations for joining terrorist groups than men.

There have been questions raised over how feminism plays into women joining terrorist organizations. For those who make the decision to become suicide bombers, it is true that they are then able to take on roles that more traditionally belong to men, at least for groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, for the most part, it does not seem

⁴¹ Dessornes. In person interview. 12 Mar 2016

like women are choosing this as a feminist statement. Additionally, the groups overall still not show large step in gaining a more progressive attitude towards women as mass instances of rape are still an issue and woman are not allowed to have combatant roles in the groups or leadership roles.

Conclusion:

Women's involvement in terrorism is far from new yet it remains to be a fascination for many and is now becoming more prominent in groups that traditionally would not have allowed it before. Women within terrorist groups have a diverse set of roles, although in the groups explored in this paper such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, women do not have leadership or combatant roles in the groups, except for suicide bombings.

This paper finds that while there is a tendency to write off women who join terrorist groups as delusional or acting on the wishes of their husbands, women in fact have a vast variety of reasons for wanting to join a terrorist organization in the Middle East. However, geographic and historical differences lead to an overall difference in the motives of women from the West and from women in the Middle East.

Western women are an enigma for many due to their decision to give up their lives and live somewhere where it is assumed that women are submissive to men and are often treated badly. Many Muslim women in the West face discrimination and an overall unsupportive environment that can help lead to radicalization. Furthermore, promises of a better life with a terrorist organization, the necessity of saving their Muslim brothers and sisters, and prospects of romance work as persuasions. Social media is greatly utilized to recruit Western women. This is not to say that Middle Eastern women do not have social media and are never recruited in this manner, however, social media is extremely useful for recruiting overseas.

Middle Eastern women tend to have more personal reasons to join terrorist groups such as loss of a relative, revenge, fighting for the greater good, being a victim of rape, and wishing to have a more combative role. Middle Eastern women are more likely to be suicide bombers than Western women are, at least for the time being. This shows that geography and country of origin do play a big difference in women's motivations in joining a terrorist organization.

This is important because in order to adequately combat the involvement of women in terrorist organizations, it is crucial to understand why they are joining in the first place. Women must be given agency and it cannot just be assumed that women are less likely to be violent or are only joining because they have been manipulated or are unstable. Women have the potential to be just as dangerous, if not more so than men. Therefore, it is important to accurately analyze their motivations in order to be able to have a better chance of stopping the radicalization of both Western and Middle Eastern women.

In the future, there will need to be continued research on the evolution of women's roles in these groups. Before, women were not even allowed to be suicide bombers, and now they are prevalent and play a crucial role as martyrs. Additionally, they do not yet have leadership roles in Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. As this field expands, there will be a need for further analysis of their roles in these groups and if they have increased and why or why not this has happened. All in all, further research will need to continue to give women proper agency in their actions and extinguish the incorrect and overall sexist notion that women cannot have their own legitimate reasons for wanting to join a terrorist organization.

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