

THE COMPLEX ROLE OF WOMEN IN TERROR GROUPS

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The role of women in terror groups over the past few decades is often underestimated; the Global Extremism Monitor reports that 11% of all suicide attacks in 2017 were conducted by female militants. The media tends to stereotype women solely as victims when it comes to terrorist groups; however, many women actively join terrorist groups of their own will. Historically, women have played an active role in violent extremist movements such as the Black Widows of Chechnya, a group of female Islamist suicide bombers in Russia. Understanding the active role that women can play in terrorist group recruitment and in the dissemination of extremist ideologies is essential in the development of counterterrorism efforts.

The role of women as active participants in terrorist groups is also a subject of internal debate. Al-Qaeda leaders have had contradictory opinions; in a video released in 2005, Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi encouraged Muslim Iraqi women to join the jihad by persuading their husband and children to fight and raising their families to understand the importance of violent jihad.¹ On the other hand, however, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's second-in-command at the time, said that women should not be involved in jihad besides their domestic duties. Despite dif-

fering views, the role of women as perpetrators of violence within terrorist groups is increasing.

Women who voluntarily join terrorist groups do so for reasons related to ideology, social status, and education. Similar to male terrorists, women may strongly believe in the ideological values behind violent movements and decide to join as a religious duty, but they may also join and stay in the system for benefits that they would not have otherwise received in their home communities. The Council on Foreign Relations reports that a portion of the female terrorists who joined Boko Haram did so in order to receive a Quranic education. In contrast, only 4% of Nigerian girls targeted by Boko Haram have the chance to finish secondary education in their home communities.²

Women also play a crucial role in the initial stages of radicalization; as primary caregivers in the domestic sphere, they endow their children with their own ideology through daily actions and practices.¹ In terms of soft power, women help create the culture and mindset that lead to willing participation in terrorist groups. Since women shape the ideologies of a community's youth, they can and should also have greater influence in the development of effective strategies to counter violent terrorism. According to oral testimonies Af-

ghanis during the 1980s, collected by the United States Institute of Peace, a former male mujahideen said that "Women also encouraged their sons to join the jihad... They were not concerned about losing their sons...after one son was killed, the mother would bring the other son to us."

The interviewee proceeded to explain how his mother sold her jewelry to fund his expenses to join

the jihad, demonstrating the manner in which women can encourage ideologies favoring violent extremism within their families, specifically martyrdom. In Islam, martyrs are promised great rewards in the afterlife, especially if they are defending Islam on the battlefield. According to the Quran, martyrs' sins will be forgiven "at the first drop of bloodshed" and they will have a seat in heaven and be protected from Judgement Day.³ The



rewards promised to martyrs further fuel the likelihood of someone voluntarily joining a terrorist group.

The role women play in terrorist groups has important implications for counterterrorism efforts. For example, since women are underestimated as perpetrators of violence, they are less likely to be searched at security points, allowing them to carry explosives or con-

triband. Changing this misconception and increasing the number of female security officers would mean that officers could search women more thoroughly and act as a watchful eye where men cannot, such as in female bathrooms or prayer spaces.

Redesigning rehabilitation programs to cater towards former female terrorists could also equip women

with the resources needed to feel a sense of agency outside of terrorist groups. Currently, rehabilitation activities for women include training for low-wage jobs such as hairstyling and sewing; expanding the curriculum can empower women to earn higher wages and develop comprehensive skills to support themselves and their families without turning to terrorist groups.

Rehabilitation programs do not address sexual and domestic violence and trauma, which many women involved in terrorist groups experience. For example, the Islamic State has bought and sold women and recruited thousands of men by offering them kidnapped women as “wives.” They also earn a huge revenue through sexual slavery and ransom.⁴ In order to reintegrate women back into life outside of a terrorist group, women must be provided with resources to process and heal from their trauma. Furthermore, some women also experience domestic violence at home, so they are forced to endure violent conditions either way; strengthening the legal repercussions for domestic and sexual violence can allow women to escape abusive



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households without joining terrorist groups.

Some female members of Boko Haram also reported

rejoining violent groups after leaving due to their community’s rigid social norms. While this is by no means an easily achieved task, trying to change the predominant perceptions of gender dynamics in the MENA region can help prevent women from resorting to terrorist groups to feel a sense of agency. This can be implemented by enabling women to receive an education or electing women to positions of power, even if it is in a minor capacity such as a town council. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, some women joined Boko Haram to complete their Quranic education; as such, giving women the means to finish learning the Quran could allow them to feel empowered without getting involved with terrorist groups.

Women have a multifaceted role within terrorist groups: as perpetrators, victims, and targets.⁵ Although women are often portrayed as victims within terrorist groups, their involvement in terrorist attacks has increased in recent decades, and the women who voluntarily join these groups do so either because of ideology or a desire to gain agency. They also have significant influence in spreading violent ideologies since they are the primary caretakers in the domestic sphere, passing their beliefs onto their children. With all this in mind, communities need to enact various types of intervention in order to curb radicalization. In addition, rehabilitation programs for former female terrorists should be redesigned to provide a more trauma-informed approach to survivors of abuse, and they should help women build the technical skills necessary to reintegrate into society. Over time, empowering women should help drastically reduce female involvement in terrorist groups.