

AN UNDERESTIMATED POWER: WOMEN IN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

JULIA TOMASZEWSKI

Abstract

The role of women in terrorist organizations has long been underestimated. Recently, female terrorist activity has been growing, in large part due to the development of online recruitment. Depending on the organization, women may either play a supporting or active role in terrorist activities. If they play an active role, women can have a significant advantage over men. Women are presumed to be less suspect and receive much more media attention when they are involved in an attack. They often share the same motives as men, including religious drive and belief in the cause. Women are also more likely to be motivated by revenge for loved ones, a desire to redeem themselves from dishonor, or a desire to gain respect in a culture that treats them like second-class citizens. This study suggests that since women are a powerful and underestimated force in terrorism, successful counterterror initiatives must account for female influence when combatting violent Islamic extremism.

Introduction

June 26, 2014 began like any other day for the Halanes, a Muslim family who lived in a suburb of Manchester, United Kingdom. However, it quickly turned into a panic as they realized that their two daughters—sixteen-year-old twins Salma and Zahra—were missing. After reporting their absence and a brief search, counterterrorism officials in Britain revealed that the girls had boarded a flight for Istanbul, traveled south across the border into Syria, and joined Islamic militants (McCoy, 2014).

This was not the first time something like this had happened in the family. The year before, the twins' older brother had done the same thing. Whether he had influenced his sisters or whether they had come into contact with other recruiters online is unknown. Once the girls arrived in Syria, both were immediately married as "jihadi brides." Later, they reported that both of their husbands had been "martyred" in battle. Broken-hearted, their mother made an unprecedented trip to Syria to try to persuade them to come back, but they refused. Their mother was briefly held captive by the terrorists before being released to return to England (Britton, 2017). The twins have since posted numerous times on their Twitter accounts, celebrating successful acts of terrorism, showing approval for mass murders by terrorists, and demonstrating with photos how they and many other radicalized women were learning to use firearms. One woman, the wife of a jihadi who lived with one of the sisters before escaping to Syria, also revealed that the sisters served as terrorist recruiters online and had successfully convinced several individuals to join them in their fight for Islamic domination (Britton, 2017).

It is difficult to understand how these circumstances came about. Both girls had bright futures ahead of them. They were ranked top of their class at their private, all-female school in Manchester and were on the career path to become successful doctors. Their family was very religious but decidedly against any kind of religious violence. Yet this example is not an isolated incident, unusual as it may seem. It is becoming increasingly common for people to leave everything, including their homes, families, and stable careers to join Islamic militants in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Why is this happening? What is the draw? What would pull people from the environment they know into a life of hate and violence?

This study explores these questions, specifically as it pertains to women. Women are an increasingly involved and powerful, yet underestimated, tool of Islamic terrorist operations. This study examines the process of recruitment, radicalization, and involvement of women in organizations like ISIS, Hamas, and Al Qaeda. Oftentimes, the process and motivations are similar, if not identical, to those of men joining similar terrorist operations. Interestingly, these groups are openly misogynistic and discriminatory in their practice and ideology, yet they still attract

female recruits. Thus, this study also examines the tactics used in the recruitment of women. It seeks to uncover how females are convinced to join radical organizations that treat them as second-class individuals. In addition, it analyzes the roles that women fill in these organizations, which may or may not be different from those that men fill depending on the specific terrorist group. Finally, this study proposes ways in which women can also be a strong force in helping to eliminate extremism. Females have an especially powerful influence in their communities despite the lack of value their culture ascribes to them.

Literature Review

Oftentimes it is presumed that terrorists are male, but recent literature challenges that assumption. While there are still statistically more active male terrorists, there has been a rise in female involvement and recruitment. Depending on the terrorist group, women can play either an active or supporting role and are recruited in many different ways (“The Role of Women,” n.d.). Hilton (2014) found that lately, due to the prevalence of social media, online platforms have been used as the primary means for recruiting new members. Frequently, this is done by painting unrealistic pictures of life with a militant group. Recruiters also persuade based on religious arguments and passages from the Qur’an that call for jihad and the death of those who oppose Islam (Hilton, 2014).

At the same time, there is a misconception that people only join such causes because they are drawn in under false pretenses or arguments. However, Sawicki (2016) found that many who are involved in these activities are not necessarily coerced. They are also personally motivated by several factors.

First, some Muslims have religious motivation, believing that they are called to wage jihad (religious war) on those who are not Islamic. They believe that dying through jihad also brings glory, honor, and a way into Paradise. Likewise, Milton-Edwards and Attia (2017) argued that, for some women, it is a matter of genuinely believing in the cause of Islam and the way of jihad.

Second, it can also be a way of seeking revenge for loved ones who have died at the hands of those opposing radical groups (Zheng, 2017). Women especially might feel an emotional drive to take such action or to preemptively take action to protect the loved ones that could be harmed in warfare. They wish to not only protect their communities, but to promote community—something Muslim women can often feel a lack of. To these women, this ensures that there will be a safe environment for them and their children into the future. Moreover, Goldman (2012) found that because many Islamic societies treat women with lower regard than men, women living in those cultures see working with a terrorist organization as a way to earn personal respect or honor that cannot be earned in any other way. Additionally, it

can be a way to earn respect for their gender as a whole by proving that women can have an impact and contribute to religious warfare (Alarid, 2016). However, this is only possible in some terrorist organizations, as other terrorist organizations relegate women entirely to the domestic sphere.

Goldman (2012) also found disturbing evidence showing that, on multiple occasions, there have been organized, large-scale operations to rape Islamic women. In Islamic culture, this is dishonoring to both a woman and her family. It eliminates the woman's value and makes her ineligible to be married. Since the primary role of women in these societies is to marry and raise children, raping women means that they no longer have a purpose or a place in society. Thus by raping women, terrorists create soldiers whose only possible purpose can be executing suicide missions that will promote the cause of their religious war. By going on suicide missions, violated women can not only serve a purpose but can also regain some degree of honor by dying for their religion. There are documented cases where women have joined radical organizations simply so they can die fighting and regain their personal honor (Haynes, 2009). Female fighters do this despite the fact that it was members of these same groups that stole their dignity from them.

Research

Why Study Women Terrorists?

Female involvement in terrorist attacks and radical groups is becoming increasingly common. The French Interior Ministry recently noted that 40% of French recruits to ISIS are now female, whereas in the past it had been predominantly men (Zheng, 2017). In 2016, at least sixty women left the UK to join ISIS, but there are likely more that were undocumented (Zheng, 2017).

Depending on the organization, women may be allowed to take an active role or may be limited to supporting roles. The issue is debated, as the Qur'an is not explicit regarding what kind of involvement is appropriate for women (Cragin & Daly, 2009). For example, Hamas welcomes all women and allows them to have similar positions as men (except they can have fewer leadership positions) whereas Al Qaeda believes that women's roles are strictly domestic ("The Role of Women," n.d.). ISIS has been increasingly accepting of women. However, nearly all groups grant that women who give their lives for jihad have the ability to enter paradise just as men do.

Those who are recruited for "passive" roles are generally only given a role in the home, which means supporting their husbands, giving birth to children, and raising the next generation to fight for Islam. In other words, these organizations require women to essentially be the support mechanisms for the males and the means of

continuing their warfare into the future. Giving birth to males is a priority since females are oftentimes seen as a disappointment because they do not have the same war-waging capabilities as men (Hilton, 2014).

Women who are allowed to take an active role have some clear advantages over men in the field. Zheng (2017) listed three reasons for this. First, counterterrorism measures are most often designed to combat a prototypical male terrorist. Thus, female terrorists are less likely to be detected through common counterterrorism measures. Their manner of dress also allows them to easily conceal weapons or other goods. For example, women have been known to strap explosives around their waist in a way that makes it appear that they are pregnant (Sperry, 2017). In addition, since they are generally not presumed to be terrorists, females can more easily gather and transfer information to aid in planning terrorist attacks. They also often invoke the sympathy of society, which aids them in performing tasks and avoiding repercussions (Cragin & Daly, 2009).

In some terrorist organizations, women are allowed to perform the same jobs as men: political representatives, operational leaders, logisticians, recruiters, mission operatives, suicide bombers, couriers, decoys, smugglers (of weapons primarily), and medical assistants (Cragin & Daly, 2009). While they do not have an overall advantage in all of these areas, the advantages that they do carry are extremely valuable.

The First Steps: Radicalization and Recruitment

Radicalized men and women alike often feel despair, humiliation, and outrage over injustice and perceive few options for influencing change. One brief moment of intense emotion evoked in them while they watch a YouTube video of innocent victims in Africa or the Middle East can be all it takes to spark their interest. Once someone is mobilized, next steps vary. (Alarid, 2016, para. 6-7)

This quotation comes from a publication by the National Defense University's Journal of Complex Operations, *PRISM*, discussing the increased use of social media for recruitment and radicalization. Radicalization is defined as "the process of supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) as in violation of important social norms (e.g. the killing of civilians)" (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 69). Thus, it is a matter of degree "in which mere attitudinal support for violence reflects a lower degree of radicalization than actual engagement in violence," and it "represents a subjective judgement proffered by those for whom the violated norms seem important but not by those who have devalued or suppressed the norms in question" (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 69). Therefore, there are lower and higher degrees of

radicalization. There are distinctions between women who support, women who join, and women who become involved in terrorist organizations (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017).

Due to the rise of the internet, recruitment is now primarily done online. Online recruitment is popular for multiple reasons: first, it has the ability to reach a high volume and diversity (both demographically and geographically) of people; second, it is significantly less risky than more traditional means of recruitment; third, the costs are comparatively minimal; fourth, there are less logistics to be worked out between correspondents; and finally, the odds of detection are much lower (Alarid, 2016). The online recruitment method has almost led to the eradication of other means, such as person to person interaction and correspondence. For this reason, the following research applies almost exclusively to the online method of recruitment.

In some instances, people may seek out a recruiter or someone with the right connections to get them onto the path of radical Islam, but recruiters also have many ways to reach out to people they see as candidates for their cause. As researcher Maeghin Alarid (2016) wrote:

The internet makes it easy to be found. A candidate for recruitment may come to the group's attention by making a financial donation, downloading extremist propaganda, entering a jihadi chat room, or visiting radical pages on Facebook. In today's environment, we see numerous examples of the radicalization process, from interest to recruitment, through execution or an actual mission, happening entirely online. (para. 7)

ISIS is especially known for actively recruiting women and girls online (Hilton, 2014). Online recruiters try to make the jihadist family and lifestyle appeal to women over social media. Referencing female recruitment, Dettmer (2014) commented:

The propaganda usually eschews the gore and barbaric images often included in the general fare of jihadist online posts, such as the beheadings last month of dozens of Syrian army soldiers after a base was overrun in the northern Syrian province of Raqqa. Instead, the marketing focuses on what one analyst calls the "private sphere," concentrating on the joys of jihadist family life and the "honor" of raising new fighters for Islam. The online recruiters stress the pleasure of providing the domesticity that a warrior waging jihad needs and by doing so to serve Islam. (para. 4-5)

This aligns more with the idea of serving in a supporting role, as does the following excerpt taken from a post by an online female recruiter. She urged women

to abandon their old lives and migrate to a place where they could directly serve their god and religion:

Biggest tip to sisters: don't take detours, take the quickest route, don't play around with the Hijrah [religious migration] by staying longer than [one] day for safety and get in touch with your contacts as soon as you reach your destination. Even if you know how right this path and decision is and how your love for Allah comes before anything and everything, this is still an ache which only one [who] has been through and experienced it can understand. The first phone call you make once you cross the borders is one of the most difficult things you will ever have to do... when you hear them sob and beg like crazy on the phone for you to come back it's so hard...Many people in present day do not understand...why a female would choose to make this decision. They will point fingers and say behind your back and to your families' faces that you are taking part in...sexual jihad. (Hilton, 2014, para. 7-8).

Despite these attempts at persuasive appeals, it is difficult to understand why someone would see these descriptions as desirable. Sperry (2017) commented, "It seems unfathomable to most of us that a female would want to join ISIS, but their online propaganda has a major focus on twisting the concept of women's rights. You'll see pictures of fully covered women with guns, as if they are treated as equals in jihad" (para. 25). In other words, to persuade women to join the cause, recruiters try to twist the truth and paint an unrealistic picture of what kind of lifestyle women may expect to enjoy under a radical Islamic regime. Women are looking for an opportunity to be appreciated for who they are, to contribute to society in the same ways that men can, and to have basic human rights and treatment. The false promises of Islamic terrorism can draw them in and persuade them to commit horrific acts. In their mind, terrorism is the only thing that will grant them the recognition that they deserve as human beings.

It is important to note that, in most cases, online recruitment usually includes detailed references to the Qur'an as the basis for why people should wage jihad. Because of this, those who are dedicated to Islam feel pressure to join terrorist groups in order to follow their holy book, fulfill their duty, and earn a place in Paradise. (Sperry, 2017). In this way, recruiting is sometimes effective because of a prospective fighter's dedication to Allah, not because online recruiters are particularly persuasive.

Motivation: Introduction

Many of the factors that motivate men to join groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda also motivate women (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017). There are also motivations unique

to women. One motivation that has frequently been presumed is the romanticized idea of being married to a terrorist, but experts in the field usually discount this argument. Instead, they point to a number of other motivations (Zheng, 2017). Female jihadists are not simply desperate individuals who are looking for a way to support themselves, a way to spend their lives usefully, or a pathway to fame, as evidenced by Zahra and Salma Halane and countless others. Some people have a bright future ahead of them and still choose this path because they are motivated by powerful factors. Several of the main categories of motivating factors are discussed below.

Motivation 1: Ideology and Religion

Just as with men, a dedication to a cause of the Islamic religion is one of the motivating factors for women to join terrorist organizations. Sawicki (2016) noted, “Some might view suicide terrorism as a cowardly act, but it is one that requires substantial presence of mind from the bomber. Women are seen as second-tier citizens in many societies [but] performing such extreme violence is a signal act of commitment and can have a riveting effect on the male fighters” (para. 20). Women also have a desire to show their commitment to a cause and to their male counterparts by committing acts of terror. As mentioned previously, it is almost universally agreed upon in different Muslim terrorist groups that women have the potential to reach Paradise by giving their life for jihad. Hence, in that regard, they share the same motivation as men.

One boy from Chicago, who ran away to join ISIS, left a note saying that he could no longer bear to live in “[t]he land whose people mock my Allah, my beloved prophet, the commandments of Allah, [and] his law. The ones who are using my money to kill my brothers and sisters” (Sperry, 2017, para. 33). This suggests that many people who join are motivated by true religious fervor, and this is not unique to men or women.

Motivation 2: Revenge and Community

On September 11, 2016, three Kenyan women attacked a police station in Nairobi, claiming that they were taking revenge for the poor treatment of Muslims in Mombasa (Zheng, 2017). Putting the irony of terrorism in response to poor treatment of people aside, this points to another strong motivator for women. Whether it comes from some innate sense of protection for those close to them, a naturally empathetic and compassionate personality, or some other factor, women may also ascribe their terrorist acts to revenge. In addition, female attacks can often be a response to personal tragedy, such as the death of a loved one who was killed in combat. Finally, terrorist strikes can be a response to those who have occupied a

woman's town, country, or homeland (Sawicki, 2016).

Not only can terrorism be a way of protecting one's community, joining a terrorist group can be a way of finding community. Zheng (2017) wrote that "Muslim women in Europe feel isolated due to difficult childhoods and rising anti-Muslim sentiment, and may be drawn to ISIS by the sense of sisterhood and community conveyed in social media posts by other female recruits" (Zheng, 2017, para. 4). In finding community, females can discover a place where they are accepted, even if they are still not valued for themselves but for their use.

Motivation 3: Personal Recognition or Profit

Though less common, there is evidence stating that ISIS sometimes grants stipends to women who are willing to join and birth and raise children to become the next generation of jihadis. One woman from England reportedly receives 25 USD per month for every child she has, a 400 USD maternity bonus, and a 500 USD marriage bonus (Sperry, 2017). This is supposedly not a unique situation, though at the same time, it appears that terrorists are able to attract the recruits that they need without such offers.

It can be a means of personal financial gain, but more often, if motivated by personal benefit, it is because a woman can earn honor and respect by giving her life to jihad. People enjoy the idea of being a part of something bigger than themselves, and in some cases, jihad is the only way that women can feel like they are a part of something that is more useful on a larger scale than merely their own households. They can receive an elevated status from joining, that cannot be earned in any other way.

Additionally, Sawicki (2016) wrote that jihad is even a means of gaining celebrity status: "Suicide bomber attacks are recorded, memorialized and posted on the internet as recruiting tools. There is a daredevil, exciting aspect to the attacks that appeals to some individuals looking for a way out of their lives and into notoriety" (para. 22). Islamic societies do not allow women many opportunities to prove their worth or be appreciated apart from their utility (i.e. their ability to bear children and keep a household). Because of this, they can sometimes be desperate for opportunities to prove that their personal worth. Becoming involved in terrorist activity gives women the ability to showcase their value (Goldman, 2012).

Apart from personal recognition, women have the opportunity to gain respect for their sex as a whole through waging jihad. Alarid (2016) wrote, "The possibility also exists that despite the terrible oppression of women in many terrorist groups, women join to prove the worth of their gender in the hope of making strides toward women's rights" (para. 46). Women who join terrorist organizations not only battle their enemies but subtly wage war on the patriarchal societies in which they live, dramatically elevating their sex's status in society (Sawicki, 2016).

Motivation 4: To Be Saved From Dishonor

It is well-documented that women have sometimes become involved in terrorist activities to save themselves from dishonor. As horrific as it seems, several recruiters unashamedly admit to purposely organizing mass rapes as a means of recruiting women as suicide bombers. Since a woman and her family is considered dishonored if she is raped, some women believe that their only hope for redemption is through martyrdom. As such, women who have been raped and are deemed “dishonorable” are the ideal targets for recruiters searching for those willing to die for an “honorable” cause.

In one such instance, a member of Ansar Al-Sunnah, named Samira Ahmed Jassim, organized the rape of eighty women so that they could be recruited as suicide bombers. The group did this because they had a shortage of those willing to undertake suicide missions (Goldman, 2012). Their plan was executed successfully, and to date, thirty-two of the eighty women who were a part of that tragedy have gone on to launch attacks. This sends the message that these women “are more valuable to their societies dead than alive and disgraced” (Goldman, 2012, para. 7). This mindset is unacceptable yet prevalent. Radical Islamic society can be quick to excuse men for brutish and unacceptable behavior, yet ready to disgrace women for circumstances beyond their control.

This wide employment of rape destroys women and girls psychologically, emotionally, socially, and eventually physically. Unfortunately, it is highly effective and compels women to give their lives so they can reclaim their honor (Sawicki, 2016). Sadly, terrorists in power know how to use social influence to destroy those around them. The pressure of society in Muslim communities is generally so strong that innocent women and children become easy prey.

Involvement

As previously discussed, involvement for women varies entirely on the group that they join and how the organization views the role of women. However, women sometimes are allowed to be involved in specially delegated ways, though not in the way that the Islamic groups would like to deceive people into thinking. For example, ISIS has created an exclusively female brigade, named al-Khansaa. The sole task of this brigade is to enforce the ISIS interpretation of Islamic law among other women in the Syrian city of Raqqa and to ensure that they are complying with all the regulations and rules (Zheng, 2017). They still have no power over men, but they have some of the same power as their male counterparts over the females in their region. This brigade “allows ISIS to lure in young women by characterizing recruits as strong and independent with ‘jihadi girl power,’ in opposition to the oppressed Muslim women stereotype” (Zheng, 2017, para. 5).

There is an odd paradox where women are devalued by Islamic societies yet, can be highly sought after their usefulness in warfare. Female recruits have symbolic rather than numerical impact for the most part, given that there still are many more men involved in terrorist groups (Milton-Edwards & Attia, 2017). Terrorism is about getting attention, making a point, and causing people to fear, which is accomplished by broadcasting terrorist acts. Statistics show that media attention for attacks conducted by women is about four times that of men. Thus, women can be extremely useful, not only in actually carrying out attacks, but also in gaining the attention that terrorists are looking for (Sawicki, 2016).

Prevention

Alarid (2016) argued that an effective strategy for countering female radicalization must include several elements. First, leaders should discourage people from propagating extremist messages online by cracking down on radical websites and prosecuting the owners. Second, internet forums should self-police by vetting material that is posted to their pages and creating mechanisms by which members can report suspicious activity. Third, government should promote a larger “counter message” online, advocating for women’s rights and promoting outlets that teach that Islam is a religion of peace and nonviolence. This could also involve using social media to directly counter the social media tactics of terrorists, debunking the false claims of propaganda. As is evident from this analysis, recruiters’ online presence and the influence of social media is at the root of the problem.

Conclusion

While there has been an alarming trend in increased participation by women in groups such as ISIS and Hamas, most counterterror plans focus on males and their activity. As a result, women are more likely avoid detection than their male counterparts. Thus, the United States and other democratic nations need to adopt policies that are not gender-biased or specific. Counterterror plans need to include women in their analysis along with men.

At the same time, while women have proved that they can be a deadly force and do significant damage, some claim that they may also be a key component to ending (or at least reducing) radical terrorism as it is seen today. Women are seen as lesser members of society in many Muslim communities, and thus, are seen as mostly useful for staying home and raising a family—more specifically, new children who will be the next generation of jihad warriors. But even though they are given this job because they supposedly have less value, mothering is one of the most significant and influential tasks in their society. Children are heavily influenced by the environment that they grow up in. Women have the opportunity to be one of the

primary influences in the lives of their children who will become the next generation of fighters—or perhaps the first generation to seek peace.

Additionally, women are first-hand witnesses to the process and people who will potentially become the next generation of terrorists (Alarid, 2016). This gives them insight and a unique perspective. It also gives them an incredible knowledge of what is going on at an individual or communal level. Thus, women are both an excellent knowledge base and primary influencers in their communities. The radical Islamic agenda cannot continue without the cooperation and support of the females in their society. For this reason, women may be the best tool available for countering Islamic extremism.

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