

## WOMEN'S ROLE IN COUNTERING EXTREMISM

By Ouafae SANDI

Today extremism is one of the major challenges facing all societies without exception. Equated with terrorism, extremism has commanded the attention of analysts and specialists. While it is easy to detect individuals radicalizing to extremist ideology, it is very difficult to predict when terrorism may begin and where it may strike. Therefore, efforts to counter extremism constitute an alternative approach to preclude the risks of terrorist acts.

The problem is that countering extremism and terrorism is identified as a male-dominated area. Women are not yet given full decision-making power, at a time when women are increasingly targeted as victims of terrorism, active participants and perpetrators of terrorist acts.

To fully understand the importance and the need to involve women in the measures and strategies to combat extremism, we must first consider the risks of women being targeted and recruited by terrorist organizations to perform different roles as terrorist planners and actors, carrying out terrorist "lone wolves" suicide attacks, as happened in Tunis when a Tunisian suicide bomber woman blew herself up in central Tunis on Bourguiba Avenue.

Though terrorism is not a new phenomenon, a recent development is women's involvement, both in number and geographical location, in terrorist activities. Research estimates that roughly 10 to 15 percent of terrorist groups' recruits are women<sup>(1)</sup>. Certain reports indicate that up to 4,761 of ISIL (The

1 Hilary Matless and Jason Warner, 'Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operations and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers,' *Combatting Terrorism Center*, August 2017; Katherine Brown, 'Blinded by the explosion? Security and resistance in Muslim women's suicide terrorism,' in Laura Jobor, Caron E Gentry (eds), *Women, gender and terrorism*, University of Georgia Press, 2011.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) recruits are women<sup>(1)</sup>, with varying degrees of involvement. Eastern Asian countries have the highest rate (%35) of female foreign fighters, followed by Eastern Europe (%23), Western Europe (%17) and the Americas, Australia and New Zealand (%17) and Central Asia (%12), the Middle East and North Africa (%6), and finally Sub-Saharan Africa (less than %1).

These figures, though by a rough estimate, dispel the wrong notion that extremist and terrorist acts are the exclusive act of men, and that women are just passive victims of them. Women's active and willing participation, both as orchestrators and perpetrators, in terrorist activities across the world calls for taking seriously the risk of their involvement in terrorist organizations. Women have multifarious roles in terrorist organizations: beyond traditional roles, as wives or domestic help, women hold leading positions within logistics and as fighters. Besides, recruiting women allows terrorist groups to spread propaganda material. For this reason, the UN Security Council adopted a series of resolutions requiring member states to consider the roles of women, analyzing and discerning their motives for becoming involved in extremism, and to devise gender-sensitive approaches and responses for extremism and terrorism prevention strategies<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **1 - Reasons for terrorist groups' recruiting of women:**

Women are a key strategic target and a constituent element of the organizational structure of extremist and terrorist groups, and a success factor for their extremist and terrorist acts. They are a means of propaganda for the ideology of violence and hatred these groups want to impose on the world at large. Terrorist organizations have these reasons for using women:

1 Joana Cook and Gina Vale, 'From Daesh to Diaspora: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State,' International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018.

2 UN Security Council Resolutions 2178 (2014), 2242 (2015), 2395 (2017) and 2396 (2017)

**First:** Using women is a strategic feature which outweighs in importance that of men themselves. Women are a key element in certain preparation and implementation phases of terrorist operations which require a great deal of logistics and supplies. Women, especially veiled ones, can easily evade a range of inspection measures, because they enjoy some kind of social immunity. They can easily pass through checkpoints and military posts, and they can be used to convey encrypted messages or exchange information.

**Second:** From a psychological and social standpoint, the presence of female elements within the structure of terrorist organizations constitutes a driver of radicalization for a broader section of young people.

**Third:** The presence of women within terrorist organizations has also a pull effect on the media, using its amplifying role to disseminate news to a wider audience about women's involvement, either as the plotter or the co-perpetrator, in terrorist operations. The media is also used to win the sympathy of other women sharing the same ideas or experiencing the same pains.

**Fourth:** Unlike men, women undertake multifaceted roles within terrorist organizations. They are more involved in logistics, owing to the varied nature of the female activities and areas within those groups, in relation to their educational, social and operational influence within the group.

**Fifth:** Women are a meaningful participant in shaping extremist content and are influenced by extremist groups. When women radicalize to extremist ideology, they are found to be far more actively involved in violent extremism. Radicalized women will cause much more damage, because they will produce generations of children with extremist views.

## 2 - Roles of women within terrorist organizations:

The place of women within terrorist organizations has always carried a mysterious air. Women were initially relegated to limited and minor roles. Analyzing the status of women in "Jihadist" discourse shows that women have been denied travelling to or fighting on the battlefield. They were mainly recruited as Jihadist brides, confined at home submitting themselves to the desires of their husbands, housekeeping, childbearing and childcare, and passing on Jihadist values to their children.

But things have changed. The first Chechen war (1999-1995), between the separatist republic of Chechnya and Russia, with the Arab-Afghan warriors joining Chechen fighters, has marked a shift in women's status within "Jihadist" organizations. Chechen women have steered away from the secondary roles traditionally assigned to them within "Jihadist" groups. In the dark years between the two wars fought with Russia, the Chechen people experienced a great deal of pain. They were confronted with the horrors of ethnic cleansing, mass rape, displacement, looting, killing and torture, with the international community casting an indulgent eye on their ordeal. A new generation of Chechen women has emerged who were named "black widows". These women –whose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons all have been killed by Russian forces– started taking up roles other than the marginal ones to which they were traditionally called. Chechen women turned to suicide bombing, recruiting waves of women in the fight against Russian forces<sup>1)</sup>.

Influenced by the experience of Chechen women suicide bombers, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader, assigned women prominent roles as Jihadi activists, using them as suicide bombers. Iraq was rocked by two female suicide

1 A. Späckhard and K. Akhmedova (2008) indicated that 42% of all Chechen suicide bombers were females. In an updated publication, the rate was estimated at 28% to 31%.

bombers, during the first year of the American occupation. It was in 2007 in Iraq that suicide bombing as a phenomenon began, since the country witnessed eight suicide attacks carried out by women.

When the Islamic State (IS) first emerged, the phenomenon of "terrorist women" soon evolved into a true rising threat. ISIL started publishing material directed at women in their home countries, demanding them to take up arms and fight "Jihad" where they are. These women were afterward compelled to undertake "Hijra" (emigration) from where they are across the world to ISIL territory. The terror organization started using new social media technologies to attract and recruit new female members. Women within ISIL have been given an active role in spreading the Islamic State's evil propaganda and recruiting other women. They have also been used in money and arms smuggling, and engaged in weapons and fighting training, after the radical group established the "Al-Khansaa Battalion" for its female militants. ISIL female militants have also been involved in plotting and carrying out terrorist activities. They moved from the marginal role of "brides" of Jihadists to an active participation as "female Jihadists". After ISIL has been dealt successive defeats, with its fighters killed or having fled, it started engaging women in fighting to make up for its acute shortage of militants. With the IS opening the door to more direct female battlefield involvement, there has been increased frontline roles for them.

Female suicide bombers within terrorist organizations have grown in number with the large body of *fatwas* encouraging women to embark on Jihad to win martyrdom. These terror organizations even went so far as to force their female militants to perform such operations. A terrorist group like Boko Haram has gone too far in exploiting women, kidnapping and recruiting countless women

and using them as suicide bombers. Researchers have indicated that Boko Haram has deployed 434 suicide bombers, in the period between April 2011 and June 2017, revealing that at least 244 or %56 of the 338 attacks in which the bomber's gender could be identified were carried out by women.

Indeed, women's involvement in extremism and violence is a complex issue. Even if women's role may in some cases be reduced to being passive victims of Jihadist groups, they may subsequently be radicalized toward engaging in terrorist acts as perpetrators. Studies on reasons why women are radicalized to terrorist acts suggest that they may either be motivated by a personal desire to improve their status within the terror organization or subjected to extremist ideology. Even in the absence of direct battlefield involvement, women can spread extremist ideas and encourage others to carry out terrorist attacks.

### **3 - Women's motives for joining terrorist organizations:**

It has become certain that women's direct involvement in terrorist activities is on an upward trend, with many typologies. It is true that studies are scarce on reasons and motives for women's radicalization to violent extremism. But one may argue that most of the same factors that prompt men to become terrorists drive women in the same way. They include:

- Feeling of being subordinate to male fighters.
- Emotional motives (desire to get married to a strong male fighter).
- Psychological motives (difficult childhood and social upbringing).
- Ideological beliefs (extremist understanding of religion).
- Political reasons (lack of democracy, marginalized areas and problems with identity and belonging).

- Economic factors (poverty, vulnerability, lack of job opportunities, etc.).
- Feeling of injustice, in the broad acceptance of that term or as a result of lack of opportunities for women to exercise their civil and political rights.

Women's motives for joining terrorist groups, like male fighters, can be the promise of a new life within a new group sharing the same ideas and views, a desire for revenge in response to perceived injustice, marginalization and frustration, or a desire for empowerment and self-fulfillment.

#### **4 - Women and counterextremism:**

It has become clear that terrorist organizations have all been keen to attract attention and recruit women. Countless are the motivational reasons for women radicalizing to extremist ideology, joining terrorist organizations or sympathizing with them from where they are. Therefore, no single prevention strategy will be sufficient to contain the spread of the phenomenon. There is a need for such strategies to be informed by the political, social and cultural specificity and diversity of each region. Nevertheless, there are some counterextremism procedures and policies on which all the States concerned can agree. These include:

It is fundamental to increase awareness of the existence of and potential for women terrorist radicalization. Women cannot always be perceived as subordinate to men within terrorist organizations or being coerced into joining extremist groups. Women often play the role of participants or perpetrators with respect to violent radicalization. Hence the need to emphasize that the stereotypical views of women as "passive victims" may create dangerous gaps in counter security strategies. To ignore motivational reasons for women radicalizing to extremist

ideology, in favor of a stereotypical conceptualization of Jihadist females, will take away from the ability of decision makers to prevent women's involvement into terrorist activities. Failing to explore all these motivational reasons, because inconsistent with prevailing conceptualization of women's natural demeanor and of its unlikely propensity for violence, will only blind societies to the existence of female extremist and terrorist radicalization. Failing to develop such all-inclusive strategy will only leave women with no role in designing and implementing counterextremism and counterterrorism strategies.

Focusing the war against terrorism on the early prevention of signs of extremist radicalization, rather than wait until these women become radicalized toward engaging into acts of violent extremism, requires finding innovative forms of prevention. These should start by expanding the scope of the search for the categories of individuals involved, primarily women. There is need to enable women to play their proactive role in preventing extremism, thereby steering their children and social milieu away from the path of radicalization. Being the closest to their community and the most influential and effective component, women should be given an active role in countering extremism and terrorism.

To achieve this goal, a number of measures are proposed:

- a. There is need to involve women and mainstream a gender-based approach in the drafting, implementation and evaluation of all policies, laws, procedures, programs, plans, measures and research works on combating extremism and terrorism. There are two chief reasons for the necessity of these measures: **First**, to consolidate efforts for a more comprehensive and effective approach against this phenomenon, and to generate additional support for these efforts by strengthening the important role played



by women in preventing and countering extremism and terrorism. **Second**, to enable women to have substantive voice and leadership in decision making, not as mere subjects of research and study in the counterextremism programs.

- b. Counterextremism efforts should prevent women radicalizing to extremist ideology. These should consist in identifying and preventing gender-linked reasons why women embrace extremist ideology. The focus should be on keeping women away from being recruited into, joining or sympathizing with extremist groups. Fully understanding the multifarious roles of women in spreading extremist ideology, and exploring the factors facilitating their recruitment by terrorist groups, are crucial in countering extremism and terrorism.
- c. Women can take frontline roles in spotting the early signs of extremist radicalization within their families or communities. Therefore, it is important to make the most of women's intuition as an early warning system to detect signs of radicalization among children; something only mothers can do. Women are also best suited to prevent their womenfolk and the youth from radicalizing to extremism. Therefore, engaging and empowering women in various sectors will help build inclusive, trustworthy institutions.
- d. It is important to empower women-centered organizations and associations in the combat against extremism, the more so as they are familiar with the issues of society and serve as the mouthpiece of the entire community. Their work should include conducting sensitization and awareness-raising conferences, meetings and training sessions for girls and women about the dangers of extremism, teaching them ways to detect and prevent signs of radicalization

among their children and within their family and professional environment. As such, they will be able to play an active role in the promotion of the values of tolerance, acceptance of difference and diversity within the same society, thus contributing to reducing this phenomenon.

- e. Also important is the need to build women's capacities to contribute effectively and fruitfully to localized efforts against extremism. Challenges such as legal and institutional constraints, security concerns, lack of resources and skills usually put a dent to women's full and effective participation in the policies and programs to combat extremism, which will require focus on building a set of skills (critical thinking, social media technologies, communication skills, mediation and settlement of disputes). Equally important are knowledge building and awareness raising, particularly with regard to the factors and influences that facilitate radicalization into extremism.
- f. It is important to reinforce women's status within society, while ensuring their socioeconomic and political empowerment, through legislation aimed at safeguarding women's freedom and delivering the full enjoyment of their civil rights, unleashing their full creative potential and protecting them from violence and abuse at home, at school, at the university, in the street and at work. There should also be laws to protect women from the dual situation of their rights being sanctioned by law and the excesses of the patriarchal society, which stands in the way of their exercise of their legally recognized rights.
- g. There is need to enhance the image of women scholars, while activating the role of female preachers and guides with regard to the spiritual security of citizens, males and

females alike. There should be more opportunities to promote women's equal participation as one half of the society, having an intrinsic value equal to that of men and being the cornerstone for the spiritual health of the entire family, especially its female members. The fact is that the function of social reform, education and the Islamic requisite of enjoining good and forbidding wrong practices is not the sole preserve of men. Comparatively women scholars, preachers and guides are best positioned to deal with their womenfolk, addressing their specific needs and concerns. They are more qualified to redress misdeeds and misconceptions among their womenfolk, and they have the broader guiding role of showing the entire society the right path, through imbuing enlightened and moderate ideology into society, making positive influence on people by means of dialogue, wise counsel and good example, raising understanding of religious matters and handling family crises, without the exclusion of any individual member of the society regardless of their religion.

**Conclusion:**

Building and growing a civilization rests mainly on education and awareness-raising efforts for women's active and full participation in the whole process. Ignoring this important fact means neglecting at least %52 of the potential of society in addressing the challenges facing it. Government approaches against extremist and terrorist ideology and groups are more effective when involving women. This is all the more important, because women have the inherent potential and natural disposition of handling details keenly and closely. Not only do women constitute a key agent in reform and rebuilding, but they are also an influential segment of the entire family. We only need to best qualify and equip them to make the most of their abilities.