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WOMEN IN COUNTERING TERRORISM

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According to a research conducted by Mia Bloom, the author of “Bombshell: Women and Terrorism”¹, female suicide bombers, including the Chechen Black Widows, and members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), carried out more than 230 deadly attacks between 1985 and 2008 and were responsible for about a quarter of all terrorist attacks in the mentioned period. In recent news published by the Atlantic Council² on 9 July, 2018, it was noted that in spite of having such an overwhelming presence in carrying out terror activities across the globe, women have been largely ignored while addressing the challenge of terrorism. This concern comes about when the world’s oldest military alliance (NATO) assemble in Brussels to reaffirm its unity, strength, and tends to resolve the threats arising from the south by its strategic approach while investing in building the capacity of women in counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE). It has been noted that the standardized assumption that women have no role to play in warfare has

mostly limited women participation in security operations and diminished their role from the political discourse on terrorism. The non-existence of a gender perspective in peace and security studies around the world also has forced women to be a subsidiary of the global stabilization and conflict resolution efforts.

Presently, even the most conservative terrorist organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or simply the ISIS, as a part of their propaganda, is increasingly targeting and inspiring women to join them. In exchange for their involvement they are being rewarded a central role in the state-building process of the caliphate. Magazines such as the *Al Shamikha*, *Al-Khansa*, and *Dabiq*, are carefully packaged to allure women by conveying to them a message of hope, opportunities, and rewards, on behalf of the extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the ISIS. According to the 2017 EUROPOL Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT), the increasing involvement of women in terrorist activities has become an unparalleled phenomenon as it is perceived that female

militant jihadists in the West face much fewer obstacles and are more successful than men as an operative in a terrorist attack. This observed phenomenon also inspires other women to join such militant groups in large numbers.

As per the reports of the International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT)³, Hague, amongst the 30,000 individuals who have travelled to the area of the Levant with the purpose of joining the so-called Islamic State (IS), more than 5000 were foreign fighters who had originated from Europe, from welfare nations such as Belgium, France, Sweden and the UK and if there 20 percent, that is approximately 1000; fighters were women. These women fighters along with their children had chosen to migrate to areas controlled by ISIS in search of a new and very different life.

In spite of the above mentioned facts, few studies have tried to analyse the reason behind why so many women have chosen to join the IS. The existing research mostly consists of the phenomenon of withdrawal from the social media of those Western women living within the caliphate, their daily lives as migrants and their role as women under the ISIS. But, such research, has failed to explain how the IS as an organisation views women. Though an exception can be found in Kiriloi M. Ingram's brief but interesting review of the female archetypes found in IS magazine *Dabiq*, published by ICCT.

As one digs deeper into the pages of magazines such as *Dabiq*, it's easy to come across almost 900 pages of the official IS propaganda entitled Promises of Paradise, which contains eleven official statements made by the self-appointed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the now late spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, that offers a dream-like picture of a future country filled with full of possibilities for young women. Nevertheless, a deep analysis of this propaganda might help to understand the incentives that motivate women to migrate and the reasons behind their radicalisation.

IS' Promises to Women

IS' Official propaganda promises women that the fulfilment of the religious duty would take them to paradise in this life as well as during their life after death. They are also promised a life full of opportunities after they have performed '*Hijra*', that is migration to the ISIS. Apart from this, women have been also promised a central role in state building within the caliphate, where they will fundamentally be assigned three vital roles; first, in becoming esteemed wives of brave and righteous warriors whom only they can support, secondly, being mothers of IS' next generation; and lastly, become state officials, by being exceptionally good in education, that is provided free of cost. Further, by joining IS women also get to experience a deep and meaningful sense of belonging, and treated as equals regardless of skin colour, nationality or ethnicity. Their religious affiliation shall make them equals in the

land of Islam, and IS portrayed as a utopian society free from any discrimination. Women are also allured to live under the IS, to experience a sense of sisterhood framed as a deep and genuine friendship that by far exceeds bloodlines. This is exemplified in the IS propaganda by promoting polygamy where four women might share the same husband in a sisterly spirit. Finally, women who join IS are promised increased influence in the internal politics of IS, as well as in international politics. These promises not only paint a picture of a young nation-state resembling a paradise on earth, but also send a message of hope, opportunity and empowerment to women making it all the more difficult to devise measures in countering radicalisation of women to IS.

Women Critical to Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Despite increasing instances of joining the violent extremist groups, it is observed that there has also been an escalation in women participation in peace-building, peacekeeping, and international development programs during the past decade. Women's participation has also been noticed in cultural mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution. In fact in Countering terrorism women play different, but equally important, roles in families, communities, and public spaces as mothers, community/religious leaders (female imams), activists, political actors, and leaders. In Pakistan, the activist named

Mossarat Qadeem⁴ had been de-radicalizing extremists for the past decade by working with legislators, religious leaders, and schools to talk young men out of committing suicide attacks. Her organization Paiman Alumni Trust⁵ has till date trained more than 655 mothers to de-radicalize 1,024 young men and boys, rehabilitating them and reintegrating them into society. In March 2015 in Morocco, there had been nationwide program to train female imams, the *Morchidates*⁶, to counter the extremist interpretations of Islam. Again in the Horn of Africa, Fauziya Ali, a female political leader, president of Women in International Security (Horn of Africa), and chair of Women without Borders, leads successful programs to upgrade African women's socioeconomic and promote political empowerment, which are the essential preconditions for preventing violent extremism in the region. Again in Belgium, Saliha Ben Ali, mother of an ISIS militant, implemented de-radicalization programs targeting disenfranchised youth.

Conclusion

"If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)."

This very well-known saying by the Ghanaian scholar Dr James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey, gives us an understanding that how women are a potential bearer of education, awareness, love and peace through generations across the world. They are mothers, educators and connectors to

societies, communities and families. They are the units of social institutions and human existence. Hence to achieve something significant for the society it is very important to include women with their influence from the smallest unit within the family to larger decision making processes politically, because once women, have found their voice they will be committed to the cause, and the change shall thus occur.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Bloom, Mia. Bombshell: Women and Terrorism. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

² VIVO, DIANA DE. "Not Just a Numbers Game: NATO, Women, and Countering Terrorism." Atlantic Council, 9 July 2018.

³ Tarras-Wahlberg, Louisa. "Promises of Paradise: IS Propaganda towards Women." International Centre For Counter Terrorism ICCT. 6 December 2016. <https://icct.nl/publication/promises-of-paradise-is-propaganda-towards-women/>.

⁴ "Mossarat Qadeem." Women Economic Forum. n.d. <http://www.wef.org.in/mossarat-qadeem-pakistan/>.

⁵ ibid No.2.

⁶ ibid.