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The Making of Female Extremism

by [Angie Omar](#)

Feb 19, 2020

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Angie Omar is a journalist based in Washington D.C. She began her career as a citizen journalist in the Arab Spring in Egypt. Shortly after, she moved to the United States and received her master's degree in communications from the American University in Washington D.C. She has researched and produced projects for non-profits, think tanks, television, and radio stations.



Brief Analysis

Women's decisions to join terrorist groups have multiple, complex factors. However, [the culture of gender repression in the general public sphere](#) urges women to search for an alternative mode of living; a reality not discussed enough in the overall conversation about terrorism.

Growing up, I came into contact with many women suffering from severe traumas sanctioned by their communities. The challenges these women faced ranged from so-called 'honor crimes' to Female Genital Mutilation, [forced marriage](#), and often included the general societal ideology that women's bodies are created sinfully.

The emphasis on preserving a patriarchal system was part of a broader rejection of diversity that included the repression of racial and ethnic minorities. Put simply, those who tried to choose a life outside of the communal norm were seen as threats, an attitude that has suffocated the creative and productive abilities of women and, indeed the this region as a whole.

What is relatively new is that some of the women who have lived through these traumas, especially those already exposed to a radical upbringing, increasingly see joining terrorist groups as a way of recapturing the agency denied to them by society. In a twisted way, some women respond to socially accepted oppressive traditions to women's rights, as well as social pressures that encourage radical thoughts and definitions of self-sacrifice in the name of the sacred, by seeking agency through the most extreme performance of these 'values.' The fertile soil in which some women naturally harvest radical ideas stems from the lack of alternative ways to express their inner anger-turned-hatred.

As Peter Bergen, a leading journalist in the field of terrorism, pointed out in an Interview with the author, "ISIS's innovation was to recruit females...so, it's possible that a new generation of terrorists are being created" through this newfound interest in female recruits. Similarly, [Jason Burke from the Guardian noted this new strategy In 2016](#), "Previously, female members of ISIS have been confined to support roles and kept away from the battlefield.

However, this policy appears to have been reversed in the summer, as military pressure on its main strongholds in Iraq, Syria and Libya intensified and substantial territory began to be lost.” This shift is often described by researchers in the field of terrorism as a drastic "u-turn" in terror strategy. **It is clear that ISIS has tapped into a deep sense of frustration among women in these communities** and is learning how to use this frustration for its own ends.

Norman Roule, a former CIA official for overseeing the U.S. national security policy to the Middle East argues in an interview with the author that “The perception of oppression is a crucial factor in radicalization...[this] oppression may just be a determination made by a single individual or a single family or single area of politics, but it’s a critical part of radicalization because what seems oppression to one person may seem as a societal norm by another.”

For many women, the most obvious exposure to oppression comes from within their own social milieu. In other words, one of the principle reasons these women can choose to take part in terrorism is to gain a sense of agency and power that they were never given in their communities through leaning into extremist ideology and accepting the new leadership roles opening up for women within those structures—even as these organizations treat them as second citizens and will even use women to generate revenue through sex trafficking.

Fundamentalists start by recruiting women who choose to play a crucial part in indoctrinating their families and contributing to terror acts because they know women could use their influence in recruiting other women or—worse—deceive them until they fall victim to groups like Boko Haram, ISIS, al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, or any other terror movements.

Even though one could argue that the Middle East is a troubled region with many religious and sectarian divides, what could possibly push western women to adapt radical ideologies and join terror groups? When Bergen interviewed American women who attempted to join ISIS, for instance, they claimed to be attracted to the terrorist group's plan to "create a perfect Islamic society, the caliphate and that there was some kind of a paradise.” This might lead one to believe that women, not just from the Middle East, can fall victim to subjugation within the international terror dilemma. Given these adaptations to involve women in terrorist groups, it is time to refocus efforts to address the quandaries of female terrorism.

As Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein emphasized in their article the need to recognize women's roles in terrorist organizations, “eighteen years since the devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11...**The United States has spent nearly \$6 trillion to counter terrorism**, yet the number of Islamist extremist fighters last year was **270 percent higher than it was in 2001**.” Many researchers, like Joan Cook in her book, "A Woman’s Place: U.S. Counterterrorism Since 9/11" are beginning to join the conversation about the gendered dimensions of terrorism, as well as discuss the societal factors that influence women to become extremists.

Female terror is just one aspect of the ingrained terror crisis in the Middle East that reshapes itself into more aggressive portraits—whether in Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or essentially any other country in the Middle East. However, it is crucial to underline the ideologies that profane women’s bodies and minds. ❖



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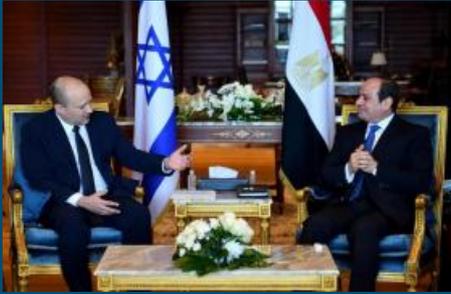


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