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A note from the editor...



"Terrorism has become the systematic weapon of a war that knows no borders or seldom has a face." - Jacques Chirac

Stuart Repon-Ness
GCTI Executive Director

It's been a busy year here at the Global Counter-Terrorism Institute, with program development such as our Masters in International Security Studies, our Criminal Justice and Beginners Arabic Programs. As the world continues the battle against terrorism, we believe education is an important factor and we aim to provide our students with the most up-to-date research and taught by our highly esteemed lecturers.

We have also held several high profile webinars hosting some of the best speakers in their field on topics such as the crime / terror nexus, women in terrorism and global de-radicalisation strategies.

Additionally, we have had the pleasure of successfully launching our international internship program that has welcomed interns from all over the world, giving them the opportunity to write a high standard academic paper and then present on it at our live webinars.

Lastly, we have been busy working on the launch of our e-mag. A vision to bring our readers a quarterly issue sharing the very latest academic research in the field of Counter-Terrorism, Geo-Politics and International Relations with a culture of unbiased, non-partisan views. We hope you enjoy our first free issue and the many more to come.

Stuart Repon-Ness



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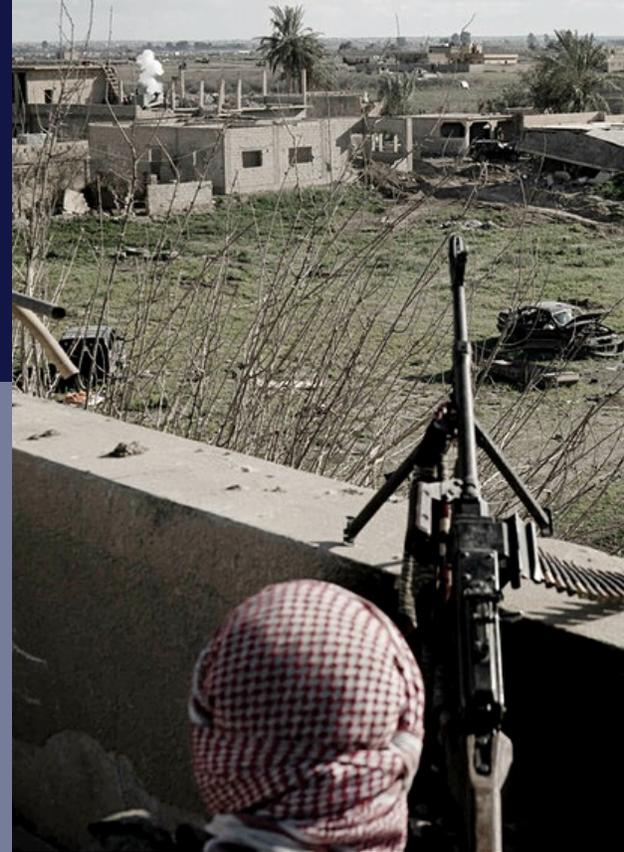
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INCEL EXTREMISM: KENYA'S AND INDIA'S PREDISPOSITION TO INCELDOME TERRORISM

By Dr Gurpreet Kaur & Miss Janet Kiguru

The evolution of Incel (involuntary celibate) extremism into domestic terrorism is a simmering concern in Africa and Asia. Their societies are largely bridled by patriarchy, societal-economic disillusionment, youth alienation, and gradual societal decay. The Incel subculture has been hijacked by other extremists who are encouraging members to become ungovernable and glorify the use of violence. In Western Europe, incel-motivated violence has become a public security concern.



In 2020, the Canadian government designated it as domestic terrorism, and the UK's Prevent program has established a category of 'Mixed, Unclear and Unstable' (MUU) threats to factor in incel threats (Leidig, 2021). The US National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism has also designated the inceldom as a threat category of domestic terrorism and violent extremism. Using Kenya and India as case studies, this paper argues that the evolving socio-cultural and economic contexts enable domestic terrorism to foster.

Introduction

The radicalisation into incelness is rapidly increasing in Kenya, even as social media commentators trivialise it as a gender war and domestic violence. However, as the movement gets more members, their redpill extremism will also increase. Within the incelness, extremists are indoctrinating vulnerable young men to swallow a redpill, which makes them realise that they have been living a lie. Their truth or new reality is that the world and society are misbalanced in favour of women (sluts) who are taking advantage of men. The redpilling is meant to encourage men to 'liberate' themselves. Their anger is directed at women in general and men who are considered likeable by women because they are 'sims' (Suckers Idolising Mediocre Pussy). Incel terrorism has taken up a similar trajectory to jihadi terrorism.

First, the very idea of incelness is foreign to Kenya. While Islamist terrorism originated in the Middle East, the incelness is coming from the US and Europe.

Secondly, the incel movements are led by 'charismatic' leaders with a cultic following.

Thirdly, the incel community has multiple groups, but the unifying factor is their hatred against women.

Lastly, like Islamist terrorism, social media has become a critical instrument to spread violent redpill ideology, and this movement has taken a life of its own, often with faceless leaders.



The study draws on informal conversations and social media surveys with over fifty conveniently sampled respondents to analyse how incelness could predispose Kenya to incel terrorism and what is driving this movement.

Social Media Platform on Radicalisation

The overt existence of the incel movement and the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) in Kenya has become increasingly popular during the pandemic. A respondent intimated that during the COVID-19 period, he got a lot of free time and started reading on improving himself. In the course, he came across books that had divergent opinions. He then realised that he was 'dumb' and has since become a member of the incel-subculture in Nairobi.



This movement has gained social media traction, and every Saturday, the #masculinitysaturday trends for the entire day and outpours even into the following week. @Amerix is a purported wellness and fitness specialist, but his tweets are militant, extremist and full of anti-women rhetoric. This has warranted other Kenyans to report the Twitter handle.

Initially, Twitter responded by withdrawing his verification tag, but he moved on to Telegram, where he created The Warriors group. Telegram is a less uncensored social media platform that radical groups often use to share information and extremist agenda. The #masculinitysaturday and The Warriors have gone viral, with a regional and global audience. The Warriors Telegram group is radical, and the oath of this cultic following is, that what starts in Telegram must never be brought on Twitter!

Social Media Platform on Radicalisation (cont.)

@Amerix Twitter handle has over half a million followers, primarily vulnerable men seeking life advice. It is here that the followers are redirected to The Warriors group. The group has earned the support of misogynist Kenyan celebrities and influential personalities such as Andrew Kibe and Shaffie Were. These celebrities have given the groups a sense of legitimacy.

The Kenyan incel movement primarily borrows from global influences, mainly from the US and Western Europe. Even @Amerix's followers admit his tweets are a regurgitation of the works of Rollo Tomasi (The Rational Male), The Game by Neil Strauss, Jordan Peterson, Kevin Samuels, Better Bachelor on YouTube and Joe Rogan. @Amerix is only popular in Kenya because his tweets relate to the average Kenyan male youth's challenges. Comparatively, the redpill culture is most prevalent in Kenya and South Africa, which have a lot of 'Western' influence in Africa. With fairly good internet connectivity, Kenya has thus become the playground of the MGTOW and incels. From a sample of 27 respondents who follow @Amerix, ten trivialised that it is not possible for someone to be convinced to hurt others by a random, perhaps faceless person on Twitter. Four admitted that @Amerix has extremist narratives but also said they expect these followers to sift what is relevant for them. @Amerix packages his tweets as motivational and male empowerment issues on health, fitness, investment diet and mental wellness. However, he then unleashes several Trojan horses on vulnerable young men as part of his empowerment agenda. Vulnerable followers defend him fiercely because of his blend of logical advice and extremism.

Social Media Platform on Radicalisation (cont.)

A key expert informant interviewed suggests that this is a common radicalisation practice. Even Mosques that radicalise youths into jihad equally mix truths and mistruths to capture the vulnerable audience. Twitter is now no longer able to suppress the #masculitysaturday. This is a looming domestic security threat that will predispose Kenya to violent extremism.

Economic Disillusionment and Alienation of The Youth

The incel movement is fuelled by Kenya's patriarchal and misogynist society and disillusioned male youth's facing economic difficulties. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya attempted to bring in a semblance of gender equality. However, the implementation of the clause through the gender bill has flopped several times in parliament. Women's issues, such as access to sanitary towels and safe shelters, have been relegated to the periphery. While some affirmative actions like women representative positions have been undertaken, men are taking these moves as a threat to their masculinity. Disillusioned male youth are lashing out at women's affirmative action through gender-based violence, and to some extent, the rise of incelism. They are angry that men have fewer opportunities, as women are no longer ready to be treated as subordinates but as equals.

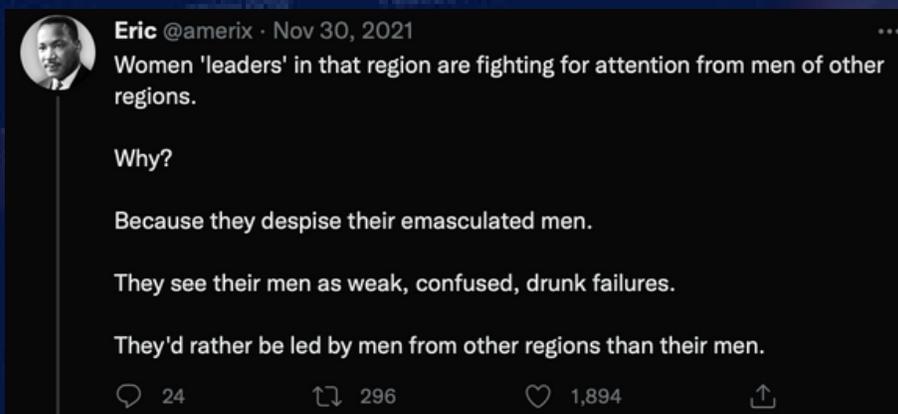
KENYA

Social Media Platform on Radicalisation (cont.)

On 30th November 2021, @Amerix used his Twitter handle to "raise political awareness" while equally spreading his extremist ideologies. He targeted Kirinyaga County, which has Ms Anne Waiguru. Waiguru is the current governor, and her fiercest competitors in the 2022 general elections—Ms Wangui Ngirici and Ms Martha Karua—are considered powerful women in Kenyan politics. In a series of tweets, excerpted below, he encourages men to rise up before women obliterate them. A follower, @asknyaora, compliments that the women-led society is headed into Armageddon.



TWEET #1



TWEET #2



Social Media Platform on Radicalisation (cont.)



TWEET #3

Of which a follower responds:

"Effeminacy is the worst consequence of shrinking masculinity. Women are chaotic in Kirinyaga, coz men allowed them to defecate on the shrine of Elders. Men are supposed to conquer while women are supposed to nurture. When we reverse the roles, the society sinks into Armageddon."

-@asknyaora-

Such extreme forms of gender politics are a potential security threat. The tweets, for instance, are geared towards attacking women in political leadership in a society where women continue to experience gender-targetted violence during elections, campaigns, and on social media. Eight respondents who are @Amerix's followers cited that disillusionment and financial frustrations have contributed to their hatred against women and society. While some say that the redpill rage is a phase that they will outgrow, others are adamant that they want a society with no women. They are convinced that society favours women and grants them better economic opportunities. They are angry that women use sex to go up the career ladder, and according to them, society repeatedly tells them they are useless.

SOCIETAL DECAY

Societal decay is equally contributing to this incel crisis. The family unit, which should be the first point of socialisation and growth of boys, is largely disfigured. Single-parent families, absentee parenthood and urbanisation have depreciated the mentorship of young men. Men are lacking proper role models that they can emulate, and instead, they have found maladaptive coping strategies. They are seeking validation and advice from charlatan masculinity icons who champion the creation of the manosphere.

Most respondents, including inceldom followers, agree that there is radicalisation, but it is only happening because society is failing to mentor men. Since this mentorship is not regulated and some leaders are faceless, the manosphere icons can be as radical as they wish. It is likely that the next generation of Kenyan men will be inspired by the into being an entire generation of incels, who in some countries have turned to terrorism and violent extremism.



KENYA

Redpill liberation is a reaction to thankless women who prefer to date older men rather than their peers. The incelists blame social decay and are angry that women are attracted only to a small group of high status, wealthy and often older men who sponsor them transactional relationships. They are also angry at these men, who they assume are the reason they are involuntary celibate. The choice of a mate is heavily based on financial status, and women want men they can control and leech on. Thus, in 2019, when a medic student, Ivy Wangechi was publicly hacked to death with an axe, Kenyan men on Twitter rejoiced. They rationalised her death and found the murderer's actions "relatable".

WHAT IS THE RED PILL LIBERATION?

They boldly said they would do the same thing in that situation. A song was written and played on the radio mocking her death, and the MGTOW community capitalised on her death by selling printed t-shirts with her face and an axe. Her crime was that she accepted gifts from the estranged boy, yet she had no intention of mating with him. For them, the feminist experiment in Kenya may have empowered the girls, but it has alienated a lot of young men who find themselves jobless and competing for the same ladies with their fathers who sponsor these ladies.



KENYA

The punishment for this 'sin' is death. @Amerix and the warriors may be militant and sensationalist, and with his wide coverage, it is difficult to tell how and when this extremism will turn violent. Due to the surmounting violence against women in Nairobi, investors are targeting the 'terror' of incelism. Female-only clubs and female-only parties have become common, particularly for the middle-class women who want to unwind without feeling threatened because of their freedoms. However, if extremism takes a violent turn, such clubs and parties are likely to be easy targets.

The rise of incelism has also been attributed to a clash of 'civilisations'. Kenya has adopted the modern culture, yet it is still very traditional in some aspects. Kenya is a juncture of where modernism and feminism are challenging patriarchy. Men are beginning to feel that traditional practices that favour women's interests, such as paying bride price, are unfair. The redpill movement is like a response to the modern culture in which women are empowered, bold, ambitious and threaten traditional roles. It only gets worse as the socio-cultural fabric is increasingly dissipating in the wake of rapid urbanisation. The audience targeted by @Amerix are young men, born in urban centres, with little or no connection to the elders in the village and may equally lack a father figure. These will be the next perpetrators of violent extremism in Kenya.

THE RED PILL LIBERATION



Introduction

India is no stranger to violence being meted out to women by men who feel slighted or rejected by them. The crescendo of this violence was the Nirbhaya rape case in 2012, following which New Delhi was named and shamed as the rape capital of India. The gangrape, and the brutality with which it happened, received global media coverage. Out of the six men who raped the 22-year-old woman, one was a teenager, a minor in the eyes of the law.

Such incidents are not new in India. What was new was the publicity such an act garnered for the very first time that the Indian courts were forced to fast-track the case (and supposedly other rape cases) and introduce the new Anti-Rape Law. Other acts of violence against women that are commonplace in India include acid attacks on women and girls, caste-based violence against women which often boils down to rapes/gangrapes, stalking and harassment, and catcalls on the streets, known as 'eve-teasing' in Indian parlance.

The violence and hatred against women exist to this extent and casual misogyny is known to be rampant at multiple levels in Indian society. The question that arises from this is whether there are there Indian Incels, and how rampant is this subculture in India? Is there an Indian Incel subculture prevalent online and offline? The answer is an emphatic yes. Indian Incels are known as Currycels—a group comprised of diverse South Asian men, but predominantly Indian men.

THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Currycels operate on a dual level: like western, white Incels, they believe they are involuntary celibates because they are unable to get sexual partners and are the victims of feminism, but Currycels also believe they are at a disadvantage due to their race and ethnicity because Indian women prefer white men to brown men. Within the broader white Incel community too, Indian Incels are seen as particularly lacking in sex appeal. The term 'Currycel' itself sprung up derogatorily within the Incel community. However, the phenomenon of Currycels has exploded on the Incel scene to the point that Incel forums are increasingly discussing whether India will be the home of Incels in the years to come.

Currycels like to make themselves known publicly and can be found on Facebook and Twitter in significant numbers (many profiles on Twitter and Facebook have their photographs on full display with their names). Within the larger 'manosphere', they self-identify as Indian MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way) and are members of groups such as Men's Rights Activists in India, Gender Inequal India and Men's Day Out (India). These are usually listed on their profiles or mentioned in their posts.

Pradeep Kapoor's book FOSLA Frustrated One-Sided Lovers' Association (2012) has led to the popularization of the term/group FOSLA, borrowed from the book's title, and the idea of 'frustoos' who are basically men unlucky in love because it is one-sided. These groups, and the general interactions of Currycels on Facebook and Twitter, put in a whole lot of effort into coining up jargon. Particularly popular with Currycels is the term 'Simping' and 'gynocentric'. Simping, borrowed from 'Simp Nation', is an abbreviation for 'Sucker Idolizing Mediocre Pussy', a man who is sycophantic and fawns over the opposite sex in a bid to attract them. Anything remotely resembling women's empowerment or a feminist discourse is mislabelled as 'gynocentric' and is very commonly used with Indian MGTOWs when posting a thread online on Twitter or Facebook.



INDIA

THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

The Nirbhaya rape case was the tipping point for Indian society to engage in some introspection—where has the Indian society at large gone wrong that its men are prone to such brutality, violence and hatred towards its women? Even the Incel community at large acknowledges that India is set to become the home-base for Incels. The answers are complex. While broadly acknowledging that systemic patriarchy is to be blamed, the nuances need to be teased out.

Push Factors

India has a long history of son-preference. Sons are seen to carry the family lineage forward, are able hands to work on a farm, are the breadwinners to take care of parents in their old age. Female infanticide was routinely practiced (and still is practiced covertly) in many parts of the subcontinent. Some men decide to remarry simply because the wife could not bear them a son. The end result is that decades of such practices have ensured an extremely skewed sex-ratio. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects (2020), the sex ratio in India in 2020 was 108.18 males per 100 females. India has the highest number of excess male population at 54.20 million and has the world's fifth most skewed sex ratio at birth (after China, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, and Armenia).



THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Push Factors

The combined effect of this is that there are villages in India with no young women at all to get married to. The village of Siyani in Gujarat shows this decline of the female sex (Prakash, 2011). In Siyani, approximately 350 men over the age of 35 are simply unable to get married, out of a total population of roughly 8,000 (Prakash, 2012).

Furthermore, it has often been cited anecdotally and in online discussions by women that Indian men in general have not been able to keep up with the changing gender roles in Indian society. India has a complex society where caste-based hierarchical divisions intersect with expectations of traditional gender roles. This is impacted by extreme inequality in terms of access to basic resources such as water and food to healthcare. In urban metropolises, the number of women obtaining tertiary education has far outstripped men, and the call-centre boom in the early 2000s saw women from all walks of life entering casual employment that paid well, and an influx of younger women in the rural-to-urban migration dynamic in a bid to get a job at call-centres to earn that money.

Many women leave villages to work as domestic workers (maids) within India as well as overseas (Middle East and Southeast Asia are popular destinations for maids for their higher salaries). Often, these women are the sole-earning members of their families. Many women in the urban centres are marrying later in life, and due to better education and an awareness of their rights, expect the burden of household chores to be shared equally between women and men. Men are seemingly not able to come to terms with the new roles of (and possibilities of) cooking, cleaning, stay-at-home husband or dad. There is a nostalgic longing by these men to go back to 'simpler' times where gender roles were clearly defined and prescribed accordingly.



THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Pull Factors

Failure and frustration at being unsuccessful in the dating world is often the first step for men to turn towards the Incel community. For Currycels, the failure and frustration is even more acutely felt due to the everyday sexual division in Indian society. Due to rampant sexual harassment, India is one of the few countries in the world where there are separate train carriages for women and even started separate night taxis operated by women for women who work late nights. The extended/joint family system ensures no privacy, and sex education is non-existent.

Most young men 'educate' themselves by watching pornography (the advent of mobile phones has made this even easier where one does not even need to know how to type—voice commands are enough). The online Incel communities alleviate the feelings of failure and these men find solidarity amongst other men who have similar experiences, and also reinforcing these feelings of inadequacy by pushing the rhetoric that all women are out to get men and that genetically Currycels are born disadvantaged so they do not stand a fair chance in the dating game anyway.



INDIA

THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Discussion

The term 'Incel'/'Currycel' is not very commonly used in the Indian sub-continent to describe members of the subculture who commit crimes against women out of hatred for the other sex. Most of the information of the Incel culture in India is from feminist writers on blogs (personal or for a social media platform), opinion pieces from e-magazines, or the sporadic newspaper report from Indian Express (2021) or Times of India (2018). Most of these news reports or opinions pieces are very recent too, from the year 2018 onwards.

There is not much awareness of this subculture at large and hate crimes against women are not specifically reported to the Indian police as an Incel-instigated crime. These terminologies are newly gaining traction in the Indian media and academic circles. No proper sociological study is available on the Incel culture in India per se.

The issue to highlight, however, is that the misogyny behind the Incel discourse, particularly in a society as complex as India's, lies on a spectrum of extremism.



THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Discussion

Laura Illya Vidal states that InCel ideology is an excellent example of new radical narratives that challenge traditional images of extremism and terrorism. Despite its global reach and almost exclusively online, InCel-related mass killings have resulted in 74 deaths since the first massacre officially linked to InCel extremism in 2014 [in the West]. The increased lethality of their actions and the apparent mimicry of the modus operandi of other violent extremism has put the debate over whether InCel violence should be categorised as acts of terrorism on the table. (Vidal, 2021)

Canada became the first country to officially categorize Incel-related violence as terrorism. The Toronto Machete Attack in February 2020 was the first Incel-related attack to be prosecuted as an act of terrorism in Canada. This then begs the question whether other countries should follow suit and label Incel-related violence as terrorism too? It is a slippery slope where the misogynistic ideology of Incels runs in parallel to the gender-based ideologies espoused by terrorist groups such as ISIS. Where does it begin tipping into the well of terrorism from being mere extremist misogynistic ideology? As Incel-based violence and the awareness related to Incels increases, it remains to be seen how different countries respond to this threat. Canada has made its stance clear. India seems to be in no hurry to do so.



THE RISE OF CURRYCELS (cont.)

Conclusion

Currycels have probably existed and made themselves known in the Indian society for some time, in part through the hate crimes committed against women and in part through the online 'manosphere'. However, this has not been recognized as part of the Incel subculture due to a lack of awareness by the general public and authorities such as the Indian police.

It is only in the recent years, particularly from the year 2018 onwards, that mainstream newspapers in India have had some coverage on Incels, but most of the specificities of this subculture are covered in blog posts by feminist writers or opinion pieces in e-magazines.

It remains to be seen how India tackles the rising wave of the Incel subculture as there are no in-depth factual studies available at the moment on the psychosocial aspects of this phenomena in the subcontinent.

While societal issues such as nourishing the family unit are required to stem inceldom, there is an urgency to mitigate social media radicalisation and the uptake of extremist ideologies by young men in Kenya and India. This study concludes there is a critical domestic terrorism threat simmering from the continued anti-women and anti-society rhetoric. The narratives have made the young men bitter, out of touch and use even extreme dehumanising language. There is need for urgent deradicalisation and deprogramming initiatives to counter the militant rhetoric on social problems and narratives that could cause violent extremism and terror attacks. This will warrant an effective information warfare strategy to mitigate the effects of the already established groups.



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AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FROM AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

by Miss Taylor Humphries

Since 9/11 a vast amount of research has been dedicated to the exploration of the failures of the 'War on Terror' from the perspective of the U.S.-led Coalition to inform future counterterrorism policy and strategy. Despite terrorist organisations demonstrating clear capabilities of learning, less attention has been paid to explore their failures and lessons learnt and the implications that this may have for the evolution of their policies and strategies. Therefore, this research will explore al-Qaeda's (AQ) failures and lessons learnt in Afghanistan after the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, and in Iraq after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, focusing specifically on their strategic evolution. Historically, terrorist's inability to internalize lessons from historic mistakes have been highlighted within the relevant literature, intensified in the case of jihadi organizations due to their perceived deep-rooted ideological inflexibility which underpins their strategies.

This ideological rigidness forms an obstacle to the greater flexibility, innovation, and fundamental shift in modus operandi, structure, and goals required for strategic innovation, helping to explain why at the tactical level, AQ has seen success, but often failed at the strategic level. Contrastingly, Furstenberg and Gorzig contest that jihadi groups - AQ in particular - are capable of change, suggesting that it is in fact their ability to learn cumulatively from their operational past which has preserved their longevity for almost two decades. Their learning transformed them into a dynamic and flexible organisation, allowing them to achieve tactical goals while simultaneously maintaining the pursuit of their long-term strategy. Conceivably, AQ have developed a "lose and learn" doctrine, in which they recognise their losses and demonstrate a willingness to adapt and employ these lessons to inform future operations.



AL-QAEDA'S STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS FROM AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

by Miss Taylor Humphries

Suggestively, learning occurs when terrorist organisations think beyond their immediate survival and instil a culture of learning to ensure that ideas outlast individuals. This has been particularly important for AQ, having faced the U.S.'s decapitation strategy which saw 75% of their original leadership killed by 2011. Like any organisation, AQ has learnt from their own experiences, but also from that of others. For instance, Goerzig argues that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) learned tactically from AQ and strategically from counterterrorism efforts. However, drawing on the notion that terrorist's learning is often a result of self reflection from previous engagements in violence, in which the old is synthesized with the new in a 'trial and error' type of internal evolution, relative to the scope, this research will focus specifically on AQ and its affiliates' learning from each other and self-learning. To further operationalisation, commensurate with Crenshaw's differentiation between learning type, this research will focus specifically on strategic learning for a more focused exploration; defined as, "significant points of novelty"

which influence a change in the organisation's shaping of their goals, and how they relate their tactics and operations to these new objectives. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom, targeting AQ and their ally, the Taliban in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban, AQ enjoyed a fertile breeding ground and a safe haven. However, by the end of 2002, the Taliban had lost vast amounts of territory and support from local Afghans due to their draconian-style governance, crackdown on poppy cultivation, and fundamentalist implementation of Islamic Law, despite their political programme originally promoting positive improvements to entice the local population. Of particular importance to AQ's early defeat was the 'betrayal' of local tribesmen – Pakistani and Afghan tribes turned a number of insurgents over to the U.S. as AQ failed to build relationships with them, and the Taliban restricted their participation in government and violated their tribal norms which led to an inability to mobilise the population.



Demonstrating AQ's willingness to learn from their mistakes was an intercepted letter to Abu Musab Zarqawi from Ayman al-Zawahiri (AQ's second in command), offering a sophisticated analysis of the strategic takeaways from Afghanistan and new goals for Iraq. The letter emphasised the importance of engaging tribal communities and gaining at least the limited support of the local population. Zawahiri also warns against making the same mistakes in Iraq, recognising the Taliban's Pashto particularism as an obstacle to securing the support of the local population, and the risk of the same fate in Iraq due to the Shia majority.

Conceivably, these lessons demonstrate AQ's new found recognition of the importance of the local population and accommodating to the host environment during a local insurgency.

After the invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. shifted their attention to ousting Saddam Hussein and regime change in Iraq, launching Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. AQ's pursuit of Iraq is recognized as their "biggest disaster", which damaged their reputation and laid the foundations for the birth of their biggest rival – The Islamic State of Iraq.

Although, Iraq influenced the greatest development in the global jihadi movement since the Soviet's withdrawal from Afghanistan, provoking new strategic thinking across its affiliate branches. Initially, AQI's pursuit of Iraq was promising. The AQ branch sought to capitalise on the Islamist-leaning, Sunni nationalist's revolt against de-Sunnifying Iraq, and their goals to end political disenfranchisement and oust foreign intervention. However, AQI squandered this unique opportunity to build a safe haven and an Islamic State in the heart of the Islamic world through strategic miscalculations. Despite AQ's attempts to warn Zarqawi about the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria's (GIA) failed insurgency in Algeria, AQI's failures have been likened to that exact experience, in which "their enemy did not defeat them, but rather they defeated themselves". Overall, AQI's defeat was due to their overly ambitious strategy, resulting in the pursuit of unrealistic ends through inappropriate ways using inadequate means, which was underpinned by their attempt to implement a revolutionary and global cause into a local, nationalist, Sunni tribal movement.

Ultimately, AQI's zealotry strategy led to their failure to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi population.²⁹ Simultaneously, AQI's strategy became progressively more extreme and discredited, and the Sunni community came to resent their barbarity, harbouring the belief that they were trying to liberate Iraq from Iraqis, not from foreign invaders. In particular, AQI appeared to mimic the Taliban's ideological inflexibility. For instance, they banned music and satellite dishes, punished people for speaking French, and even killed women that refused to wear all black and the niqab. The Iraqi population took a particular dislike to AQI's use of suicide attacks and civilian murders, which included the targeting of fellow Muslims. Contradictory to the customs of the Iraqi Sunnis that they were seeking to govern, in the areas that they seized, AQI also imposed a strict form of Sharia using terror tactics, which further alienated supporters of the wider Sunni movement. Additionally, like AQ and the Taliban in Afghanistan, AQI failed to build a relationship with local tribes - they violated tribal norms regarding marriage, encroached on their economic interests, forced puritanical fundamentalism upon them, alienated and even murdered individuals that failed to support them. Anti-AQ sentiment was only worsened by AQI's brutal terror campaign and instigation of a sectarian war, accompanied by their inadequate means to protect Sunni communities from Shia retaliatory violence, which saw them ultimately undermined by the Iraqi population, tribes, and fellow Sunni rebels that had initially welcomed them.



Additionally, despite warnings, AQI emulated the GIA's mistake of turning against its fellow rebels in an attempt to monopolise power, based on an overestimation of their power and the flawed assumed passivity of local insurgents, despite being largely outnumbered by and militarily weaker than the Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Coalition forces. AQI's infighting also undermined its claims to be a "global vanguard of Islam" on behalf of all Muslims, damaging the 'brands' reputation, as well as highlighting the tendency for jihadists to alienate the host communities of the local insurgencies which they seek to hijack. This is also evidenced in their overreliance on foreign fighters with foreign ideas. In particular, it was their declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 which sealed their fate, as they claimed monopoly over political leadership but lacked the drive and ability to govern. This strategic error can be categorised as a situational miscalculation, referring to strategic overreach which leads to mistakes regarding intermediate aims and tactics. These strategic miscalculations were detrimental to AQI's failure, and laid the foundation for the U.S.'s 'Surge' in 2007, facilitated by the Awakening Movement which saw Sunnis partner with the U.S. to fight AQI, including the Anbar Awakening and the Awakening councils/the Sons of Iraq Programme.

Given the similarities between AQI's failures and those of previous conflicts, Hafez uses this case study to contest AQ's capabilities to learn. However, it must also be noted that the wider AQ movement criticised AQI's handling of Iraq. 44 In particular, Bin Laden criticised the infighting, and Zawahiri condemned Zarqawi's indiscriminate Shia killings, use of foreign fighters, and the extremity of their terror campaign. This may suggest that AQI's failures were not necessarily a testament to jihadist's abilities to learn, but instead, to Zarqawi's fanaticism and extremism at the individual level, for AQI's strategy was "largely based on Zarqawi's personality". Upon reflection, this research has explored the literature surrounding terrorist's learning capabilities, before outlining the failures and lessons learnt during AQ's insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11.



Conclusion

In assessing AQ's long-term learning capabilities by fast forwarding to their affiliates/branches insurgencies in Yemen, Somalia, and Mali, by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Shabaab, and AQIM retrospectively, it can be concluded that while AQ appear to recognise their historic failures and can outline lessons for their next theatre, they seem to fail in the implementation stage. Arguably, this is due to a governance dilemma, in which AQ continue to struggle to balance their post-9/11 strategic learning, it can be concluded that while AQ appear to recognise their historic failures and can outline lessons for their next theatre, they seem to fail in the implementation stage. Arguably, this is due to a governance dilemma, in which AQ continue to struggle to balance their post-9/11 strategic learning, which typically encourages a Western-inspired hearts and minds approach, characterised by a more moderate form of Islam and legitimate governance to achieve their strategic aim of establishing an alternative Islamic state, and the imposition of a harsh Islamist rule and overreliance on violence and extremity, underpinned by the ideological rigidity inherent to jihadi organisations, which ultimately led the AQ insurgencies proceeding Afghanistan and Iraq down the same route to defeat as their predecessors.

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PARADOXICAL REBELLION: ISIS, WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL GENDER IDEOLOGY

by Dr Gurpreet Kaur

Abstract

For women who have actively chosen to join terrorist groups, the question becomes, what informs this agency? What is so appealing about an ideology that sees the reinforcement of traditional roles for women informing such an agency? It is this 'why' that remains elusive. This paper is an attempt to look at the 'why' informing the gender ideology of terrorist groups, focusing on ISIS. This paper will show that the 'jihadi brides' of ISIS—the foreign young women who are radicalized and leave everything and everyone in their home countries to marry ISIS men—enact a paradoxical rebellion in joining a terrorist group and embracing wholeheartedly the traditional gender roles espoused by a terrorist organization such as ISIS. By embracing traditional gender roles in ISIS, these women go against acceptable norms and restrictions that they face at home, in their communities and countries. Such an action gives them an agency they otherwise feel they do not have recourse to in their own lives.



The push and pull factors that compel women to join ISIS will be examined, and the implications of these factors will be explored in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in wars and conflicts is not new. From struggles and revolutions for independence during colonization, witnessed even during the Arab Spring, to their role as suicide bombers in terrorism and terrorist groups, women have always participated in such conflicts. However, when discussing security, wars and conflicts, more often than not, women are usually portrayed as victims or as passive participants. The remit of security, war and terrorism is usually seen as a male domain. It is this perception that has typically informed the international community's response (and indeed the general public's response) on female radicals and female terrorism (Pearson, 2018). The media, in turn, typically portrays such women as brainwashed and without any agency. Although a significant number of women choose to corroborate in terrorism for sheer survival—as several women did in Iraq and Syria during the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) takeover, and many others were trafficked—there are others who have actively chosen to leave their homes and therefore have had agency in their decisions. For these women who have actively chosen---

to join terrorist groups, the question then becomes, what informs this agency? What is so appealing about an ideology that sees the reinforcement of traditional roles for women informing such an agency? Why would young, educated women choose to leave countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Denmark, Belgium, among others, and go to Syria to join the ISIS caliphate? During the last seven years or so, there has been a sharp increase in the interest in gendered dimensions of terrorism, particularly with the rise of ISIS and its active recruiting of women. Through these studies, the 'how' of gendered aspects of terrorism has been mainly answered: how have women participated as suicide bombers, how have women been recruited online by terrorist groups by using social media and how have women been radicalized. It is the 'why' that remains elusive. Why have women found such ideologies attractive? Why do young women gravitate towards extremely traditional gender roles as espoused by ISIS, to the extent that they give up everything—family, friends, country—to go abroad and fight a war that is not theirs?

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to look at the 'why' informing the gender ideology of terrorist groups, focusing on ISIS. This paper will show that the 'jihadi brides' of ISIS—the foreign young women who are radicalized and leave everything and everyone in their home countries to marry ISIS men—enact a paradoxical rebellion in joining a terrorist group and embracing wholeheartedly the traditional gender roles espoused by a terrorist organization such as ISIS. By embracing traditional gender roles in ISIS, these women go against acceptable norms and restrictions that they face at home, in their communities and countries. Such an action gives them an agency they otherwise feel they do not have recourse to in their own lives. It is this agency that continues to baffle many scholars and practitioners in the fields of security and counterterrorism. It is precisely this idea that "women would willingly support or act on behalf of a group that would seek to strip them of their basic human rights [that] has been unfathomable to the public" (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021). Again, this phenomenon is not new but it is poorly understood, as stated by Speckhard and Ellenberg as well (2021).

The studies that probe the 'why' of women joining ISIS in such unprecedented numbers galvanized particularly around the years 2018-2021 (Bloom and Lokmanoglu, 2021; Brown, 2020; Moaveni, 2019; ITV News (Shamima Begum), 2019; Pearson, 2018; Pearson, Winterbotham and Brown, 2020; Salcedo, 2019; Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021), with a few exceptions such as "Till Martyrdom Do Us Part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon" by Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith (2015) and "Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation: A Milieu Approach" by Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham (2017), which were published a few years earlier.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a perceptible shift from analysing the online presence and social media accounts of these women, to obtaining actual first-hand interviews, narratives and accounts of women who left to join ISIS. There was an uptick in this trend around the time Nadia Murad won the Nobel Peace Prize as a former ISIS sex-slave of the Yazidi community. Her accounts and interviews brought the world face-to-face with the horrors that these survivors went through. There were significant problems in reconciling the brutalities that survivors such as Murad went through, with the sheer number of foreign women who had actually left everything and gone to Syria to join ISIS. The problems were not just in imagining the irreconcilability of these two poles, but also in articulating it. How do we know what the solution to something is if we do not even know how to articulate what the problem is in the first place?

Azadeh Moaveni's ground-breaking study of more than 20 young women who left their respective home countries of Tunisia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sudan, Jordan, UK, Germany, and Belgium, among others, sets the stage of piecing together the 'why'. Her book, *Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS* (2019), pieces together first-hand accounts and information from the 'jihadi brides' themselves. Around the same time, she published an article in *The Guardian*, "It could have been me: On the trail of the British teenagers who became 'brides of Isis'" (2019). There is a very telling moment in that article. Moaveni states:

I thought nothing was more romantic than radicals who fought against all this injustice, and ached to run away to the Middle East to join some inchoate resistance struggle. I found our life in Silicon Valley suburbia soulless and vacant, chafed at my mother's you-mustn't-become-like-them strictness, and felt like I did not belong. ... To be offered an escape from conservative parents, persuaded [these girls and women] were doing something at once fiercely adventurous and perversely liberating – such delusions seemed incomprehensible to the white female columnists criticising them. But to my mind, it seemed relatable. (Moaveni, 2019, emphasis mine)

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Moaveni seems to be echoing what Shamima Begum, a teenage girl who left the UK in 2015 to join ISIS at fifteen years old, says in a television interview after the UK revoked her citizenship in 2021 for being a 'jihadi bride': that she felt like she didn't belong and had no purpose when she joined ISIS (ITV News interview, 2019). This deep need that women had to be included in some sort of way as a citizen, or "[h]aving no sense of place as a citizen" (Moaveni, 2019, *The Guardian*) drove many women to the brink of despair due to their particularized experience of marginalization and disempowerment through repressive political regimes, social status, religious sects and affiliations and identities and roles adopted in the family and community. Many Muslim women have reported feeling like second-class citizens in their own countries. This vulnerability, in turn, effected a route into the ISIS recruitment drive, "a group that saw their own needs and pretended to offer a solution" (Moaveni, 2019, *The Guardian*).

Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg's paper "ISIS and the Allure of Traditional Gender Roles" is the latest study to come out this year (2021) in trying to provide some sort of answers to this question of why so many women seem to find ISIS attractive. This study is unique in that it foregrounds private interviews from 259 ISIS men and women "to examine the psychosocial aspects of joining, participating in, and leaving ISIS, and how those aspects are informed by gender" (2021). Although the study is very promising, Speckhard and Ellenberg's paper gets tangled in data webs that do not tease out the intricacies of the motivations behind the foreign women who joined ISIS in droves. Also, Speckhard and Ellenberg have made no reference whatsoever to Moaveni's study and accounts of women joining ISIS, and this absence is quite strange, considering that Moaveni has painstakingly pieced together the deeper structural issues that influenced the women's decisions to join ISIS as 'jihadi brides'.



INTRODUCTION

This paper uses Moaveni's and Speckhard and Ellenberg's studies, along with the broader studies informing the gendered aspects of ISIS, to form a springboard for my own research into this topic, and to attempt answer the question of why the women enact a paradoxical rebellion in joining ISIS.

ISIS: NATION AND WOMEN

ISIS, as a terrorist organization, distinguished itself very early on as uniquely positioned in terms of its online presence, outreach and recruitment via social media and other platforms, and its wealth. The factors of social media outreach and wealth, in particular, saw a recruitment drive of both women and men as never seen before in other terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda (who in turn, denounced ISIS as not reflecting 'true' Islamic values). Speckhard and Ellenberg state that "the sheer number of women who joined ISIS was unique, as was their diversity, in contrast to previous terrorist groups, who far more often did not use females or relied on local women versus attracting them as foreign fighters" (2021, also quoted in Saltman & Smith, 2015).

The reasons for this are several-fold, but one reason that sticks out amongst others is that ISIS declared itself as a caliphate and a state. In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson defines the nation-state as "an imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983). This is very much in line with how ISIS espoused its imaginary caliphate to be and went ahead and anchored that imagined political community to the geographical bounds of Syria and Iraq, with the ambitions to expand the physical territory of the caliphate further.

ISIS: NATION AND WOMEN

It is through this establishing of themselves as a state that they had the ability to offer to women a "comfortable life as a wife and mother", something that, according to Speckhard and Ellenberg, "no other terrorist group before could offer" (2021). It is this creating of the 'state' by ISIS that proves to be the point of entry for agency by these women, the so-called 'jihadi brides', a term which itself has been criticized and problematized by gender analysts. Speckhard and Ellenberg contend that through the online propaganda, ISIS "promised women a utopic state in the making that offered them better and easier lives with free housing, salaries for their husbands, and a life free of discrimination and the constraints and pressures of secular society" (2021).

This point of entry into the caliphate proves to be the first point in which these 'jihadi brides' exercise their agency. In doing so, ISIS then became the first jihadist group that placed women at the forefront of its recruitment drive, using traditional gender roles to offer a modicum of stability: stable jobs with salaries, the possibility of homeownership, a life without facing discrimination because they were practicing Muslims. ISIS needed women to maintain their own state-building capacity, and in a twisted way, it rolled out what Moaveni calls a women's strategy to counter the feelings and despair of feeling like second-class citizens but contributing to nation-building in the caliphate in a very material and tangible way.



JOINING ISIS: PUSH FACTORS

One of the most commonly stated push factor that routinely comes out of the analyses of 'jihadi brides' is that, more often than not, they come from traditional, conservative and patriarchal backgrounds. Through the Islamic state and through the traditional gender roles of wife, mother and a homemaker, "ISIS's empowering propaganda [especially] appealed to women living in conservative households where decisions were being made for them about their futures, as ISIS religiously justified and empowered their taking their futures into their own hands by deciding to travel to join ISIS" (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021). This is a crucial point to illustrate the agentic nature of these women, but what is missing from this analysis is what class these women belonged to. Several women who joined ISIS from countries such as Tunisia, Sudan, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and even from Europe, came from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background. The conservative patriarchal familial structure operates very strongly: "Go to University! Study hard! Don't talk to boys!" (Moaveni, 2019), to name a few injunctions operative in these women's lives. Girls and women from this background experience limited agency and limited say in their daily lives.

Fathers and brothers make decisions, and those decisions are followed. ISIS as caliphate and state, in putting forth the role of wife and motherhood as a cause celebre, let these women feel empowered in making a decision for themselves to go to Syria to join ISIS, and contributing materially in nation building, i.e. producing the 'cubs' of the caliphate. This operates as a powerful motivator because many of these women do not feel they can participate actively as citizens in their own homes and home countries. This is precisely how the paradoxical rebellion functions: the women rebel against restrictions where they feel disempowered, and in choosing to join ISIS as 'jihadi brides', rebel against these restrictions, their family, their own countries, but the rebellion is paradoxical because what they are choosing to go towards instead is even more traditional, conservative and patriarchal.



JOINING ISIS: PUSH FACTORS

However, as mentioned earlier, class differences are an important consideration. An upper middle-class Muslim woman would have different choices and recourse to the marginalization she feels in her societal context. Differential access to resources, such as education, finances, employment opportunities (which attracted several 'jihadi brides' to ISIS in the first place) means that class differentials are an important factor that dictate when militancy becomes an alluring option for these women. This is an important consideration which is often overlooked in studies and reports. In writing about the motivations of Sharmeena, one of the first 15-year-old schoolgirls from London to go to Syria, Moaveni elucidates:

"Perhaps, as might well have happened if she existed in a more educated family and world, someone might have told her there were other avenues for dissent and other ways to help vulnerable Muslims across the world... There were many things a young woman could do with rage. But it took an attentive, intact family, living rooms with books, a sensitive school, layers of protection that often didn't exist around working-class girls from East London, to introduce those ideas." (Moaveni, 2019)

Moaveni tries to point out that differential access, while opening doors for women to become lawyers, journalists, educators, amongst others, also closes such doors for other women—the 11 "other avenues for dissent" thus not equally available to women when they find such doors shut (Moaveni, 2019).

JOINING ISIS: PUSH FACTORS

The anger that these young Muslim women felt, that forms another push factor for joining ISIS, is explained in detail in Saltman and Whitman (2015). They outline three factors:

- Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, including questioning one's identity and uncertainty of belonging within a Western culture
- Feeling that the international Muslim community as a whole is being violently persecuted
- An anger, sadness and/or frustration over a perceived lack of international action in response to this persecution



Many women and girls explicate in the interviews (and based on their online profiles from earlier studies such as Saltman and Whitman, 2015) that as a minority community in Western countries or as minority practitioners of Islam in other countries, particularly in the wake of post-9/11 Islamophobia, they experience a sense of isolation and do not feel as if they belong in their respective societies. The wearing of the hijab has become a bone of contention in many countries, where "[w]omen who wear a headscarf or veil have been shown to experience discriminatory comments in public more frequently than Muslim men due to their appearance, which serves as an identity marker for being Muslim" (Saltman and Whitman, 2015). The media too plays a role in these feelings of cultural and social isolation and exclusion.

JOINING ISIS: PUSH FACTORS

The way in which terrorism is reported and its depiction in popular media such as movies and television plays an important role in social perceptions and stereotypes, where the twinning of 'terrorist' with 'Muslim' has led to further prejudices. These women and girls then talk about the persecution of the Muslim community internationally by referencing the current conflicts that are happening around the world along with the media representations, and their feelings are reinforced by the violent images circulated on social media through the process of radicalisation, in this case by ISIS (Saltman and Whitman, 2015). Feelings of anger and frustration start setting in at the lack of international action to the persecution of the Muslim community, where "throughout the process of radicalisation a cognitive behavioural pathway starts to build itself around the extremist propaganda that manifests itself as an alternative reality" (Saltman and Whitman, 2015).

These factors are not only applicable in Western contexts. Increasingly, women and girls from countries such as Tunisia, Sudan, Indonesia, and Malaysia also joined ISIS for similar reasons, especially as they feel their own governments and communities are letting them down.

Nour, a Tunisian girl that Moaveni interviewed, put on the niqab, and in Nour's words, it was "a natural act of defiance for a teenage girl" (Moaveni, 2019), which led to her teacher in school trying to rip it off her. Nour then stops going to school as she is shunned by her teachers and fellow students. Nour's rebellion is paradoxical too. Nour's agency and choice in rebelling against the state institutions and her family was in joining ISIS after she felt isolated within her own community because she was shunned for wearing the niqab, although that choice itself was borne out of a frustration tied to the "working-class neighbourhood in a country where the state micro-policed people's piety" (Moaveni, 2019).

JOINING ISIS: PULL FACTORS

Stopping at such an analysis, however, would be too simplistic. The women's agency and motivations go much further than just patriarchal injunctions and conservative family norms, or governments and institutions that they were rebelling against. The push factors are inextricable from the pull factors, and they feed into each other. These women's rebellion is also paradoxical in another way. These foreign women who left their home countries to join ISIS held other various roles in the Caliphate too: that of recruiters, enforcers and members of the al-Khansa brigade (the morality police of ISIS) who tortured locals, language instructors, doctors and mid-wives. In these roles, the women who joined ISIS found a sense of agency and empowerment described as "heroic dominance rather than meek subservience" (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021) by Aisha, a Kenyan interviewed by Speckhard and Ellenberg. Aisha gave her account as follows:

[Aisha] remembers looking online and seeing "pictures of Islamic women, dressed all in black stockings and gloves and niqab and she was holding an AK-47 [...] She was independent. ... When Aisha decided to carry out a suicide mission, she was exhilarated by what she believed was her chance to act in a heroic role on behalf of Islam. (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021, emphasis mine)

Similarly, Umm Rashid, another ISIS woman interviewed by Speckhard and Ellenberg, stated that she felt that her membership in "ISIS's hisbah, the morality police, allowed her to take back a power she felt she had lost when she was forced to drop out of school because of the war and a series of traumas occurred" (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021).

JOINING ISIS: PULL FACTORS

Aisha and Umm Rashid's accounts highlight paradoxical rebellion and agency in the sense of empowerment they feel they are able to wrest back into their lives by performing violent acts. From the latest interviews conducted by Moaveni and Speckhard and Ellenberg, the sense of empowerment is a new development, and quite a powerful motivator, as a pull factor from the list Saltman and Whitman (2015) came up with:

- Idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian 'Caliphate state'
- Belonging and sisterhood
- Romanticisation of the experience (Saltman and Whitman, 2015)

The pull factors of "idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian 'Caliphate state'" and "belonging and sisterhood" are tied to the push factors of cultural and social isolation and the feeling that the Muslim community is being persecuted internationally, which leads these women to place a sense of belonging within the ISIS caliphate. Hence, the enactment of the paradoxical rebellion is the belief of having agency and power in their own lives, where ISIS is portrayed to offer these women an alternative source of female empowerment rooted in uber traditional gender norms and roles, but at the same time, they have a possibility of recourse to violence through being suicide bombers or killing and torturing civilians as the women in the morality police.

It is also important to note that, by and large, researchers have found that the push and pull factors do not really differ for men and women when joining ISIS. Men have reported joining ISIS for the sense of adventure, romance and the "draw of traditional gender roles and the attraction of the hyper-masculine portrayal of ISIS" (Speckhard and Ellenberg, 2021) so that they are able to take on the role of being a protector and breadwinner of the family.

IMPLICATIONS

For the purposes of organising this paper, I have used the model of push and pull factors, routinely used in such studies, to explicate why women join ISIS by enacting a paradoxical rebellion which gives them a sense of agency and empowerment. However, this model has been heavily criticized in the recent years, especially after the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality report in 2017 (Moaveni, 2019) on women and violent extremism.

This report was criticized for being decontextualized, historically, politically, socio-culturally, and for the language deployed in the report to describe women who joined ISIS. The report, and indeed other institutional bodies and the general public, insist on finding one single motivation, drive or angle to understand the muhajirat—female migration for the purpose of joining ISIS—by employing strict categorizations such as push and pull factors. What Moaveni's and Speckhard and Ellenberg's studies show is that there are multiple and diverse motivations. The women who join ISIS, the 'jihadi brides' themselves, openly illustrate this in their interviews, their social media postings, their interactions on social media with others. Due to these diverse motivations and variations, "it remains difficult, and highly controversial, to broadly label individuals or groups as being 'at risk'" (Saltman and Whitman, 2015), which remains one of the challenges encountered by counter-terrorism strategies.

One major problem to contend with is the fact that to understand and deal with problems that a group such as ISIS posed (and still poses today with the ISIS-Khorasan active in Afghanistan), it is important to acknowledge "awkward truths about how we have ended up with such violence in the first place" (Moaveni, 2019).



IMPLICATIONS

Deep-rooted causes, structural issues and policies (domestic and foreign policies) have to be examined and solutions to these need to be found. Legacies of colonization need to be dealt with, and in the present milieu, neo colonialism and neo-imperialism as well. These legacies have had a particularized impact on women. Policies that seek to deal with these challenges by imposing generic language and ideas (Moaveni, 2019) will not be effective and may aggravate isolation and marginalization of communities or groups they are targeted at. A more inclusive and positive media representation of marginalized groups, and especially women, is also desperately needed to counter the ISIS narrative that Muslims are being globally persecuted.

Evidence-based studies show that moving away from purely theological approaches for intervention work has proven to be more effective in addressing personalised vulnerabilities, particularly for countering Islamist extremist radicalisation. This means more involvement at the local and grassroots level, with a broad set of actors such as youth organisations, women's and human rights organizations, LGBTQI communities, alongside governments, actively participating in dialogue and initiatives.

The coming together of these communities with a broader range of issues—what has commonly become known as 'intersectionality'—is crucial to an informed and effective approach to counter-terrorism measures with regards to a group such as ISIS and their recruitment of women.



IMPLICATIONS

The fact that researchers have found that the push and pull factors do not greatly differ for men and women when joining ISIS is crucial. Socially and culturally, there exists a gender bias when viewing what is or is not acceptable for women. There are certain constructs that are deemed more acceptable for women and we often think of women in those terms too: caring, nurturing, amenable, self-sacrificing, inter alia. It therefore becomes impossible to even entertain the idea that women might find militancy and violence attractive as well. This is the reason gender-mainstreaming is crucial and needs to be the cornerstone for finding solutions, where there has to be an integration of a gender equality perspective at all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects, and assessing how it impacts both women and men. With regards to counterterrorism, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released a brief titled *Mainstreaming Gender in Terrorism Prevention Projects* in 2020.

It outlines certain guidelines and procedures with respect to “mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development of programmes and projects to assist Member States in implementing international instruments related to the prevention of terrorism, the relevant Security Council resolutions, and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy” (2020). This brief is in keeping with the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 68/178 (2013) and resolution 72/194 (2017). These two UNGA resolutions contain provisions on gender-mainstreaming the criminal justice responses taking into consideration the principles of equality and non discrimination.



IMPLICATIONS

The two UNGA resolutions then pave the way towards thinking of counter-terrorism strategies through the lens of international human rights law. The United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) Resolution 2178 was adopted by consensus on 24th September 2014 in the United States of America (USA), particularly with regards to 'Foreign Terrorist Fighters' or FTFs. The resolution highlights that "a complete disregard of human rights is not always helpful from a security perspective" (Ginsborg, 2018)—though it is not without its own problems, and the complexities the resolution poses cannot be addressed comprehensively in this paper.

Lisa Ginsborg states that the UN Security Council, through resolution 2178 under Chapter VII of the Charter, explicitly acknowledged for the first time, that "giving weight to long-sighted preventive and human-rights friendly approaches to counter-terrorism" might be more beneficial (2018). The resolution calls upon member states to:

"engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts, address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, including by empowering youth, families, women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and all other concerned groups of civil society and adopt tailored approaches to countering recruitment to this kind of violent extremism and promoting social inclusion and cohesion." (quoted in Ginsborg, 2018, emphasis mine)



IMPLICATIONS

Following resolution 2178 in 2014, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2242 on women, peace and security on 13th October 2015. Paragraphs 11, 12 and 13 of resolution 2242 are crucial in terms of developing counter-terrorism strategies that are gender-sensitive. Paragraph 13 echoes directly, in human rights terms, that there is a need to address the empowerment of women, youth, religious and cultural leaders, the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism, consistent with the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy — A/RES/60/288, welcomes the increasing focus on inclusive upstream prevention efforts and encourages the forthcoming Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism to integrate women's participation, leadership and empowerment as core to the United Nation's strategy and responses, calls for adequate financing in this regard and for an increased amount, within the funding of the UN for counterterrorism and countering violent extremism which can be conducive to terrorism, to be committed to projects which address gender dimensions including women's empowerment. (UNSC Resolution 2242, 2015).

Resolution 2242, however, is soft law and not binding on states, unlike resolution 2178 which was passed under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter and therefore is binding on states. These resolutions (2178 and 2242), however, highlight the growing consensus of late that human rights violations could be potential factors or triggers contributing to the appeal of militancy and terrorism. In particular, the denial of "political rights, poverty or social and economic marginalization" (Ginsborg, 2018, 226) has been evidenced to show a link between such denial of rights and the rise in violent extremism. The promotion of human rights to countering violent extremism (CVE) is in line with the United Nations Global Counter terrorism Strategy and includes the promotion of equality between men and women for the effective enjoyment of cultural, social, economic and political rights. This improvement in gender equality is increasingly coming to be seen as the cornerstone of long-term strategies for terrorism prevention that can be sustained in the long run.



CONCLUSION

This paper has been based on recent studies that have incorporated actual interviews and narrative accounts of women ISIS-returnees and those who are in refugee camps. These interviews and narratives show that “there was not one story of Isis women, but many separate stories, bound together by one truth – the ease with which jihadist militancy could exploit women’s frustrated hopes and desires” (Moaveni, 2019). The extremist worldview and experience offered by ISIS is seen as highly empowering by some women, as shown in the discussion of push and pull factors. This empowerment and agency lead to a paradoxical rebellion by these women who join ISIS as foreign fighters, often called ‘jihadi brides’, a term problematised by gender analysts for infantilising these women and making them out to be naïve when they do, in fact, wield agency. This all-encompassing narrative by ISIS, and other extremist and terrorist groups, needs equally empowering counter-narratives. To challenge such a worldview adequately and sensitively, a detail-oriented perspective is required of the ideological factors as well as acknowledging real-world factors and issues that bring about the extremist recruitment of women in the first place. The importance of intervention work that addresses gender mainstreaming is increasingly coming to be seen as instrumental in combating Islamist extremist radicalisation by groups such as ISIS, as well as addressing personalised vulnerabilities. Approaches that combine international human rights law with counter-terrorism strategies are being endorsed by international platforms as the way forward.

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