Minority Report: The Danger of Women in Islamic Terrorism and in ISIS

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Minority Report: The danger of underrepresented female participation in Islamic terrorism

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This thesis is focused on the role of women in modern Islamic terrorism, especially their participation in the terrorist organization, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS. It argues that women are traditionally viewed in Western countries as not posing the same threat level as men in Islamic extremist organizations. When women actively support violent extremist acts, their actions are thought to be peripheral to the cause or a result of coercion. However, this thesis argues that women are in fact extremely important to the structure of radical Islamic organizations and should be given more attention by security authorities. Furthermore, I argue that the longstanding perception that women, and Muslim women in particular, are merely victims of male predatory behavior, may overlook personal agency in their decisions to participate. While we cannot overlook predatory recruitment techniques, these methods may also be employed by women who pressure others to support the cause. This thesis concludes that it is difficult to make sweeping statements without gathering more information on those women who choose to actively participate in terrorist actions. Gathering and evaluating in-depth data on these women would advance the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), a field that is growing increasingly relevant in the early 21st century.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Changing Face of Global Terrorism:

One of the most pressing security issues of the 21st century is the growth of global jihad. While members of Islamic extremist organizations use the features of Islamic ideology to justify their actions, the execution of actions taken by members of such organizations fulfill the required features of terrorism. Terrorism is defined as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (Bloom 2011, 15). Organizations associated with the global jihadist movement, such as al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and al Shabaab, have been responsible for suicide attacks, bombings, and other such violent acts all of which were used to affect both the civilian population and government policy. This current global jihad terrorist movement stands out from previous terrorist movements because the organizations involved don’t necessarily target a specific population, but instead, uses tools such as the Internet to reach out to vulnerable persons and recruit for their cause without regard for national boundaries. Such tools allow for a growing population of participation in terrorist activity from demographic groups that previously had little cause or ability to participate.

Those in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) relied on focusing their research on the small pools of potential recruits which is no longer possible thanks to new development in communication technology. Instead, the CVE community must rely on alternative tools for detecting recruitment which casts a wider net. One such tool is a
radicalization trajectory, a roadmap describing the different stages that an individual takes on the way to performing violent acts. Historically, creating a trajectory of this nature was not possible due to the fact that there used to be many obstacles researchers faced when making such trajectories. For a trajectory to work, a researcher would need access to large amounts of reliable information of potential recruits’ history, movements, and actions. The Internet has proven invaluable for the sheer quantity of data researchers have to work with, with many of the data points consisting of reliable, cited public access materials. As the quantity of information increases, so does the chances of finding a large enough selection of individuals with the necessary details which, as a whole, makes it easier to create an accurate trajectory.

Female Roles Within al Qaeda:

When looking at female participation within the Islamic State, it is important to first understand the way in which their roles changed from women’s roles in al Qaeda. While many have argued that women were not important to the structure and hierarchy of al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist organizations, women are used as the justification for a great deal of what terrorists do. Women hold a very powerful, symbolic role in jihadist ideology. One of the rallying cries used by jihadists in Iraq was that the Western ‘invaders’ would abuse the Muslim women there and that Muslims from all around the globe needed to mobilize to protect them as well as the sanctity and purity that they represent.

One example of a violent action that was prompted by women’s status occurred in December 2010, when Abu Ghraib, one of several American overseas detention centers, was attacked. The attack was triggered by a letter written by a woman named “Fatima,” a prisoner held in the detention facility. In this letter, she wrote about the conditions which she and other women faced while being detained there. “I say to you: our wombs have been filled with the
children of fornication by those sons of apes and pigs who raped us. Or I could tell you that they have defaced our bodies, spit in our faces, and tore up the little copies of the Qur’an that hung around our necks? […] We are your sisters,” the letter stated (Rayyan 2010). The author then called on Muslim men to take action that “God will be calling [them] to account [about this] tomorrow.” This letter sparked outrage throughout Muslim communities throughout the world, whether or not they were extremists. While veracity of this letter is still in doubt, it is true that there was a woman, identified only as “Noor,” who was raped while held as a prisoner within Abu Ghraib (Harding 2004). However, the investigation into Abu Ghraib did not find other cases of women who were raped nor even a woman called Fatima. This suggests that even the perceived violation of a symbol of womanly purity could incite terrorist action.

While the letter is believed to be fabricated, the inflammatory words sparked an attack on a heavily guarded military detention center. There are copious amounts of evidence which prove that men were abused and that some were even sexually assaulted at Abu Ghraib, yet it was the potentially fake words of a woman speaking about attacks on her and other women that inspired people internationally to take action. Within Islam, women are particularly venerated and are oftentimes viewed as symbols of purity and of the homeland. That symbolism can be easily manipulated by terrorist organizations. Since terrorist organizations motivate their recruits to join them by villainizing the West, any case where the West can be connected to attacks on women become invaluable.

Women’s participation in al Wada is often obscured by the fact that the terrorist organization calls upon women to participate in terrorist activity less active ways. Mia Bloom points out that groups such as al Qaeda initially banned women from participating in physically going to the insurgency zones and that Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, the current leader
of al Qaeda and formerly Bin Laden’s deputy, insisted that there are no women in al Qaeda’s ranks (Bloom 2011. 226; "Ayman Al-Zawahiri Appointed As Al-Qaeda Leader” 2011). Zawahiri stated in an article published online that Muslim women should “be ready for any service the mujahideen need from her,” while discouraging any attempts to travel to war zones, and at the same time forcing any woman who did want to travel to Iraq to travel with a male guardian (Bloom 2011. 226). Requiring a male guardian limited women’s membership in al Qaeda while at the same time providing an added benefit that for every woman recruited, there would be a man who, according to al Qaeda philosophy, could fight.

However, even though women were discouraged from joining, there are a multitude of cases where women did become involved with terrorist organizations. In fact, certain parts of the extremist ideology almost made it necessary for a lot of women to participate. Nelly Lahoud, a Senior Fellow for Political Islamism at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), noted in her article, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of Jihadist Ideology,” that one of the key features of a jihadist ideology is the belief that these organizations are fighting a defensive war, “making their jihad not just lawful but an individual duty incumbent upon each one of them” (Lahoud 2010). This type of jihad, known as jihad al-daf’, acts as a general call to arms for Muslims for times when the Islamic territory is under threat. If or when this happens, “jihad becomes an individual obligation (fard ‘ayn) incumbent upon every Muslim, regardless of age, gender, or financial circumstances” (Lahoud 2016). This became evident when Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, known as the father of the global jihad, stated that Muslims are required to perform Jihad when Islamic land is invaded and that the traditional need “to seek permission” from parents, husbands, or other authorities becomes void (Riedel 2017; Bloom 2011. 21). Under this interpretation, when the United States and other Western countries entered Afghanistan and Iraq
in 2001, all Muslims were told to go and defend their “homeland.” Due to the extremist interpretation of homeland, women were encouraged to join al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups.

Suicide bombers have become a standard method of attack by terrorist organizations because of how simple and yet deadly suicide attacks are and are important but tragic additions to research about women in al Qaeda. If the individual perpetrating an attack does not need an escape route, then the planning only involves the set-up. This primarily consists of gathering the materials for the attack and deciding the most effective target for attack. Compared to an attack that gives the perpetrator enough time to set up the attack without being caught, a suicide mission requires less forethought and less prior training. This aspect makes it advantageous to terrorist organizations who might have access to recruits but not a lot of time to invest in preparing individuals for intensive plans of action including women who do not participate in military training. Even more importantly, suicide bombers wear civilian clothes and are not noticeably different from any other civilian. It is not possible for the military to treat every single individual that they encounter as a threat so it is necessary to narrow it down somehow. Unfortunately, sex did and does not act as an absolute barrier to performing violent martyrdom missions.

Al Qaeda began to rely on women for martyrdom missions, even after making very public statements banning women from joining in al Qaeda. Zawahiri acknowledged that women were among the ranks of the mujahideen and admitted that some of these women were part of suicide missions in Algeria (Bloom 2011. 227; Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). Women appeared in missions in Iraq and included the first recorded attack by a female suicide bomber which took place on September 28, 2005 (Stone and Pattillo 2011). Women continued to participate in
martyrdom missions; researchers estimated that there were a total of 174 attacks performed by women in Iraq between April 2003 and August 2008 (Bloom 2011. 216). That indicates that during those five years there was an average of 35 attacks committed by women each year.

There are also a number of cases of women who traveled to insurgency zones where they committed martyrdom missions. These women defied the restriction that women could participate in jihad only under the circumstance that they were protecting their hometown. While many of these women may have familial or ethnic ties to Iraq and other insurgent regions, there were some women who had no ties at all. The most infamous of female suicide bombers was Murielle Degauque. Degauque, known as Europe’s first woman to become a jihadist “martyr,” set off an explosive device in an attempt to kill the American patrol stationed near Baghdad in Iraq in January 2005 (Castle 2005). Despite growing up in a non-Muslim family in southern Belgium and having a history of dabbling in drugs—something that is considered haram or forbidden by Islam—as well as a multitude of boyfriends the last of whom exposed her to extremist ideology. After converting to Islam and marrying a future jihadist, Degauque disappeared from Belgium and broke off contact with her family before appearing in Iraq where she committed the attack. This is just one example of an individual who had no ties to Iraq and was not even raised as a Muslim but who had traveled, joined, and performed a suicide bombing. Her case proves that there were women who performed jihad despite the fact that they were doing so for a region where they have no ties.

Female suicide bombers are powerful weapons for terrorist organizations yet have not been the focus of the CVE community. Because of the perception that women would not even be allowed to participate in violent roles within Islamic terrorism, women were not perceived as possible enemy combatants on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq. American and British troops
told interviewers such as Mia Bloom, a professor of Communication at Georgia State University and a fellow at the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Penn State, that they were instructed to avoid shooting women by their commanding officers for the reason that the militaries were attempting to lessen any chances of causing civilian casualties (Bloom 2011). This policy meant that female suicide bombers would be seen as civilians, allowing them to get closer to their target and detonate a suicide vest successfully. This posed an immediate threat to both the U.S. and British military in Iraq who both depended upon al Qaeda’s ideology as a way to narrow down the possibility of targets.

Al Qaeda, like any terrorist organization, has a guiding ideology, but, as a terrorist organization that doesn’t have the resources or power of a globally sanctioned state, it doesn’t have the luxury of being able to ignore any strategic advantages. Women provide an advantage because of their involvement both in supportive and violent actions and yet their role within jihad remains relatively unacknowledged. There were and there still are women who are participating in roles who are not acknowledged by al Qaeda. If states were to determine the risk that women pose based on what the terrorist organization publically stated, they would encounter data set problems due to the fact that there are women who appear to defy ideological restrictions which makes it difficult for CVE and law enforcement communities to anticipate, track and categorize these women.

**Emergence of ISIS and the changing ideology of global jihad:**

In order to understand the changing trends in recruitment, it is important to first understand the history of global jihad. While both al Qaeda and the Islamic State have become household names and for most have become almost synonymous because of their similar goals, the two organizations have very different histories and ideologies. During the 1980s Muslim
“muhajideen” insurgent groups mobilized against the Soviet Union and the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan—the socialist party which controlled Afghanistan from 1978 to 1992. Both Osama bin Laden, the founder and leader of al Qaeda until his death in 2011, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of the group that would later become the Islamic State, fought alongside other Muslims to free Afghanistan.

**Figure 1:**

Selected locations where al Qaeda and its affiliates operate

*AL QAEDA’S operations in 2014 showed that the terrorist organization had influence in countries throughout on three of the seven continents in the world (Reuters 2014).*

By the time that bin Laden and Zarqawi met in Afghanistan in 1999, al Qaeda had already existed for over a decade and it was already established within the shadowy realm of Islamic jihadi networks (Bergen 2006; Zelin 2014). The first mention of al Qaeda was in a meeting on Aug. 11, 1988 when several leaders of the jihad in Afghanistan, the leaders of an Egyptian terrorist organization known as Al Jihad, and bin Laden met in Peshawar, Pakistan (Wright 2008). At this time, the Soviets had announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan and the jihadists were buoyed by their success and discussed several ideas of turning the Muslims
who had fought in Afghanistan towards other longstanding Islamic complaints in the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the overthrow of the Egyptian government. These Muslims were already trained for war and had proved their dedication to Islamic jihad and would be valuable assets for either of those insurgency zones. However, these men who were experienced in leading and in fighting from their involvement in terrorist organizations or insurgencies lacked the resources to pursue either goals. Bin Laden, on the other hand, was wealthy and could sponsor them, but he had already visions of an “all-Arab foreign legion” which would fight against the USSR as well as other foreign governments in the Middle East (Wright 2008). Other members of the meeting decided to give support to bin Laden’s legion by providing the expertise needed to run the organization or al Qaeda or, translated into English, “the base.” Indeed, al Qaeda would provide the foundation for acts of terrorism internationally.

While al Qaeda was co-founded by a number of individuals, bin Laden was the backbone of the operation. His experiences during the Soviet-Afghan War demonstrated what a unique position he was in to help Muslims unhappy with living under non-Islamic governments. While many of those who were fighting the Soviet Union had unremarkable backgrounds, bin Laden was a son of one of the richest men in Saudi Arabia who not only had close connections to the royal family but ran an extremely successful construction business. Bin Laden would have had first-hand experience with large businesses and would have the knowledge and ability to run a similar structure (Klebnikov 2001). This undoubtedly influenced the design of al Qaeda which primarily acted as a financier for terrorist plots across the globe.

Zarqawi’s background was almost polar opposite from bin Laden’s. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was born Huthaifa Azzam and was the son of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, the man who is
known as the ‘Father of Jihad’ (Weaver 2006). While his father may have been jihadi royalty and his Bedouin tribe is one of the most important in the region, Zarqawi did not come from money. His history includes gang involvement, working jobs as a video-store clerk, and even serving prison time before he first began fighting in Afghanistan when he was 15 years-old. His gritty background helped him develop into the leader of an organization which became known for some of the most gruesome actions, including beheading almost a dozen hostages (Zelin 2014). This use of violence on a small but public scale indicates a very different organization from al Qaeda or any other extremist Islamic organization.

Zarqawi founded Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JTWJ) in 1999. In the beginning, al Qaeda provided JTWJ with seed money as it did for many different radical Muslim groups throughout the world. This supply of money continued until 9/11 when al Qaeda was officially on the run from the United States and the international community as a whole (Zelin 2014). Al Qaeda and the JTWJ were not officially affiliated in any capacity other than through monetary transactions. These appeared to have been rather open-ended transactions as al Qaeda appeared to have neither dictated the JTWJ’s targets nor their campaigns. The relationship between the two organizations could loosely be termed as allies in that neither interfered with the operations of the other but both had a relatively similar goal. The term “allies” indicates that neither organization held hierarchal power over the other but instead they approached each other as equals.

While al Qaeda managed to run several jihadi training camps where attendees were trained in skills such as explosive making, it tended to focus on creating an international, finance network which could be used to sponsor terrorist attacks even in groups outside of al Qaeda itself. These groups were carefully selected for strategic operations meaning that there was a sort
of distinction in being given aid from al Qaeda (Roth et al 2004. 28). For the most part, the
groups that became allies of al Qaeda were not given money directly, but were provided with
logistical support in the form of attending training camps and other non-financial means of
support in return for pledges of baya or bayat. Bayat is a binding oath of fealty that exists
between two individuals (Roth et al 2004. 28). Bin Laden appeared to rely heavily upon bayat
within the structure of al Qaeda. Those welcomed into his inner circle had pledged to it.

The way in which bin Laden depended on personal pledges made his relationship that
much more unusual. Al Qaeda provided financial support to Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad despite
the fact that Zarqawi had not pledged bayat to anyone within the organization. Bin Laden seems
to have held an extraordinarily high level of trust for Zarqawi and his organization and, through
this trust, JTWJ was then allowed to act independently for a number of years. Only after four
years in 2004 did Zarqawi officially pledge bayat to bin Laden (Zelin 2014). After this, the JTWJ
lost a lot of its independence and was welcomed into the al Qaeda family to the point where the
organization became known as al Qaeda in the land of Two Rivers, al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI.
Then, after Zarqawi’s death, the bayat became void as it is a pledge between individuals, not
organizations. AQI broke away from al Qaeda and reformed itself as the Islamic State of Iraq
and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

While bin Laden seemed to value loyalty within his organization above anything else and
only surrounded himself with individuals who pledged baya to him, Zarqawi believed in
“battlefield leadership.” This term refers to the idea that the power and authority of an insurgent
group is derived from those who fight on the front lines rather than those who run the operation
behind the scenes (Zelin 2014). This type of leadership is dependent upon a meritocratic system
where leaders are those who have proven themselves in the field. This particular structure also
tends to hold a certain amount of advancement ability for all of its recruits. Since meritocracy is not that different from democracy in the idea that anyone is able to advance, men and women who were brought up within the west might find this system more approachable. This means that while supporters of al Qaeda consisted mostly of individuals with ties to insurgency zones or causes, ISIS could attract men and women who had little to no ties except that to Sunni Islam.

ISIS has proven to be different from traditional terrorist groups and stands out even from other Islamic extremist groups. In Al Qaeda, the leaders consisted of the military elite and spiritual leaders of the Soviet-Afghan War (Bertrand 2015). Those recruited were men of certain age and who had military physical capability. There was also a certain weight to men who had conviction in the ideology. ISIS, on the other hand, while the leadership appears to primarily consist of men with military background, welcomes just about all of their recruits. In fact, they have been known to target extremely physically or mentally vulnerable—whether they felt unappreciated, isolated, misunderstood, or were unhappy with their life for some other reason—groups of people that Al Qaeda showed no interest in. This included plots to recruit men and women who were disabled and homeless (Schofield 2015). That added to the fact that there have been a lot of cases where members of ISIS used to be involved in gangs or in drug rings. These are not typically men who have absolute conviction in ISIS’ cause, but instead have a penchant for seeking power, legally or illegally. This indicates that the recruitment process has little to do with a careful selection procedure but instead involves casting a wide net for any vulnerable individual whom might be caught. These individuals are useful as bodies to carry bombs for suicide missions or as someone to replace those killed at the frontline.
ISIS in global jihad:

Figure 2:

THE ISLAMIC STATE, unlike al Qaeda is much more territorial focused and it’s range of control is limited even within Syria and Iraq (Davis 2014).

With the rise of the Islamic State, women were invited to participate in a variety of roles, some of which exist because of the nature of ISIS. Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, wrote that ISIS is “qualitatively more significant than a terrorist organization” due to the fact that it is creating a proto-state across colonial boundaries in Syria and Iraq (Lister 2015. 51). ISIS is dedicated to building an “Islamic state” even to the point that they have declared their leader who goes by the name Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the caliph, a title that has not been used by any person since the fall of the Ottoman empire in 1923. The title of caliph holds great weight in Islam as it is the title of the successor of the prophet Muhammed and who holds religious and political importance. ISIS, by declaring itself to be the new Caliphate and its
leader the new Caliph, has the power of legitimacy for those who want to see a beacon of strength in the name of Islam.

ISIS’ call to jihad has had a lot of success. In 2015, experts estimated that a total of 20,000 foreign fighters have joined ISIS, over 3,000 of these from the United States alone ("20,000 Foreigners Have Joined ISIS in Iraq, Syria" 2015). Among these thousands were women who bolstered the numbers of ISIS’ population. It is estimated that there are as many as 550 women who have traveled to Syria to live under ISIS (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015). ISIS’ ability to adapt to social media has made it especially dangerous for people in their late teens and early twenties, the predominant audience of social media platforms, who are coincidentally the right age to fight while being still ideologically undeveloped. These are the individuals who pose the most security risk because they have the ability to undertake dangerous missions but can still be groomed for whatever role ISIS wants them to play. ISIS was able to appeal to Westerners in a way that even its predecessor, al Qaeda, could not because, while it’s ideology was just as extreme, the structure that ISIS advertised was similar to what Westerners have come to expect; social mobility based on actions.

The Internet and women:

The development of the Internet was an important turning point in female participation as well. Due to strict interpretation of Islam in jihadism, women are typically discouraged from taking physical or violent roles within the organizations. However, as the accessibility of individuals throughout the globe increased, so did the population of potential recruits. Members of al Qaeda and later Islamic terrorist organizations created extensive online networks that have the ability to connect interested parties from all over the world. The rise of the Internet also meant that women could join since they were able to join those networks from their domiciles.
Women began to create and post propaganda, design fundraising schemes, and set up recruitment cells in support of terrorism under the approval of terrorist organizations. This development resulted in an increase of female participation within al Qaeda, which in turn increased the number of individuals who provided support to the terrorist organization.

Women can even rise to fame rivaling the fame of martyrs through their work on the Internet. One such woman was Malika El Aroud, known most commonly simply as “Malika,” who was a Belgian Muslim who would broadcast her opinions on radical forums. In one interview, she described herself as a warrior for al Qaeda and that, while she believes that women should not participate in violent attacks, her jihad is through her writing. She states that broadcasting her views and those perpetuated by al Qaeda is her form of jihad. To her, “[w]riting is also a bomb” (Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). The Internet provided numerous opportunities for women to take up a more active role while maintaining the nonviolent role dictated by their radical ideology.

Female recruitment on the internet also has the side effect of increasing available information about the recruiters themselves. When recruiting, these women typically talk about themselves including information about their daily lives and their beliefs. This information, however, can be extremely problematic because recruiters do not necessarily have to be truthful. Generally speaking, recruiters tend to create a persona that their targeted audience might feel a strong connection to. This means that, unless researchers are able to verify the information which female recruiters divulge online, this information should be considered untrustworthy.

**Women in ISIS:**

There are a number of roles that women play within the Islamic State. Audrey Alexander, a research fellow at George Washington University’s Program on Extremism who specializes in
the radicalization of women, condenses all of the different roles that women play into three
different types: plotters, supporters, and travelers (Alexander 2016). Plotters are members who
participate in the planning or implementation of domestic acts, supporters gather material
support, publish or circulate propaganda, or aid in concealing information about domestic
attacks, and travelers physically go to insurgent zones where they can be involved in the
organization directly. All three roles are vital to the way which ISIS functions in different ways.

Other women who support ISIS may perpetuate violence without perpetrating a violent
act. One aspect of modern day terrorism is that individuals can contribute to terrorism without
ever taking up a weapon. Both men and women who support ISIS can become recruiters through
spreading disinformation and propaganda about the terrorist organization from the comfort and
safety of their home. Through these “non-violent” roles, individuals can increase the chances of
radicalizing individuals throughout the world and thereby increase the number of individuals
who attempt to travel to insurgent zones or plan a domestic attack. Women who act in these
supportive roles may not be making an act of violence themselves but their action increases the
chances of violence. By looking at the end result of recruitment, anyone who supports ISIS in
this particular way should be considered encouraging violent behavior as it spurs people to act in
a manner that they might not have without incitement.

ISIS especially relies on women using the internet for recruitment. It represents the life
blood of any organization which relies heavily on suicide attacks and martyrdom. It also appears
to be extremely popular among women. Individuals who defected and left Syria reported that
women in ISIS who acted as online recruiters were given a long leash on the internet whereas
everyone else found Internet access to be extremely restricted. This could only add to the appeal
of becoming a recruiter (Moaveni 2015). For the price of promoting ISIS, these women can get
almost unlimited access to the Internet. The role of women in recruitment is especially important because, according to the ideology to which Islamic extremists subscribe, women and men who are not related by blood have restricted ability to interact. Although we have seen numerous cases of young women being groomed for jihadi brides by male members of ISIS, for the most part, women are encouraged to reach out to women living in Syria.

Many women also reach out to female recruiters because, as women, these recruiters could answer questions about life as a woman under ISIS. Women tend to make posts which specifically aim to make ISIS more approachable and “friendly” to potential recruits. When women post pictures of daily life including activities such as cooking or playing with children, potential recruits would start to see them as ‘normal’ despite pictures that feature weapons or tags such as #CalamityWillBefallU and other such terror-related catch phrases (Mortimer 2016; Geller 2014). It would not be accurate to describe these women as non-violent when they appear in pictures posing with AK-47s—the weapon of choice by ISIS militants. Posting pictures of weapons indicates a level of familiarity with the weapon which in turn indicates that the poster has accepted a level of violence. In her article, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” Jytte Klausen, a Fellow at The Wilson Center in Washington D.C. and the Lawrence A. Wien Professor of International Cooperation at Brandeis University, performed network analysis on the large number of Twitter accounts that disperse advice and propaganda on behalf of jihadist groups like ISIS. In particular, she found that there were a number of Twitter accounts that were maintained by women purportedly in insurgent zones. These accounts were used to promote ISIS by demonstrating the normalcy of life under ISIS including posting pictures of their “children dressed up in ISIL fan gear,” which she compares to the way in which a Manchester United fan might “dress up her kids for fun”
These posts and others promise that life under ISIS is safe and fulfilling and that there are everyday activities such as selfies, grocery shopping, raising children going on. To potential recruits, this means that they can keep the comforts that they are used to but also can live under Sharia law and participate in a movement for an Islamic state. Women who believe the social media posts, can be convinced that they won’t be losing anything by going to Syria while at the same time, they gain purpose in their lives.

Women outside Syria also seem to find recruitment a powerful way to contribute to terrorism. Malika El Aroud, a woman who encouraged men to go join al Qaeda during the early 2000s, said that “It’s not [her] role to set off bombs — that’s ridiculous. I have a weapon. It’s to write. It’s to speak out. That’s my jihad” (Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). Women have performed the same role for promoting ISIS’ agenda. The Internet is easy for most people within Western countries to access and it allows them to contact people throughout the world. These individuals can also remain in safety by recruiting others for jihad and for domestic plots rather than planning for either themselves. It also doesn’t go against the ideology for women who follow ISIS’ teachings to the letter. By posting on social media, these women can choose to be active in their support of terrorism and at the same time not leave their domestic sphere. To many women, the role of being a recruiter is extremely appealing because they do not have to leave their loved ones, they do not have to travel and live in a war zone, and they do not break with their adopted ideology. Through recruitment, these women have the ability to perpetuate violence without participating themselves. This means that there are fewer women involved in the types of plots which capture the interest of the general public which in turn can make it difficult for researchers to find out about.
CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Researching the original trajectory:

In 2015 there was an article entitled “A Behavioral Study of the Radicalization Trajectories of American ‘Homegrown’ Al Qaeda-Inspired Terrorist Offenders” in which Dr. Jytte Klausen and a team of researchers set about mapping out a timeline of the radicalization process for individuals who spent their formative years in the United States. This trajectory was revolutionary both in its accuracy as well as its approach to mapping the process of radicalization. The study was based on the idea that since extremist Islamic terrorism is a lifestyle choice, it would be associated with other overt behaviors. These in turn could then be used to determine the level of the individual’s acceptance of radical behavior.

The data used for the original study consisted of detailed profiles of specially designated terrorists who have been convicted in U.S. courts or killed while engaging in a jihadist terrorist act since 2001. Each profile contains over 50 different data points that represent different demographic and action specific options. Coders filled in the profiles using open sourced material including court documents, newspaper articles, as well as social media posts written by the terrorists themselves. These coders who fill out these profiles have been trained to recognize the required information for these data points including the behavioral indicators of radicalization used for the original trajectory project. To this end, coders are also trained to give special interest to indicators that have a date or a year attached to them such as date of conversion or date of arrest. Data collection on this scale and with this level of detail requires a
significant amount of time according to the case. Coders could spend anywhere from 1 to 8 hours on a case depending on the number of individuals involved and the complexity of their case.

From the dates and years collected from these behavioral indicators, researchers were able to create a timeline of behaviors for each of the 331 offenders included in the original study. These timelines developed into the radicalization trajectories that provided average timeframes with which one could predict the rate that an individual might take action on their extremist beliefs.

**Parameters of the original study:**

Because the study was specifically studying the phenomenon of homegrown terrorism, the individuals who were included consisted of men and women who either were born in the United States or had immigrated when they were 14 years old or younger. The researchers also eliminated any individual whose radicalization process took place outside of the United States. These two parameters would guarantee that those within the study had been raised within the same country and would most likely have the same sort of values based on the society where they grew up but also that the extremist influence that sparked the radicalization process was based within the United States rather than based in a foreign location, making these individuals truly ‘homegrown.’

Other specifications for the study required that the first terrorist activity for these men and women took place after the September 11 attacks in 2001 and that the sources for the information came from official or thoroughly researched sources. Above all, the study necessitated that not only were these parameters met, but that there were enough data points for each individual included. After this initial phase of data collection, the researchers were left with
331 individuals. From this list, 22 were eliminated for their insufficient documentation and 135 were used for an in-depth portion of the research.

**Modeling the trajectory:**

The initial problem with any trajectory is determining when is the start date. Having a start date is especially important as it establishes a discernable starting point that is then used to establish the timeframe. Having a start date is especially important as it establishes a discernable starting point. The starting point is important because it defines the beginning of the timeframe. For a radicalization trajectory, for example, the time frame would be defined as the time between the noted “start” behavior and the end point. An end point would be defined as the action an individual takes in support of their ideology. These timeframes can then be compared to the timeframes of other individuals, and would allow researchers to demonstrate how quickly or slowly the radicalization process would take. The success of a trajectory is often dependent on how researchers find the start date because, if they don’t look far enough in their subject’s history, they could miss important indicators that are vital to understanding the process of radicalization while at the same time, if they look too far back, they could give importance to indicators that could be unrelated.

Meanwhile, the end date is typically easy to recognize because it is generally the date when the individual took action or was arrested. In either case, it is well documented. Court documents and newspaper articles rarely document the beginning behaviors exhibited at the beginning of an individual’s journey to radical criminal activity. Klausen and her team of researchers decided to avoid this pitfall by plotting out as much information as they could find for each individual’s timeline. That way they could still analyze the data and be able to discover the behavioral indicators and timeframes that individuals seem to have in common. It also
ensures that the study relied on the data that was documented rather than educated guesses as to when to begin their study.

**The stages of radicalization included in the trajectory:**

*Figure 3:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage:</th>
<th>Pre-Radicalization</th>
<th>Stage 1: Detachment</th>
<th>Stage 2: Peer-Immersion and Training</th>
<th>Stage 3: Planning and Execution of Violent Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description:</td>
<td>Searching behavior indicative of cognitive opening.</td>
<td>Detachment from previous life; e.g. by spending inordinate amounts of time with online extremist peers.</td>
<td>Leaves home to become closer to a peer group of like-minded individuals.</td>
<td>Attempts or enacts violent action—or joins a terrorist group abroad or attempts to join a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This could include:</td>
<td>Expressions of disillusionment with world affairs or with religious or political authorities. Behavior indicative of a personal crisis in response to personal events, e.g. a family crisis, drug addiction, or being arrested. Seeking out information in venues outside the individuals’ established social milieu, either online or real-life, from new authority figures.</td>
<td>Actively seeking to get closer to new authority figures, or engaging in Da’wah online or to proselytize in public. Experiencing a revelation or making changes to lifestyle such as dropping out of school or work. Picking fights with local mosque or teachers, colleagues, and family—or otherwise trying to convince others to change, e.g. by starting a blog or a website.</td>
<td>Attempting to go abroad to join an organization or a network to “live” as prescribed by the ideology. Behavior indicative of a desire to permanently join the militant community, e.g. by finding a spouse through the extremist community. Seeking out ways to demonstrate commitment to the new ideological community and its mission, e.g. by acquiring practical training in the use of firearms or other skills considered important to the mission of the extremist community.</td>
<td>Actively supporting another person carrying out violent action on behalf of the ideology. Issuing threats online or real-life, or in other ways supporting immediate violent action, e.g. by engaging in online fraud. Joining a foreign terrorist organization or taking practical steps to carry out an attack, e.g. by acquiring materials needed to fabricate a bomb or purchasing firearms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*THE ORIGINAL TABLE OF STAGES published in the 2015 study depicts the particular behaviors which the researchers were looking for in each stage (Klausen 2015).*

The study successfully identified behavioral signifiers that were then were categorized in four different distinguishable phases of radicalization. The first phase was called Pre-
radicalization. The researchers describe this stage as consisting of “searching behavior indicative of cognitive opening” (Klausen 2015. 9). During Pre-radicalization, radical individuals often experienced personal crises or dissatisfaction with current events that encouraged them to seek information. It is a stage of questioning when an individual might be particularly vulnerable for the introduction of a new ideology as they might interact with radical persons online or in person who appear to have the answers they are looking for.

After pre-radicalization, there is Stage 1. This is a period of detachment. Stage 1 is described as a time of detachment where individuals spend “inordinate amounts of time with online extremist peers” (Klausen 2015. 9). During this phase, individuals show signs of increased involvement and dedication to the ideology and a decreased interest in activities and values that they used to embrace. There is the introduction of many new figures in this person’s life as they embrace new groups of friends and new authority figures while becoming more distant from family, friends, colleagues, and others with whom they might have had relationships previously. During this phase, people might also become more aggressive with these new beliefs and become known to participate in proselytizing in public, picking fights with anyone who questions their new beliefs, or in drastically changing their lifestyle in an attempt to follow the teachings of their new ideology.

The third phase is Stage 2: peer-immersion and training. During this phase, individuals are known to leave home in order to “become closer to a peer group of like-minded individuals” (Klausen 2015. 9). At this point in the individual’s radicalization process, you can see the individual taking further steps to ensure that they are fully embracing the ideology including seeking to marry a radical individual as the jihadi brides do or by leaving Western countries and leaving for locations where they could live under Sharia law. Of course, the fact that the
information that what ISIS practices is Sharia law comes from members and recruiters from the organization does not make a difference at this point since the individuals are well into the radicalization process and have embraced the ideology. At this point, the individual may not be involved with a specific terrorist organization but are instead interested in the jihadist ideology itself, so their travel abroad does not necessarily mean that they want to join a particular group.

The last phase is Stage 3. During this phase for the planning and the execution of violent action, Stage 3 is described as a period of time where the individual “[a]ttempts or enacts violent action—or joins a terrorist group abroad or attempts to join a group” (Klausen 2015. 9). While the previous phases indicate that the individual is being primed for recruitment in a terrorist organization, this is when the individual is openly (or perhaps secretly if they are attempting to hide their activity from law enforcement) supportive or inspired by a specific terrorist group. It is also the time where the individual is the most violent. During this phase, individuals begin a variety of violent-based actions such as posting death threats online, encouraging others to attack or kill various targets, or carrying out or assisting a co-conspirator with a violent plot in the name of a terrorist organization. It is also when individuals attempt to travel to insurgent zones in order to join armed groups and support or participate in violence abroad.

These phases were created after a multitude of behavioral indicators were plotted and the non-relevant indicators were eliminated. Thus, the indicators themselves became the stages based on the level of radicalization indicated by the action, making the trajectories heavily based on the data available instead of predictions for what may appear.

**Results of the trajectory study:**

There were several major key findings from the trajectory. The first one was that there is a wide window of opportunity for preventative intervention prior to the individual’s
radicalization and that there are a number of individuals who take a sizeable amount of time before they decide to act on the radical ideology. The median of the period of time an individual takes before deciding to act on their beliefs was just over 4 years but when the researchers excluded a few outliers who took 12 or more years, the average trajectory was just over 3 years (Klausen 2015. ii). The researchers point out, however, that once an individual becomes involved in an extremist peer group or starts to exhibit behaviors that show a greater dedication to the radical ideology, the rate of radicalization speeds up. This indicates that any sort of intervention prior to the individual’s reaching of peak radicalization would be before they have the definite signs of radicalization. This makes it difficult for law enforcement’s ability to recognize individuals in the early stages of radicalization.

The most important key finding from the study was the fact that the majority of individuals included in the study progressed through all four stages in a rather predictable manner showing a rate of progression that is consistent throughout the majority, even if their trajectories were not uniform. This meant that, while it may be difficult to discover the first signs of radicalization, once law enforcement or other CVE experts discover someone with radical behavior, it would be theoretically possible to determine how radicalized that person is. This is significant for the work and study of de-radicalization programs because it would allow for those enrolled in such programs to be treated according to their connection to the jihadist ideology. This would allow for more specialized treatment.
The problem with the women’s trajectory:

However, the trajectory ended up having certain issues when it came to the resulting analysis of female trajectories. According to the study, women appeared to have undergone Stage 1 and Stage 2 in four months on average (Klausen 2015. 19). This would represent an extremely accelerated rate of radicalization, especially when compared to the average 12 months for male radicalization through those two stages.

This result was most likely a false finding because there were not enough subjects within the dataset to be able to make a consistent dataset. In November 2016, about a year after the study was published, there were nearly 5,400 profiles total within the original dataset and only 351 of them were female. When looking specifically at Americans, the total number of profiles was 883 individuals and only 63 of these profiles were female. This means that, assuming that it had not likely changed dramatically in its demographic population within one year, the dataset that the researchers used was about that size only after a series of different specifications to narrow down the dataset. This means that, at the time of the original study, there was a huge, statistical imbalance in the data between men and women. This of course create a bias in the raw data that could skew the results. According to the numbers from 2016, women make up around seven percent of the total number of jihadists from the United States. Any researcher attempting to make a trajectory for the radicalization of women in Islamic terrorism will be looking at a data sample that is too small to make any sort of accurate predictions concerning radicalization.
A second reason why the dataset for the original trajectory was unable to accurately portray female radicalization predictions is that, according to the parameters of the study, the majority of women involved in terrorism do not typically commit violent acts. According to the original publication, “The radicalization trajectory rate is a measure of the time it takes for an individual to move from initial identification with the ideas and objectives of an extremist ideology to undertaking violent action in the name of that ideology” (Klausen 2015. 8). While some women do undertake violent action, they are primarily known for providing logistical support for violent acts, inciting violence against certain targets, creating propaganda, or traveling to insurgency zones. These actions are related to violence but may be interpreted as not violent in themselves. This would mean that they might not have been included within the study.

A third reason is that women may radicalize in less public or noticeable ways. Women could either be stealthier about their radicalization, people may not notice the signs of radicalization when women are involved, or that their signs of radicalization are simply not consistently reported in open source material. In all three cases, the behavioral indicators that the researchers and coders were looking for would not be recorded within public access.
documentation meaning that a trajectory based on that material would not be able to fill in an accurate timeline.
CHAPTER THREE: CREATING A NEW TRAJECTORY

Recreating the study for a female trajectory:

When recreating the study, it was necessary to expand the country of interest to include both the United States and France. This would expand the pool of people and would allow for more accurate analysis. Using the same parameters of individuals resulted with 112 women, 70 women from France and 42 women from the United States. For all of these individuals, I reexamined their cases and attempted to find as much information as possible. One individual had to be eliminated because there were no known years or dates associated with her.

I then went through the detailed profiles and plugged in the different dates and years into the existing behavioral indicators used in the 2015 study. I found a total of 236 different dates and years to use as data points, the highest number of data points per person, but the average points per person is 2.13.

I also found that while there were individuals who had data points for all four stages, it was relatively rare. Instead, about 64 percent of women had dates within a single stage leaving about 34 percent of women with two or more stages. For the women with only one stage represented, the date present was typically from the final phase when they performed their action or were arrested because this stage is usually well represented within court documents, news articles, or other open source material. Both the low number of data points and the number of stages represented per person are not ideal.
Based on the availability of information from public access documentation, there are not enough data points for any researcher to study the radicalization of jihadist women. In the original study, researchers were able to eliminate hundreds of profiles from a dataset based on male jihadists from a single country due to lack of relevant information, if one was to eliminate individuals from a dataset composed of women from two countries based on a lack of information, that dataset would not only be significantly smaller than the one the original dataset but would be miniscule as there are only be a handful of women with enough data points to even map out their individual timelines. While there are upwards of 5,000 male jihadists of whom there are any number of extremely detailed profiles to study, there are less than 400 individuals who are female. It is not possible to be able to complete a trajectory without either a larger number of individuals or a greater level of detail concerning each woman. Either of these are necessary to increase the accuracy of statistical analysis.

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larger number of individuals or a greater level of detail concerning each woman. Either of these are necessary to increase the accuracy of statistical analysis.

**Analysis:**

One possibility for the lack of required information is that the behaviors mapped in the original trajectory were not present for women. For this to be the case, there would have to be behaviors which occurred regularly that weren’t included as the indicators of the four original stages. However, there didn’t appear to be a problem with the behaviors. The women I studied had almost the same trademark behaviors that the men had, especially lifestyle changes, seeking peer immersion, having the desire to take action. The only differences were on the surface levels such as the different roles that women play such as having the desire to travel to become jihadi brides. This would signify that the behaviors translate well for women.

The second possibility this would indicate is that there are problems with the information available through open sourced material. Although there are court documents available for public access and newspapers who cover the subject with all regards to using correct sources and even going directly to the sources, there were few cases where all of that information was readily available. To make a trajectory, it is necessary to have plenty of dates in order to plot the different timelines. Even if a behavior was stated, if there isn’t enough information to narrow that indicator down to a reasonable span of time such as one to two years, that indicator will not be able to add any value to the timeline; especially if it is the first indicator which would be used to plot the start date for the timeline. It would not be even possible to make any educated guesses based on trends in the data because one would need enough cases in order to prove that there is a trend. Without such a specific range of information, researchers would be hard pressed to be able to fill in the gaps.
Since the behaviors appeared consistent with the ones plotted by the original researchers and there did not appear to be any that were female-specific, it seems that it would be possible to create a trajectory given a larger data pool. However, for this to occur, there would have to be enough timelines; researchers would be able to track general trends and thus provide an educated response to how do women radicalize.
CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING WOMEN IN TERRORISM

Examples of the threat from female jihadists:

It is necessary, therefore, to increase our attention on radical women. News stories and court documents become more readily available when the subject is decidedly more “news-worthy.” This would mean that the story contained some sort of human interest whether in the women themselves or in the action they committed. Women can easily slip under the radar of news cycles because of how few actually take part in violent plots and, when it comes to terrorism, successful, violent actions—successful meaning that the plot was not stopped beforehand by law enforcement—make it to the front page more often than supportive or non-violent roles. While people throughout the United States would recognize the name Tashfeen Malik, the wife and co-conspirator of the San Bernardino shooting, few outside of CVE and terrorism research are familiar with Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, the would be bombers of New York City who were arrested in a sting operation in April 2015. Similarly, plots that are non-violent in nature do not garner a lot of attention. In 2013, Hawo Mohamed Hassan and Amina Farah Ali were the leaders of seven other women who were indicted for their fundraising efforts on behalf of Al-Shabaab. The investigation was known as the United States “largest anti-terrorism investigation since Sept. 11, 2001” (Furst 2001). However, while the hijackers for the 9/11 attacks only entered the country days before the attack, these nine women had lived within the United States for years. While not being native born or “homegrown” American terrorists, these women were the next thing as residents. That they were not considered front page newsworthy across the country demonstrates a problem with relying on media interest.
However, part of this may be the fact that they are women. Just as the military struggled with identifying female members of al Qaeda as threats, law enforcement has had trouble recognizing radicalized women. Women have been convicted of different charges for their attempts to aid in terrorism. For some women, they are sentenced for attempting to leave while others receive no official sentence at all. In October 2014, three teenagers aged 15, 16, and 17 from Colorado were stopped at the Frankfurt airport in Germany after the authorities had been alerted that they were attempting to travel to Syria and join ISIS. They were stopped by German law enforcement and sent back to the United States where they were questioned by FBI agents and then released (Brumfield 2014). There is no mention of their arrest or of any legal action taken against them. Meanwhile, several months earlier in April 2014, Shannon Maureen Conley, 19-year-old woman from Denver, was arrested as she attempted to fly to Frankfurt and then on to Turkey. She was later charged with “conspiracy to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization” (Sandell and James 2014). All of these young women were from the same state, from the same country, and attempted to do the very same thing using the same travel route. While Conley was over 18 years of age and could therefore be tried as an adult, the minors attempted to break the same law and therefore should have been addressed legally even if their sentences would have been different. This did not happen and the three teenagers who attempted to join ISIS in October were released while the teenager who attempted the same thing months earlier was arrested and charged.

The inconsistency can in part be attributed to the idea that women do not pose a security threat since they cannot perpetrate violence under ISIS. This hearkens back to the idea that women are not allowed to take part in violent roles in Islamic extremism but does not represent the reality of the situation. First of all, women do participate in violent roles. Amanda Spenser, a
student of Global Affairs, performed a study on the different roles that women play in ISIS. She found that out of 72 cases, 1 percent were combatants, 3 percent were prison guards, 10 percent were patrol officers, and 6 percent were heads of command (Spenser 2016). That means about 20 percent of women in ISIS hold positions where they have some sort of power or potential for violence against others. This would indicate that there are women in Syria who perform violent actions whether in combat or within ISIS itself.

The West has seen an increase of domestic attacks by female supporters of ISIS. The most famous attack where a woman was a perpetrator was the so-called San Bernardino shooting on December 2, 2015. During the shooting, Tashfeen Malik and her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, killed 14 people and injured 21 others who were at the Inland Regional Center located in San Bernardino, CA (St. Claire 2015). That same day, Malik used one of her social media accounts to declare her allegiance to ISIS. Malik was actively involved in the planning of the attack and we need to acknowledge that there are women who take her same line of action. Audrey Alexander, a Research Fellow at the Program on Extremism argues that we can no longer rely on the idea that the radical ideology will keep women from performing violent actions in the name of ISIS. She wrote in her paper, “Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America,” that “an increased reliance on directed attacks and lone-actors to relinquish command and control, diminishing their desire and ability to impose more traditional gender structures” (Alexander 2016). Her argument is that the further away the women are from the center of control, which, in this case, is represented by ISIS territory in Syria, the less control the center has over their actions. Women living in ISIS are under the direct authority of ISIS and their every action can be dictated according to the ideology, whereas Malik, in the United States was remote and ISIS would have only had access to her through the Internet. Law enforcement
cannot rely on participant’s strict adherence to the ISIS’ version of Sharia law for determining who can be a threat and must instead plan for women who support the organization as threats to domestic security.

Even the traditional non-violent roles that women have played in global jihad pose a threat. In November 2014, French law enforcement shut down the charity “Perle d’espoir” or “Pearl of Hope” and arrested Yasmine Znaiidi, the president of the organization. The authorities accused Znaiidi and her partner, Nabil Ouerfelli, of using the money it raised for legitimate reasons for supporting the terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra. Znaiidi was able to maintain her organization for two years during which the organization sent around $125,000 USD under the cover of providing food and medical supplies to children in Syria and Palestine. The pair was indicted on December 5, 2014 with financing terrorism in Syria and Iraq (“Summary Of Terrorist Incidents And Counter-Terrorist Operations Worldwide December 2014” 2014). While Znaiidi did not take up a gun or a bomb herself, the money that she raised was used to support a specially designated terrorist group and allowed for the perpetuation of violence in an already unstable region. Her action might have been non-violent but the impact was anything but.

Supporting terrorists or terrorist organizations have a very real affect and can have dire consequences. Even for women who do nothing to support organizations like ISIS, if they are accomplices to a violent plot, they have accepted that violence is acceptable. On March 26, 2003, Chris Marie Warren, was charged with making false statements so that her husband’s nephew, Irfam Kamran, could get a visa to the United States. There, he planned to act as a sleeper agent for al Qaeda or the Taliban and would take action on either organization’s signal (United States of America v. Imran Khan 2004). Warren may have only provided false information identifying Kamran as her son, but if he was successful in coming to the United States undetected, he might
have cause irreparable harm to civilians or to the US itself. That indicates that Warren was a security risk no matter what her specific actions consisted of.

Women are present in terrorism and they play roles. Their level of security risk should not be dependent upon whether they are male because women have proven capable of recruiting, taking up weapons, and giving support to terrorist plots that, if they had succeeded, would have led to more violence. Stating that women are not violent, therefore, ignores the danger that is posed by any member of a terrorist organization.

The perception of Muslim women as victims:

Despite the continued presence of women in Islamic terrorist organizations, these women are rarely seen as the perpetrators or recruiters of violent ideology. One possible reason is that non-Muslims living in the West perceive Muslim women as victims most likely because of a pre-conceived bias against Muslims. When living in the West, Muslim women face a unique type of bias. The bias is most clearly demonstrated by the way in which “Muslim” dress is treated. Gérard Araud, the French ambassador to the United States, tweeted on August 15, 2016 using his verified account, that a “burqa is not a neutral attire. It contains an [sic] conception of the woman as a [sic] object of lust, a subject and not an agent of history” (Araud 2016). Aroud’s statement indicates that his opinion is that burqas are never chosen by the women who wear them and that by wearing it, the woman is automatically objectified.

This sentiment most likely refers to the symbolic power of burqas as Islamic rather than the fact that the women are covered head to foot. While analyzing the women’s movements in the mosques of Cairo, Mahmood noted that the treatment of religious dress is different for Muslim women. She wrote that while the people who do not practice any religion or those who define themselves through their secularity often state that they are indifferent to outward displays
of religion, this is severely tested whenever religiosity is brought into the public sphere via religiously affiliated clothing. When this occurs, Mahmood found that “women's adoption of religious clothing is taken to be a sign of social coercion” male religious clothing such as Jewish yarmulkes or Sikh turbans are not (Mahmood 2005. 75). While the reasons behind the association with Islam and the subjugation of women are complicated, there are certain repercussions with attributing Muslim women agency.

However, by making a blanket statement that all women who wear burqas are oppressed, non-Muslims take away the agency of all Muslim women. Instead, it is necessary to examine the specific circumstances where women lose their agency to choose to wear a burqa. When looking at the repression of free choice, there appear to be three different possible levels; familial, societal, and legal. The familial level represents a “soft” level of repression where friends and family might pressure someone into behaving a certain way but there are limits to where they can enforce this behavior. At the societal level there is that same kind of pressure but at a larger scale. This larger scale has limits to its ability to enforce. On the legal level, suppression is represented by a hard line of enforcement and the rules have the ability for very powerful repercussions. If there is a legal level of suppression, women only have the agency to disobey the law and face the possibility of various official sentences. On the societal level, the most powerful way to control individual behavior is through shunning him or her. This can be a powerful deterrent but it is not as powerful as the legal level. With suppression on the familial level, the deterrent consists of similar tactics as those on the societal level but there is more internal pressure. This pressure, while soft, can be compelling since it is done by people whom the individual cares about. This would mean that any shunning or exclusion is that much more powerful. In the West, there are no pressures at the legal or societal levels for women to wear
burqas, only at the familial level. While oppression can occur at all or any levels within this model, women in the United States or in France, where there may only be familial pressure cannot be compared to women living in areas of the world where there may be legal, societal, and familial levels of suppression.

**Perceiving women as victims in ISIS:**

It is not inconceivable to say that a bias against Islamic women has influenced how states and researchers approach the research and legality of female jihadists. Previous studies on the recruitment of women for ISIS or other Islamic extremist organizations argue that women are victims of these organizations and some imply that women cannot become participants or agents within the organization. Saba Mahmood, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley with a focus on the relationship between religious and secular politics, explores the victimization of women especially as perceived by the West. In her book, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, she discusses the theories of positive and negative freedom. She defines negative freedom as the “absence of external obstacles” as presented by the government, businesses, or society and positive freedom as “the capacity to realize an autonomous will” based on self-interest and thus the individual is fully capable to recognize the best choice for his or herself and is able to implement it (Mahoud 2010. 11).

Research about women and especially studies about Muslim women tend to follow the first theory of freedom, that freedom is entirely based on a lack of obstacles. Mahmood states that these studies view male influence as an obstacle or “coercive presence” and that women must look for spaces that are completely independent of this presence as the only spaces for women’s “fulfillment or self-realization” (Mahoud 2010. 12) This then argues that women are unable to
have agency in their decisions if men are at all involved, thus perpetrating the idea that women are victims.

Researchers have also argued that the methods with which ISIS recruits women are the same as those used by human trafficking. Ashley Binetti, a Hillary Rodham Clinton Law Fellow at Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, argued that the recruitment of women should be considered entrapment and trafficking due to the nature of how women are lured out to Syria. In her article, “A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS’s Recruitment of Women from the West,” Binetti writes that women who are recruited to become jihadi brides are exploited by the terrorist organization to facilitate “the recruitment and retention of male foreign fighters” (Binetti 2015). She then goes on to note that under the common definitions of human trafficking, which state that an individual is lured by force or by fraud to a situation where they are exploited either sexually or by servitude, female recruits should be considered trafficked persons. By international standards, how women are targeted and exploited by terrorist organizations such as ISIS is indeed an example of human trafficking and law enforcement experts should be considerate of that particular factor of female terrorist radicalization.

There is ample evidence that women are groomed for sexual roles under the understanding that they will become wives of mujahideen. In other cases, jihadists recruit women to specifically be their bride. In 2015, a French reporter who goes by the penname Anna Erelle was able to write first-hand knowledge about how ISIS recruits many young girls. Erelle posed online as Mélodie, a female Muslim convert, and caught the attention of a high level member of ISIS called Bilal who proceeded to try to recruit her for his wife (Erelle 2015). She noticed that she commanded almost instantaneous respect from other young women simply because of her connection to this member of ISIS’ elite. They would message her, asking for her
advice on everything from whether to pack sanitary napkins, to the best ways to travel to Syria. For anyone who struggles with authority or who wants to be considered important, it would be intoxicating to have these strangers fawn over her expertise, whether it was real or not.

The relationship with Bilal was also designed to lure her in. Much like a sexual predator, Bilel displayed an enthusiasm for Mélodie, showering her with attention from daily affectionate messages and compliments. Anyone with low self-esteem or a bad home life would be drawn in by the open devotion from someone like Bilel who already cuts a romantic figure from posing as a hero for all Muslims everywhere. Once she showed reluctance to travel to Syria, the conversations turned nasty. When “Mélodie” said that she wasn’t sure she could make it to Turkey, Bilel turned on her and messaged her saying, “Do you think I’m an idiot? From now on, you’re going to shut up. I’m part of a terrorist organization. You can’t talk to me like that” and “Where are you, you little bitch? I swear to Allah, you’re going to pay.” (Erelle 2015). She also received messages from a woman claiming to be Bilel’s wife with more abuse and insults. Bilel, of course, did not tell Mélodie that he was already married.

If Erelle was a woman who was interested in ISIS, she would have been in trouble. She would have ended up in the middle of an insurgency zone, far from her family and friends where her life would have been in danger the whole time. Furthermore, the one person she would have known was lying to her. Women under those circumstances are extremely vulnerable and they are likely to never make it back home.

Two young women who left everything to join ISIS from Austria faced this dangerous situation. In April 2014, Samra Kesinovic, who was 16 years old when she left, and her friend, Sabina Selimovic, who was 15 years old, snuck away from their home and left for Syria. In a letter to their parents, they wrote that they would see their loved ones in paradise and that they
“will serve Allah and die for him” (Bacchi 2014). ISIS appealed to these young women, so much so that even before going, they expressed a willingness to die for the organization and showed a deep level of trust for ISIS. Their story was taken up by the media and reports of their marriages, pregnancies, and regrets. However, amid all the rumors that they were married and pregnant, there was news that Kesinovic was killed by members of ISIS. In October, news sources reported that an unnamed Tunisian woman who had been living with the two young women in Raqqa but had defected, said that Kesinovic had been beaten to death after she had attempted to leave ISIS (Sehmer 2014). For such highly radicalized individuals to then turn around and try to leave, indicates that the conditions that Kesinovic and Selimovic were both unexpected and horrifying. To most people in the world, this is a clear case of human trafficking and of entrapping two young woman who then pay with their lives.

While women are portrayed as being preyed on by an organization that restricts their role to motherhood and domesticity, the women who go are oftentimes visibly aware of what roles are available to them. Numerous twitter accounts of women who travel to Syria and join ISIS relish their role as the wife of a martyr and the mother of a future jihadist and indeed flaunt their life on social media. It is true that ISIS has a strong-hold over access to the Internet and that this could mean that everything we see from members of ISIS is fictional and created only as part of the propaganda machine, but it is also likely that these women do feel a strong attachment to ISIS and feel that their participation in a domestic capacity role should be honored rather than scorned.

**The predatory nature of ISIS:**

While the argument that female members of ISIS are victims of human trafficking holds merit and should be given considered when dealing with radicalized women, there is a problem
in viewing female jihadists as victims. The first is the assumption that the roles for women are solely exploitive and that the women, like Kesinovic and Selimovic, don’t understand what they are getting into. Nabeelah Jaffer, a reporter who spent a great deal of time talking to female members of ISIS, noted that the women she spoke to seemed to enjoy their roles as the wives of muhajideens. One woman, a Bangladeshi woman from the United Kingdom known as Umm Umar, enjoyed her marriage. While admitting that it is difficult to be a woman without male relatives within ISIS, Umm Umar said how she was matched to a man who, like her, was Bangladeshi and from the UK and whose family was even from the same Bangladeshi village. Even after his death, “[s]he seemed proud of her husband’s success, and never spoke a word of grief or sadness” (Jaffer 2015). Other women expressed jealousy at the respect and the monetary support that the wives of martyred individuals receive from ISIS or discussed how they were studying traditional Islamic studies in casual conversations over the internet and were excited to share their perspective and their opinions. Assuming that all of these women are lying can distort the actual observable data. It is not possible to claim that there are not those women who have willingly embraced the ideology and believe it wholeheartedly even though they have been trafficked.

The second problem is that there is an assumption that only women recruited by ISIS can be considered victims of human trafficking. The most common understanding of human trafficking is women who are sold or tricked into the sex industry. These women are often exploited because of their poverty and their lack of family or community to protect them. In contrast, according to a report published in 2008 by the International Labor Organization (ILO), while they found an estimated 2.5 million victims of human trafficking worldwide, 32 percent were trafficked into forced labor, 43 percent into sex industries, and 25 percent into a mixture of
both (ILO Action Against Trafficking In Human Beings 2008). This would indicate that, on a large scale, human trafficking is almost equally made up of both forced labor and sex industries. It is important to understand that the forced labor is just as exploitive as the sex slavery. For the most part, victims of human trafficking for forced labor face slavery for their whole life or even death as the jobs that they are required to perform are usually extremely dangerous. For example, boys in Cambodia and Burma are sometimes forced to work on deep-sea fishing ships. These ships can stay at sea for up to two years at a time meaning that the boys face up to two years of isolation. 10 percent of these boys never return and those who become sick or become useless for labor in some other way are thrown overboard (Feingold 2005). These boys are exploited and then killed when they are no longer useful.

Based on accounts we have from those living in ISIS territory, it is easy to interpret men as unrestricted. That freedom, however, comes with a price as the men are primarily participants in fighting on the frontlines or committing suicide attacks. Most recruits who lack previous military or insurgency experience do not appear to advance up the ranks of ISIS and most are killed within their first year in Syria. Who’s to decide which role is better; life as a sexual object or life where imminent death is almost guaranteed.

Very few individuals, who join ISIS, whether male or female, manage to return home even if they regret leaving. Upon their arrival in the terrorist organization, they are given a few weeks of weapons and ideological training and then they are sent to the frontlines. For those who try to avoid the training and fighting on the frontlines, they are abused and tortured in humiliating ways. Miloud Maalmi, a member of a recruitment cell from Strasbourg, France, traveled to Syria with his fellow recruits with the hopes of contributing in ways that don’t involve fighting. It was not an unreasonable assumption as there are many Westerners who are
used by ISIS to produce propaganda in different languages in order to broaden the audience of recruitment material. However, after making the excuse that he was too sick for training, Maalmi was imprisoned for two days during which he was forced to eat excrement, was urinated on, and was masturbated on ("Procès De La Filière Djihadiste" 2016). These are acts of torture where the prisoner is forced to undergo humiliating and dehumanizing treatment designed to make them more subordinate and malleable to their captive. While we do not have many stories like this from ISIS, it would be generous to assume that this was a one-time offense of the terrorist organization. It is more realistic that torture of this nature happens more regularly than we know but since men in ISIS are more likely to die in Syria than return to the West, we remain unaware of how often this occurs. Men in ISIS are forced to fight. While many go to Syria specifically to fight, for anyone who, like Maalmi, refuses to take on that role, they face extreme humiliation or other forms of punishment. Like the boys of Cambodia and Burma, they are exploited for their labor and it doesn’t matter if they are killed since they are expendable. The only difference is that ISIS’ industry is war, not deep-sea fishing.

Both men and women are lured by the false expectations of life under ISIS and both men and women are exploited by the organization, but the exploitation of women is easier to argue since they do not typically participate in violent action in the way that men do on the frontline. However, this does not mean that female members of ISIS should be excluded from research about terrorism. Recognizing that men and women have been used by terrorist organizations acknowledges the harm done to both sexes while preserving the ability of women to be able to make decisions even if those decisions result in their own entrapment. They are just as much a part of the Islamic State and there are women who believe just as much in the ideology as the men.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS:

Women play an important role in global jihad but because researchers don’t have access to the necessary information concerning these women, it is difficult to be able to make any definite conclusions. In order to create successful preventive or counter-radicalization policies, it is necessary to collect more information about the women who have already participated. This information includes their demographics, rate or radicalization, actions, and other necessary information in order to catalogue and study female participation.

In order to better understand the way in which women are recruited and radicalized, it is necessary to build a trajectory specifically for them. However, at this point, it is not possible to undertake that endeavor. It is first necessary to collect more information about women who pose a domestic threat, especially timeline specific data points. One way to accomplish this is by increasing media and general public awareness about the role which women play in jihad. Generating public interest in female jihadists should result in a similar growth in specific information which will better our understanding of them.

Creating a trajectory for women is extremely important to CVE. This data would indicate the average rate of radicalization, an important piece of information for law enforcement, military, or other groups with an interest in CVE or creating a process for the de-radicalization of individuals who have progressed extremely far in their ideology. This particular strategy can prove to be effective when there are specific behaviors which all or most of the subjects do which are easily observed.
The reality of ISIS is that even though jihadi women may have been victims of human trafficking or other abuses, the West and other regions of the world do not have the luxury of treating them as victims. These women pose a security risk both in the insurgency zone and out of it as all radicalized individuals are, even if their trends are not yet codified or complete yet. It is difficult to discern those women who truly regret joining ISIS and those who pretend such, since they both have embraced the terrorist ideology at one point or another. Thus, all women who join ISIS contribute to the international community’s dilemma about managing terrorism and they must be approached and tracked in the same way that men who perform their same actions are. While most women who support ISIS may not perpetrate the violence themselves, it does not mean that those women play no part in violence. In the end, whether women act as recruiters for foreign fighting or for violent domestic plots or that they plan an act of terrorism themselves, women pose a security threat both in the insurgent zone in Syria and outside it.
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