

# Women in Daesh: Jihadist ‘cheerleaders’, active operatives?

by Florence Gaub and Julia Lisiecka

Until recently, the women in Daesh were viewed mainly as misguided teenagers overly active on social media, or volunteers destined to produce fighters for the caliphate and play the role of housewife. But the foiled attacks in Paris and Nice in September this year, which were set to be executed by women, drove home the fact that the female component of the organisation is every bit as dangerous as its male contingent.

Women in Daesh have been underestimated for several reasons: they constitute only up to 20% of the Western foreign fighters (estimates range between 550 and 2,500 in total), are somewhat younger than their male counterparts (22 on average compared to 25), and are portrayed by Daesh propaganda as conforming to highly conservative and consequently passive roles. But the narrative of the submissive Muslim woman – largely echoed by European public opinion – glosses over the fact that *muhajirat* (female migrants), especially Western ones, join the organisation with a radical agenda and the desire to see action.

## Profiles

The women of Daesh can be divided roughly into three main groups: women held against

their will, such as captured Yazidis; Arab and Asian women who play no executive role (so far); and Western women. The latter not only constitute the biggest group in terms of those who have travelled to Daesh-controlled territory, they are also of greatest concern to Europe.

These women differ from male foreign fighters in a number of ways, which make them, in terms of profiling, more difficult to detect for law enforcement agencies: one-third are converts (compared to around one-quarter among men), more than half are married, and they often travel to the territory in inconspicuous all-female groups. In contrast to their male counterparts, they have less of a criminal history and are therefore usually unknown to the police. At first glance at least, they do not conform to any profile which would trigger law enforcement alarms.

In addition, as female lethality rate in Daesh territory is lower than that of the male foreign fighters (7% compared to up to 20%), their proportional share will probably increase over time. European women are also half as likely as their male counterparts to return, partly because they are not as free to move as the men, and partly because they establish solid social

relations in the territory. Those that do return are therefore more likely to have been given permission to leave rather than to have escaped. It also appears that women's radicalisation is noticed less by people in their social surroundings – but they radicalise, just like men, in person or online and at the same speed. Far from the image of the manipulated ingénue, most women are the ones who *initiate* contact with a recruiter.

But the women of Daesh share some basic traits with their male equivalents. First, they have never joined a radical organisation abroad in these numbers before, and second, their motivation for doing so is largely the same: the search for empowerment, meaning, a sense of community, and, albeit to a lesser extent, adventure and action. Like the men, they display the same heterogeneity in terms of religiosity and education, and use the same means of travel to reach the 'caliphate' through Turkey.

## Roles

Daesh propaganda and social media posts (often created by other female recruits) depict a highly traditional role for women; once in Daesh territory, most unmarried women are likely to be quickly married off to a fighter. This is in line with conservative Islamist literature which suggests that the active participation of women in militant jihad goes against principles of modesty and the ban on public mixing of genders. The Daesh magazine *Rumiyah* suggests that while women's opportunities to participate in physical jihad are limited, their fight could, for example, take the form of collecting funds for the organisation.

Consequently, the reality of life under Daesh rule for women is harsh, with numerous limitations imposed on the lives of the new female recruits: they are unable to leave the house without a male chaperone, must conform to strict dress and behavioural codes to avoid corporal punishment, and are forced to witness extreme violence. Daesh territory is a warzone, with daily life seeing airstrikes and disrupted access to basic goods.

Most Western women tend to socialise among themselves and limit their interactions with the local population, and see their husbands only on the rare occasions when they are allowed home from the front.

But besides the importance of women as child-bearers and wives who legitimise the self-proclaimed state, the contribution of *muhajirat* to the group goes far beyond the media image of jihadist 'cheerleaders' who chose or were duped into leaving comfortable lives in search of romantic adventure. Although many of them claim to reject European values and feminism, their Western upbringing seems to make them more eager to seek an active role and bend the gender-related rules imposed by Daesh.

Unlike male European foreign fighters, who are not known to hold high-ranking positions in Daesh's hierarchy, European women have gone as far as possible within the conservative system of the organisation. The all-female al-Khansaa brigade, which serves as a 'moral police force' enforcing social norms on women living in Raqqa, is the principal institution where Western *muhajirat* (under the leadership of British convert Sally-Anne Jones) assume an active role. Recent reports from Daesh media outlets announced the appointment of the first female official spokesperson, reflecting the key roles of women in communication, propaganda and recruitment. While maintaining relatively low profiles, they manage information flows and contacts between local fighters and operatives abroad. Other female tasks include logistics, fundraising, medical care, as well as intelligence gathering and sharing.

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The aspirations of foreign women who join Daesh are clearly expressed in their violent rhetoric and incitement to hatred on social media. For instance, one female activist originally from the West Bank called on women through her Twitter account to join Daesh in Nigeria rather than Syria, as there they are able to participate directly in fighting. Another

girl from the Netherlands wrote of her aspiration to die a martyr, and since she could not



join fighters on the front, hoped to be killed in airstrikes by the anti-Daesh coalition. Many female Daesh supporters regret not being able to carry out executions and join their husbands and brothers in combat, and fondly recall the actions of al-Qaeda and Daesh heroines such as Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who was jailed in the US for an attempted attack on American agents in Pakistan in 2008 or Sajida al-Rishawi, a female Iraqi suicide bomber who was executed in Jordan for killing 57 people in an attack on a hotel in Amman.

Outside of Daesh territory, jihadist women have, so far, played mostly supporting roles, such as in the recent attacks in Paris, San Bernardino or Orlando. But this is changing: in addition to the failed all-women attacks in France and New York, women have attacked targets ranging from a police station in Kenya to a cattle farm in Nigeria. British national Samantha Lewthwaite, the widow of one of the 2005 London bombers, is one of the better-known examples of a jihadist wife turning into a fully functional operative: active in al-Shabab, she is suspected of having played a role in several major terrorist attacks on Kenyan soil.

### Strategic reserve

Although women, to date, have not assumed major operative roles in the attacks orchestrated by Daesh in Europe, this is likely to soon change. In part this has to do with the fact that the male contingent is thinning out and being placed under increased supervision by law enforcement agencies: in other theatres where jihadist elements were active, such as in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chechnya, women took on more important roles once their group was on the defensive. But more importantly, women constitute a strategic reserve for Daesh because they are well placed to switch from the role of facilitators to perpetrators.

Already serving as key linkages in the networks both within and outside of Daesh territory, women have a major advantage over men: the positive security bias. Generally, women are subjected to more relaxed security checks, but they also have the ability to conceal weapons and material with looser clothing and longer

garments. Terrorist laws and counterterrorism measures introduced in recent years in Europe put the profiling focus on men rather than women, a flaw which was first addressed in the report of the Special Rapporteur on Terrorism to the Human Rights Council in 2007, suggesting that security forces tend to ignore women as potential attackers.

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The positive security bias is a major problem for two reasons.

First, violent attacks by women conducted by other radical organisations are known to be more lethal, less likely to fail and garner more media coverage. Second, men are able to take advantage of the more lenient rules by disguising themselves as women: reports of male fighters escaping territory controlled by Daesh in burkas to avoid recognition by the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces underscore the operational value for the organisation.

In addition, many female supporters of the group who never made it to the caliphate’s territory could still seek a way to engage in the activities of the organisation, possibly turning to violence as either ‘lone wolves’ or in small all-female groups which are hard to detect for security apparatuses. In February this year, for instance, a sixteen-year-old German girl who previously attempted to travel to Syria and was told by Daesh operatives in Turkey to return home, stabbed a policeman at a train station in Hanover. In an example of group collaboration, one of the women involved in the thwarted attack in Paris this September has also previously unsuccessfully tried to make the journey to Syria. These examples reflect a broader pattern, with many other unsuccessful *muhajirat* seeking alternative ways of supporting Daesh.

### Legal responses

The legal response to female jihadists across Europe, while highly varied, is not as muscular as towards their male counterparts. To begin with, only nine EU member states have made travelling to conflict zones a criminal offence in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2178, which requires states to criminalise travel for terrorism-related acts, or for the financing, organisation or facilitation of such acts. Most women returning from Syria and Iraq fall into the latter category for the time

being, and have been punished with comparatively soft measures such as the confiscation of their passports or limitations on access to social benefits.

In cases where women are charged, their final sentences vary wildly. While in the UK several (although not all) returnees or would-be *muhajirat* have received three- to fifteen-year jail sentences for endangering their children, providing material support to a terrorist organisation and proselytism, similar cases in the Netherlands and Belgium often resulted in acquittal. The defence tends to argue that the women who travelled to Daesh-held territory were not fully aware of their own acts, vulnerable to manipulation and naïve. For instance, Shukri F. (a young girl who a Dutch court had no doubts journeyed to Syria with her husband and attempted to convince other women to join them by spreading her extreme ideology), was acquitted on all counts since there was no proof that she actively participated in an armed struggle.

The ongoing case of recent returnee convert Laura H. in the Netherlands accurately reflects the debate over the role of females in Daesh: while prosecutors argue that all women who travel to join the organisation, whether they fight or not, serve the organisation's goals, the defendant claims that she was politically inactive and travelled to Syria following in her husband's footsteps to take care of her family.

The judicial incoherence stems also from the ambiguity surrounding the nature of membership in Daesh. While each male foreign fighter has to make a pledge of allegiance to the group and its leader (*bay'ah*), women rarely undergo any *formal rite of passage*, since they are not involved in combat activities.

This misses the point of what Daesh is (or aspires to be) and the role of women within the organisation: rather than 'members', individuals joining Daesh become 'citizens'. Travelling to its territory (*hijra* in Daesh terminology) is stressed repeatedly by the group's leader as an obligatory act, and its magazine *Dabiq* has stated that 'there is no life without jihad, and there is no jihad without hijra'. So central is the migration to Daesh-controlled territory to the organisation's success that foreigners, including Western women, receive preferential treatment when it comes to housing, food and services. Unmarried women arriving from Europe often marry high-ranking fighters, boosting their

status and influence through marriage. The *mere act of travelling* is therefore an act of support for a terrorist organisation.

## Visions and actions

The failure to detect radicalised women is in large part to do with European stereotypes about women as 'violence-adverse' persons, and about Muslim women in particular as 'submissive' individuals. But women have repeatedly played an active role in political violence, be it in the Palestinian territories as suicide bombers or in Germany in the Baader-Meinhof gang. The first step is therefore to recognise that women, including Muslim women, can constitute as great a threat as men.

Second, inconsistencies across European legal systems in dealing with Daesh work to the advantage of its female members, who usually are acquitted. And if women are convicted at all, it is usually for child abuse related to the fact that they took their children to a warzone rather than for supporting a terrorist organisation. Similarly, early warning systems fail more often to deter young women from travelling than they do young men: in several cases, girls that had been stopped the first time around either succeeded at a later stage or simply continued to radicalise at home.

Third, the narratives of counter-radicalisation are male-centric and the field has few female practitioners. The initiatives launched so far are largely designed for young men and are consequently unlikely to have an effect on young women.

Lastly, Muslim women in Europe need to be more involved in the debate on female radicalisation.

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