



# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DAESH TERRORIST ORGANIZATION

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## ABSTRACT

*The scale that the terrorist phenomenon has gained in recent decades, materialized in the form of the establishment of numerous organizations, such as DAESH (also known as ISIS), continues to attract global attention not only by its bloody atrocities and manner of propagating terrorist ideology, but also by the involvement of women in its structures, invested in leadership positions and actively participating in the planning of terrorist actions. DAESH believes that involving women in their fight for an Islamic Caliphate would legitimize their efforts and present a better image among Muslim and international communities, despite the fact that Islamic society has often blatantly violated the rights and freedoms of women. Using well-developed propaganda to exploit women's vulnerabilities in order to persuade them to join the organization ranging from the desire for adventure to deeper motives such as disillusionment with the society they live in, or the search for purpose and identity, DAESH recruits an increasing number of them into the organization. It is therefore necessary to understand the gender needs of women, especially those in areas considered vulnerable, so that entities involved in counter-terrorism can devise appropriate strategies to prevent the global radicalization process.*

**Keywords:** terrorism, DAESH, women, atrocities, radicalization, propaganda.

In recent decades, researchers have increasingly focused on the role of women within terrorist organizations. Studies show that women are increasingly responsible for acts associated with terrorism and have been recruited into terrorist organizations worldwide. In the case of DAESH (also known as ISIS), women have held significant and diverse roles. As wives of fighters, they have been responsible for raising the next generation of fighters, being involved in the education and training of children according to the organization's ideology. Additionally, they have been involved in propaganda and recruitment activities, used to attract other women to the organization. They have also been recruited to directly participate in terrorist operations, from carrying out attacks to kidnappings and other violent activities.

Although the reasons why women join terrorist organizations may vary, research suggests that among the most common ones are the desire for adventure and a sense of purpose in life, the aspiration to join a group that shares the same ideologies and values, or the desire to escape a difficult life situation (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020, Cigainero, 2016). It is important to note that their involvement in terrorist organizations is not limited to DAESH, but is a global phenomenon that targets a variety of terrorist organizations and extremist groups.

The term terrorism has existed since ancient times, being associated with the concept of terror, and has been practiced by both state and non-state actors worldwide. Throughout history, we find multiple examples of different figures who have written about or practiced terror. For instance, the ancient Greek historian Xenophon (431-350 BCE) (Tuplin, 2023) mentioned in his manuscripts the effectiveness of psychological warfare against populations, while the Roman Emperor Tiberius (14-37 CE) (Pohl, 2023) used exile and execution as means of deterring opposition. We can also mention instances of terror during the French Revolution or the Spanish Inquisition, where torture and execution were used for heresy. After the American Civil War (1861-1865), the Ku Klux Klan emerged in America as an extremist racist organization that sought to intimidate the African-American population through torture and assassination, opposing their equal rights with the white race (Equal Justice Initiative-EJI, 2020). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, terror was implemented by anarchists in Western Europe, the United States, and Russia, who believed that assassinating individuals in positions of power was the best way to achieve political and social change (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime-UNODC, 2018, Chaliand & Blin, 2016). Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use and practice of terror has begun to

transform, becoming a weapon for a variety of political movements, from far-right to far-left. Terrorism could be considered an official policy in states like the Soviet Union under Stalin or Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, where arrests, torture, imprisonment, and execution were used to create a climate of fear for those who did not support the respective national ideology (Chaliand & Blin, 2016).

Jihadist terrorism, rooted in the concept of jihad (holy war), is considered the most threatening form of terrorism to Western values and interests (Bakker, 2006). The jihadism has led to acts such as ransom, hijacking of airplanes, assassinations, suicide bombings, and death threats against political figures, journalists, and entrepreneurs.

As a result of modern society and globalization, jihadist terrorist organizations/groups have undergone transformations in their structure and operational scope, extending their reach beyond national borders. Technological advancements and the ability to travel from one country to another have allowed terrorists to carry out their activities in different parts of the world (Bakker, 2006). Additionally, the online environment has played a significant role in propagating extremist and radical ideas and ideologies. Thus, this "new" type of terrorism is characterized by a higher number of casualties, the use of sophisticated weapons, and excessive brutality, such as attacks against civilian populations and the use of suicide attackers.

Furthermore, in the past decade, the world has witnessed a steady increase in the number of women who have not only joined terrorist organizations/groups but also provided logistical and financial support. This trend raises critical questions about the factors and motivations underlying women's involvement in terrorism, as well as the challenges and opportunities for combating and countering this phenomenon (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020). Similar to male individuals, women go through a process of radicalization in which they change their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in an extreme or radical direction, often in opposition to social values and norms. In a religious context, radicalization can be defined as the adoption of a set of extreme or intolerant beliefs and practices, and can be influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, manipulation, social isolation, access to false or alarming information, or the influence of extremist groups (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020).

The process of radicalization can be described as the evolution of an individual's thinking and beliefs towards an extremist perspective, which may involve support for a group or a violent ideology. It can also be influenced by factors such as the level of anxiety or

social frustration and access to extremist information and interaction with extremist groups or individuals. The process can be dangerous, especially when encountered by young or vulnerable individuals who can be convinced by extremist propaganda and prompted to commit violent acts. Therefore, it is important to understand the causes and mechanisms of the radicalization process in order to develop effective strategies for its prevention.

Extreme ideologies attract followers through simplistic and appealing discourse that offers quick solutions to complex problems. They also provide a sense of belonging and purpose, offering individuals a way to understand themselves and the surrounding world. Extreme ideologies also provide a sense of understanding of individual or collective suffering and a way to act to heal this suffering. They can also be attractive to those who feel marginalized or excluded from society.

It is important to note that while these factors may contribute to the radicalization process, there is no standard profile or single cause that explains this phenomenon. Each case of radicalization is unique and can be influenced by multiple personal, social, historical, and cultural factors (Aly, 2015).

Radicalization has also had a profound impact on individuals from European countries who have adopted extremist ideologies (known as foreign fighters). They have chosen to travel to states like Syria and fight for DAESH. These individuals have abandoned their previous lives and chosen to join a terrorist organization with values and beliefs different from the society they come from. Their participation in armed conflicts and acts of terrorism has had a devastating impact on the lives of many people and communities in Syria and other countries. It has also had negative consequences for the personal lives of radicalized foreign fighters, who now face security, justice, and social integration issues (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020).

DAESH was established in 2013 in Iraq and quickly expanded into Syria and other areas of the Middle East. The organization attempted to impose its own Islamic state and create a Caliphate. To consolidate its power, ISIS resorted to brutal tactics, including the execution of those who did not share their vision of Islam and the use of extreme violence in the fight against other armed groups (Islamic State, 2023).

DAESH managed to attract a significant number of fighters from around the world, including Western countries (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020), and became one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations globally. However, the Iraqi army, Kurdish forces, and an international coalition led by the United States launched a series of offensives against DAESH, ultimately leading

to its territorial defeat in 2019. Recruitment has been one of the key strategies of DAESH. The organization has used sophisticated propaganda methods and utilized social networks to attract young people from around the world to join their fight.

The terrorist organization DAESH has drawn global attention not only through its bloody atrocities and propagated terrorism, but also through the involvement of women in its structures. Surprisingly to many, DAESH has recruited and engaged women in various roles, including leadership and planning of terrorist actions. This movement contradicted conventional stereotypes that considered women limited in their societal roles and incapable of acting independently. Regarding women who have joined DAESH, there are various reasons for their actions, ranging from the desire for adventure to deeper motives such as disillusionment with the society they live in or the search for purpose and identity (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020, Veldhuis & Staun, 2009).

Within DAESH, women have long been considered an essential element in their struggle for the creation of a global Islamic state. They have been involved in various activities within the organization, from recruiting new members to participating in military operations and even holding leadership positions.

Women were recruited into the DAESH organization through different methods, some similar to those used for recruiting men, and others specific to women. In many cases, they were recruited through social networks and acquaintances (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020). They were often contacted by other women who were already part of the organization and promised a better future within the Caliphate. Recruitment through the internet was also an effective method for DAESH, which used social networks such as Twitter and Facebook to attract female individuals from around the world (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020, Veldhuis & Staun, 2009).

Another method of recruitment was through forced marriages. They were often abducted and forced to marry DAESH fighters or members of the organization's leadership, being compelled to conform to the rules and laws imposed by the organization.

Additionally, DAESH recruited women through religious and educational institutions. They were often attracted by the promise of an authentic Islamic lifestyle and opportunities to participate in educational and religious programs.

Women play an important role in the DAESH organization for several reasons. Firstly, ISIS considers their involvement essential to maintain and expand control over the conquered territories. They are seen as capable of providing logistical support and fulfilling essential

roles as mothers and wives of organization members. Secondly, DAESH views women as an important means of propaganda and recruitment. The organization's propaganda presents them as vital to building an ideal Islamic Caliphate and promotes their image as heroines and fighters in the service of Islam (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020). Furthermore, DAESH uses female individuals to transport weapons and provisions through conflict zones without being suspected or checked by security forces. DAESH believes that involving women in their fight for an Islamic Caliphate would legitimize their efforts and present a better image among Muslim and international communities. By involving women in the organization, they attempt to build a positive perception of their cause and attract sympathy and support.

Imagine equality and justice within Islamic society, despite the fact that it has often blatantly violated the rights and freedoms of women. Traditionally, men have been considered the ones to join such organizations, but this terrorist entity has made special efforts to attract women to its ranks. This has raised questions and prompted researchers to try to understand why women join such a violent and discriminatory terrorist organization against them. Personal trauma is a factor that could lead to their affiliation with DAESH. Some women may be victims of physical or sexual abuse or may witness violence and conflicts in their communities. The extremist group's message of providing a sense of safety and security can be appealing to those who have experienced trauma in their lives (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020).

Feelings of isolation and marginalization can also contribute to their joining DAESH. In some cases, they may feel disconnected from their communities or face discrimination based on their religion or ethnicity. The extremist group's message of a utopian society and a sense of belonging can be attractive to women who feel marginalized in their societies. Lack of education or employment opportunities can also contribute to women joining DAESH. In some communities, they may not have access to quality education or job opportunities, which can limit their prospects for the future. The extremist group's promise of providing opportunities for women to contribute to their society and obtain an education can be appealing to those who feel they have limited options. Some of them have joined the organization to be with a husband or partner who was already a member. DAESH encouraged women to marry its fighters and presented marriage as a religious duty (Khaleeli, 2014). Some women may have felt pressure or coercion from their partners or family members to join the organization or may have been convinced by the promises of a better life in the Caliphate.

Thus, personal relationships can also be a factor contributing to women's decision to join DAESH. Some women may be influenced by friends or family members who have already joined the extremist group. These individuals can have persuasive influence and may use emotional relationships or promises of adventure to convince them to join. This type of recruitment is particularly effective when the individual is experiencing feelings of isolation or loneliness, as they may seek social connection and a sense of belonging (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020).

However, it is important to note that the relationships formed within DAESH are often extremely restrictive and oppressive and can be characterized by abuse, forced marriage, and a lack of freedom and autonomy. Women who join the group through personal relationships may find themselves trapped in situations that do not allow them to leave the organization and give up their affiliation, and as a result, they may suffer significant emotional and physical harm.

For some women, joining DAESH may seem like an exciting adventure or an opportunity to start a new life. Membership in the organization can be seen as a way to escape a boring or unfulfilled life and seek adventure. Propaganda has described life in the Caliphate as interesting and meaningful, with opportunities for travel, fighting, and serving an important cause. Some women have been attracted to the idea of being part of a revolutionary movement, taking risks, and experiencing new things (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020).

Poverty, unemployment, and lack of education can make some women vulnerable to recruitment by extremist entities. They offered women economic support and a way to improve their social status through marriage to fighters and having children. This was a means to escape material hardships and gain a sense of security and stability. Additionally, the group's message of social justice and opposition to corruption may have resonated with those who felt marginalized or excluded from the societies they came from. Women who joined ISIS came from a variety of backgrounds and different countries. There is no typical profile of those who joined the group, as their motives and circumstances leading to this decision were highly diverse.

Some security experts argue that women who joined DAESH often came from disadvantaged backgrounds with socio-economic problems and felt that they were not given equal opportunities and rights in their societies. Among them were those who experienced domestic violence or other forms of abuse, seeking to escape the difficult situations they faced. It has also been observed that many of them were young and were drawn

to the group's propaganda through social media networks and other online communication channels. This allowed them to reach a much larger audience than would have been possible through traditional recruitment methods.

It is important to note that the majority of women did not have advanced knowledge of Islam, but exposure to extremist propaganda manipulation led them to make this decision. Many of the women who joined the organization are from Europe. There have been numerous reports of women from countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Belgium traveling to Syria and Iraq to join the extremist group (Antúnez-Moreno, 2020). According to estimates, around 1,000 women from Europe traveled to Syria and Iraq to join DAESH since the group's expansion in 2014 (Cook & Vale, 2018).

Despite the diversity of their motivations, women have faced many of the same challenges and dangers as their male counterparts. They have often endured harsh living conditions, brutal treatment, and constant threat of violence. Many have also been subjected to strict rules and limitations on their behavior and freedom.

Below are the stories of some women who joined DAESH, highlighting their individual experiences within the organization and their lives after leaving it.

Hayat Boumeddiene, a French citizen, made headlines in 2015 when she was involved in the terrorist attacks in Paris. She was the partner of Amedy Coulibaly (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.), one of the attackers who killed four people in a Jewish supermarket. Boumeddiene was not present during the attacks, but had left France a few days earlier and was believed to have joined DAESH in Syria. Some reports suggested that she was killed in Syria, while others that she may still be alive (Thomas, 2015).

Laura Passoni, of Belgian origin, joined DAESH in Syria in 2014. She was one of the many young women who were radicalized and lured to join the group, attracted by the propaganda and promises of adventure. However, Passoni's story took a different turn when she

realized the true nature of the group and decided to leave. She contacted a friend in Belgium who helped her leave Syria and return to Europe, but she was arrested upon her return and charged with supporting a terrorist group (Cigainero, 2016).

Shamina Begum is a British woman who left the UK at the age of 15 to join the terrorist organization in Syria (Al Jazeera, 2023). Her story garnered a lot of attention and controversy in the media, as well as important questions about the responsibilities of individuals who join extremist groups and the challenges of addressing the threat of terrorism and radicalization. During her time with the group, Begum lived in Raqqa, the de facto capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. She spoke about her experiences, including witnessing public executions and her marriage to an ISIS fighter. She also expressed support for the group's violent ideology, unaffected by the beheading of Western hostages. However, in 2019, Begum was found in a Syrian refugee camp and expressed her desire to return to the UK. She was stripped of her British citizenship by the UK government, which argued that she posed a threat to national security. She subsequently launched legal appeals to regain her citizenship, arguing that she was a victim (Rajvanschi, 2023).

## Conclusion

The stories of women who joined DAESH serve as a reminder of the profound impact that extremist ideology and violence can have on individuals and communities. Thus, the reasons they had are diverse and often rooted in personal circumstances, such as a desire for adventure, a search for meaning, or a desire to escape difficult living conditions. However, we have seen how the organization uses a range of tactics, from propaganda and manipulation to coercion and force, to attract vulnerable individuals into their ranks.

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