THE WOMEN OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

by
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Abstract

Current counterterrorism approaches primarily target male militants with little regard for women in terrorism. However, today women are major contributors to the growth of extremist groups, most notably the Islamic State. The women of ISIS took on more leadership roles and influential positions than any other Islamic extremist group. Besides taking on the typical roles expected, such as wives and bearing children, they also took control of most of the group’s recruitment strategies.

This study focuses on the active role women play as recruiters in growing and strengthening the influence and spread of extremist ideologies. It aims to explore the active role of women within extremist organizations, focusing on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and provides recommendations on how the United States can counter this growing trend. The study explores why a growing number of women willingly joined ISIS and took part in the planning and organization of the group.

Since there is no clear data on the exact number of women who act as recruiters or how many people they were able to recruit in comparison to their male counterparts, this study will compare ISIS’ recruitment and the role women played within the organization to those of two other known terrorist groups, Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab. It has become clear that ISIS’ use of women in active roles greatly impacted its ability to grow so quickly. Being one of the first Islamic extremist organizations to use women in active roles, that is not as suicide bombers; ISIS recruited thousands of individuals from all around the world in a short period.
The United States, along with its allies in the region, has made significant progress towards defeating the physical territories of extremist groups, primarily that of the Islamic State. The loss of territory due to military operations has significantly weakened the group. However, ISIS posed a significant and growing cyber threat. Their ability to effectively utilize social media for recruitment indicates that their cyber threat remains, despite the reduction in their physical threat.

**Keywords:** Islamic State, Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Women, Recruiters, Social Media

**Thesis Advisor:** Professor Sarah Clark

**Thesis Reviewers:** Dr. Joana Cook and Cynthia Storer
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Research Question

Does the active involvement of women as recruiters in extremist Islamic groups have a significant impact on the group’s success? This study focuses on the Islamic State’s caliphate in Iraq and Syria and investigates whether women as recruiters contributed to the group’s ability to grow and recruit from a global audience.

In this research, success will be measured by the number of individuals who have been recruited since the time the group was founded. Because there is no solid data on the number of women who served as recruiters, nor is there data on the number of individuals women were able to recruit as opposed to men, the impact of women as recruiters will be measured through a comparative analysis of groups with similar goals and ideologies, but who have not used women in similar roles. This comparison will allow the research to identify if the active role of women as recruiters contributed to the growth and strength of the Islamic State.

ISIS’ women’s use of social media for recruitment contributed to its ability to grow at an exponential rate and create a worldwide audience that attracted the attention of individuals who may have been vulnerable to recruitment. Understanding the role women play in recruitment for ISIS, and the tactics, practices, and approaches used that helped the organization grow faster and stronger than other similar groups should enable counter-recruitment efforts. This understanding should provide policymakers the tools and bases on which to create the changes needed to reduce the likelihood and eliminate some of the motivators that lead an individual towards radicalism.
Introduction
The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has frequently been described as one of the most unique extremist organizations. The self-proclaimed state has its own army, economy, currency, health, school system, and many more factors that contribute to what is typically seen as a functioning state. This pseudo-state, internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, has been able to recruit individuals from a wide range of cultures, nationalities, and religions. It was able to reach and recruit a wider global audience than any other Islamist extremist organization, making it one of the most dangerous terror groups in the world\(^1\).

Women’s active involvement has long been a debate among extremist groups. Unlike most extremist Islamist groups, ISIS has regularly advocated for the direct engagement of women, including in combat positions. Most other similar groups, such as Al Qaeda or Al Shabaab, have only allowed women to take on supporting roles, primarily to act as wives and child-bearers. For most extremist groups, when women are actively involved, they are only deployed in combative positions as suicide bombers.

Many people, particularly in Western countries, do not see women as having the same threat as men when it comes to terrorism. It is often assumed that women are far less likely to act in such brutal, violent, and indiscriminate killings. Adding to this, many organizations only allow women to take on minor roles in terrorism, which increases the misconception that women are not capable or willing to act in a similar way to men. However, women are becoming increasingly involved in terrorist organizations and taking on leadership positions, playing a vital role in the long-term survival and growth of these groups. ISIS today may have lost most of its

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territory, but the organization is likely to regroup and regain strength in the region if something is not done to counter recruitment.

The Islamic State uniquely capitalized on the increasing role of women to grow and expand their networks across the globe. This research is intended to focus on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the role women have played within the group. Although terrorism itself can never be completely stopped, much can be done to reduce its prevalence. By reducing the number of people joining extremist groups, or who seek recruitment by such groups, we reduce terrorism and the likelihood and frequency of terrorist attacks. It is crucial for the United States, in its Global War on Terror, to bolster its counter-recruitment efforts to secure the homeland and ensure the safety of Americans domestically and abroad.
Literature Review
The continuing evolution of terrorism has left gaps in the literature. The literature on the role of women in ISIS as recruiters is scarce but slowly growing. Available literature provides some insight into the roles women play within the Islamic State and can be divided into several categories: why women become foreign fighters, why extremist groups recruit women, and the role of social media in terrorism.

As women become more involved in the recruitment process for extremist organizations, the group’s ability to recruit from a wider global audience increases, ultimately increasing the spread and influence of extremist ideologies. The following sources provide an outline for the available relevant literature for my research on the role of women as recruiters within the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and provide insight into the type and scope of literature available on the role women play in terrorism. These sources were chosen because they most closely relate to the intended research, while also proving that there is a gap in the literature.

This review will provide a baseline for the primary type of communication method being used by modern terrorist organizations, the role women play within ISIS, as well as what drives women to join, which will help identify the gaps in research are and what type of information is needed to fill those gaps.

Why Women Become Foreign Fighters

Literature on women’s involvement in terrorism typically focuses on the reasons women join groups and the general roles they play within them. Researchers such as Mia Bloom believe that women join extremist groups because they are seeking vengeance, particularly for their families,
who they believe have been mistreated by governments or particular segments of the population. She also believes that another primary reason women choose to get involved in terrorism is that they are accompanying a family member who has chosen to join. Bloom argues that women primarily choose to join because they are going with or for a family member. Bloom’s argument does not identify the political or ideological motivations women may have for joining extremist groups, nor does it clarify why they would take on active roles within those groups. This paper will focus on women who have chosen to join extremist organizations and the active roles they have taken on to advance its growth.

Researcher Laura Sjoberg focuses much of her research on trying to identify the reason a person would be motivated to join an extremist group, regardless of gender, as she believes that looking at motivations through a gender-lens may result in the automatic attribution of certain behaviors to a particular gender. While Sjoberg discusses the motivating factors women have for joining extremist groups, she leaves open the question of why women would choose to join ISIS specifically. As a result, this leaves a gap in the role women are playing in ISIS. The majority of literature focuses on the motivations men have for joining extremist groups and why they would choose to become foreign fighters. This paper aims to close that gap by identifying the motivations that may lead women to independently join a group like ISIS and why they would choose to become recruiters.

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3 Ibid.
Similarly, while researchers generally agree that addressing the motivations should not be gender-focused, they also believe that the role of gender is an important factor in radicalization. Many researchers choose to look at the differences between male and female radicalization and have found that it does play a role in recruitment, and can, therefore, impact the mechanisms and factors that go into recruitment\textsuperscript{5}. Pearson and Winterbotham find that both men and women follow similar patterns when being recruited, however, the language used to recruit each one can be different (e.g. the narrative for women is more peaceful while the narrative for men is more violent)\textsuperscript{6}. Additionally, they analyze the differences in recruitment techniques of men and women.

While Pearson and Winterbotham do not look at who is doing the recruiting, this paper builds on the reasoning and methods used by women for targeted recruitment, and how that can impact whether or not those recruited are being recruited for reasons other than those listed in available literature.

\textit{Why Extremist Groups Recruit Women}

Erin Marie Saltman focuses much of her research on the “push” and “pull” factors that lead women to join ISIS\textsuperscript{7}. The “push” factors are the motivators in which women want to leave their homes to become foreign fighters, which may result from feeling discontent with their current status in their communities. This can also be a result of feeling anger towards a particular


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Saltman, Erin Marie and Melanie Smith. ‘\textit{Til Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon}. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015.
government or the lack of response to issues that most concern them. The “pull” factors, on the other hand, can include things like unrealistic expectations of life in the Caliphate or becoming convinced of extreme religious duties. Saltman’s research provides a brief overview of the likely motivators women have for joining the Islamic State specifically. However, her research still leaves the gap of the roles women took once they joined and what factors may lead them to take on those roles. Researcher Anita Peresin similarly discusses the motivations women have, which can include similar push and pull factors, such as dissatisfaction with their current lives or seeking to fulfill certain beliefs. Both Peresin and Saltman agree that there are several reasons women may choose to join, and often it is a combination of those factors that lead to women becoming foreign fighters. While this literature addresses the reasons why women may choose to join ISIS, it does not tell us why ISIS wanted to recruit women or why they would choose to allow them into their ranks. This study will attempt to close that gap by identifying the reasons why ISIS may have chosen to dedicate resources towards recruitment and how they went about identifying and advertising the pull factors that would help achieve that goal.

Researchers address the rise of women’s involvement in terrorism differently. Some believe that involvement in terrorism is not dependent on the person’s gender, but rather their social, economic, or educational status. Anne Speckhard’s research agrees with Bloom’s, as she believes that many women join these groups as a result of some form of trauma. She adds that women’s engagement in terrorism is often linked to violent sexual assault or forced into sex slavery. The belief remains among some researchers that many women who join terrorist

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8 Ibid.
organizations do so because they, or their family, have been treated unfairly, killed, raped, etc.\textsuperscript{11}. Similar researchers contend that women choose to join seeking vengeance; however, they argue that it is to continue the missions of the men who failed their own\textsuperscript{12}.

Katharina Von Knop’s research broadens the scope to look at other extremist groups, including Al Qaeda, to identify the reasons why extremist groups would want to recruit women. Von Knop believes that terrorist groups often have different reasons for recruiting women than the reason women join\textsuperscript{13}. She believes that while some women join extremist groups because it aligns with their extreme ideologies, those groups may target women for recruitment for less sincere reasons, such as exploitation in propaganda or to serve as motivators for men to join, which aligns with Lauren Shapiro’s research. Existing literature indicates that the reasons women join often differ from that of men and can also differ from the group’s reason for recruiting them\textsuperscript{14}. What this literature lacks, however, is a means of countering these trends and what governments can do to slow or stop the flow of women joining these groups.

To address why organization leadership may recruit women, Bloom believes this comes in phases, during which particular types of people are sought out over others, such as targeting college-aged individuals during more volatile periods, or doctors and surgeons during times of recovery. Each of these phase shifts means a change in recruitment methods including types of


propaganda and how it is distributed\textsuperscript{15}. This research will allow this study to look at how recruitment tactics change and changed throughout ISIS’ lifecycle and how those might change who is taking on those roles. It may help this study analyze whether or not women play a more significant role in the recruitment of specific types of individuals. It will also allow this study to compare that with her research on other terrorist groups that will be used in case studies in my research, such as Al Qaeda.

Existing literature tends to focus more on the women who join the group rather than their roles once they have joined. Researchers primarily focus on women’s roles in terrorism as suicide bombers. Amanda Spencer has helped close this gap by analyzing counterterrorism approaches for degrading and defeating ISIS. However, this article particularly emphasizes the need to analyze and target female operatives, who are believed to hold influential positions within the organization. Spencer found that women’s responsibilities within the group are more than the role of being a wife, but mainly serving crucial roles as recruiters\textsuperscript{16}. She looks at explanations for why women prefer some of these roles, particularly if they are foreigners. This literature provides a background for the demographics and roles of females within ISIS. It also provides insight into the other roles women are taking on and what may be driving factors for preferring some of those roles, such as students or combatants, versus others.

As women’s involvement and feminist movements increase, the literature around the motivations women have for joining increases. The majority of the literature agrees that there is no universal

reason why women become foreign fighters or why groups may or may not choose to recruit them. It is essential to understand what motivates women and to understand how they are becoming radicalized.

**Social Media and Terrorism**

Social media plays a critical role in modern terrorism and the literature around this subject is quickly growing. Authors Scott Gates and Sukayna Podder analyze the process of recruitment of foreign fighters and how that shapes the character of the group. They believe that the diverse group of recruits should be examined to see the challenges the group faces in organization, compliance, and allegiance to the group\(^\text{17}\). The authors are looking at recruitment patterns and motivations for joining ISIS.

Despite the growing body of literature on the role of social media in terrorism, there remains a significant gap in the literature discussing the specific way in which women have been able to use social media to recruit and be recruited. How women are using social media, particularly within extremist groups, is largely understudied.

Researchers have analyzed the use of social media, primarily Twitter, as a means of collecting data on the narratives being used by extremist groups and their followers. Researchers such as Laura Huey have conducted primary research on the type of language being used to understand

what type of information is being disseminated and to identify key messages that can be used to create counter-narratives\(^{18}\).

Several research centers have also conducted research to address the growing trends of social media and terrorism. The Wilson Center has conducted significant research on social media use amongst terror organization. The consensus throughout the literature shows that social media is particularly useful in terrorism for several reasons. First, social media is free and reliable, meaning that people from all over the world can easily and quickly access it. Second, information can be quickly spread to a large number of people. Third, social media provides an interactive platform where people can share content and discuss a wide range of topics. Finally, the social media platforms that are primarily being used (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) are highly popular amongst the target audience\(^{19}\). In addition, the U.S Department of Homeland Security’s database of captured or returned foreign fighters, from various extremist organizations, shows that a significant number of individuals who were radicalized and became foreign fighters were radicalized online through social media\(^{20}\). This literature helps close the gap in identifying what mediums extremist groups are using for recruitment.

Because there is little information on the scope and impact women’s roles have had on extremist groups and the existing literature frequently passes over the operational roles they play, more needs to be researched as to how this trend in recruitment can be countered. Further research


needs to be done to understand and address the reason women joined ISIS and to understand how and why they took on the roles they did. Much of the literature aims to identify the potential threat women, particularly women who become foreign fighters, can pose to security stability. This paper will attempt to address these gaps in the literature. There is a clear gap in the research. Women are playing a key role within this organization, yet it is rarely discussed. More research needs to be done to study extremist organizations that have uniquely encouraged women’s involvement and what can be done to counter those trends.

**Background**
The Islamic State has been labeled a terrorist organization by most countries. However, calling ISIS a terrorist group alone would be mislabeling it. ISIS has a sophisticated and well-equipped military, hierarchical leadership structure, currency, and controls territory. The proper label would be pseudo-state. As such, counterterrorism efforts that would typically be used for a terrorist organization will not work on a group like ISIS. Although most of the group’s territorial gains have been diminished, ISIS still holds small pieces of territory and is likely to try to regain what they have lost.

After the 2003 U.S invasion in Iraq, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was one of the extremist groups fighting U.S forces. AQI’s leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged his allegiance to Osama Bin Laden. After Zarqawi’s death from a U.S airstrike in 2006, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took control over the group. As the civil war in Syria grew, Baghdadi decided to pull away from AQI methods and decided to rename the group the Islamic State. At the same time, the pro-Shiite

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agenda being pushed in Iraq led to Sunni Muslims feeling alienated and angry with their government\textsuperscript{22}.

Baghdadi soon announced the decision to create a Caliphate and the group quickly began establishing its own territory. In early 2014, ISIS took control of Fallujah and Ramadi, a conquest that came suddenly and as a surprise. Soon after, they began taking control over larger Iraqi cities, including Mosul and Tikrit\textsuperscript{23}. By this time, ISIS had made a name for itself and as people from all over the world traveled to become part of the Caliphate.

At ISIS’ peak in late 2014 and into 2015, it is believed to have control over 100,000 km\textsuperscript{2} of land, with over 11 million residents therein\textsuperscript{24}. It is also estimated that among those, over 40,000 individuals from around 80 countries traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the group\textsuperscript{25}. Despite the caliphate’s recent “fall”, it remains unclear the direction the group will go from here. It is crucial for governments to identify the long-term drivers that motivate individuals to radicalize and become foreign fighters in order for countries to reduce the number of individuals who are joining extremist groups.

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\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Hypothesis and Methodology

The hypothesis behind this study is that women’s active roles in violent Islamic extremist groups have a significant impact on the group’s success by allowing them to grow stronger and faster. There are likely several factors that lead to the successes resulting from women’s involvement in terrorist activities. A likely reason for this is would be that women in ISIS have been afforded the opportunity to take on these roles, an opportunity not available to them in other Islamist extremist groups. This may also be because women have used social media to their advantage, identifying what drives other women to join and targeting their recruitment campaigns to appeal to audiences of all ages. By studying the role women play and the tactics they use for recruitment within the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, we can gain a better understanding of the factors that drive people to join, and use this information to counter recruitment by extremist organizations.

This research will first identify what recruitment methods are being used by violent Islamic extremist groups as well as the role women are playing, more generally, in terrorism, followed by the role women are playing directly in recruitment and the means in which they are able to do so. The precise roles women play in extremist groups is relatively unknown and data identifying the number of women who have joined these groups varies according to different sources. To address these deficits, and to identify the impact women have had on extremist groups, this study will compare the roles women have taken according to publicly available social media accounts and women who have returned or defected from the Islamic State and other violent Islamic extremist groups.

The study will then take a look into two of the most notorious violent Islamic extremist groups, Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab, and compare their methods to those of the Islamic State. These groups
were chosen for several reasons. All three groups are among the deadliest terrorist groups in the world\(^2\), have Sunni ideologies, and have recruited from an international audience. Despite similar objectives and similar governance systems, Al Shabaab has not utilized women in the same manner as ISIS.

Through an analysis of publicly available sources, including publications and case studies, this research aims at identifying the trends that drive recruitment, particularly amongst women. It is important to understand the type of messages being put out, and identify the means of countering those trends.

**Extremist Recruitment Tactics**

Terrorist recruitment is based on the balance of the goals and objectives of the group, along with the resources the group has available. The goals and objectives rely on the group’s ideology, as well as its vulnerabilities. Recruitment tactics are designed to emphasize the goals by ensuring that the message and motivating factors resonate with the largest possible audience. Islamic extremist groups rely on recruiters reaching individuals who have a rudimentary knowledge of the religion, allowing them to spread their extremist ideology because of the recipient’s lack of knowledge on the religion, making them extremely vulnerable to extremist ideologies.

Women and men are exposed to the same propaganda, and the trajectory taken towards radicalization differs for each. However, it is the common, underlying reasons for radicalization that extremist group recruiters focus on. These factors can include ideological, social, economic, 

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or psychological factors, or a combination thereof, which contribute to an individual’s susceptibility to radicalization. Recruiters not only aim to radicalize individuals, but to transform radicalization into extremism or terrorism.

Women’s Role in Terrorism
A common misconception among the public is that women play minor or basic roles in terrorist activities, which most likely stems from the misconceptions about the status of women within them. However, terrorism conducted by women is on the rise and is expected to increase as women’s empowerment movements continue to grow. As the feminist movement becomes more globalized, women become more motivated to engage in political activities, some also become motivated to engage in violence, similar to their male counterparts. As a result, extremist organizations are becoming more open to recruiting women and even allowing them to grow in their ranks.

Most extremist groups, including ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Al Shabaab, treat women as second-class citizens and have used sexual violence as a means of forced compliance. Traditionally, women’s roles within extremist Islamic organizations have been limited to supporting roles, primarily caring for their families. Social media has provided women with platforms they did not previously have, and with the freedom social media offers, women are better able to engage with potential recruits, distribute propaganda, and create their own narrative. It has also

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29 Ibid.
provided a look into the lives of women within these groups, such as their daily activities and the roles they play within the organization.

**The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**
The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is more than a terrorist organization. It is a city, a military, a home, and a brand. Estimates of the number of fighters in Syria and Iraq during ISIS’s peak in 2014 greatly vary. A study conducted by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London estimates that over 40,000 individuals, 10 percent of whom are women, were affiliated with ISIS in 2014. However, foreign intelligence agencies and human rights organizations, such as the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, believe that the actual number is more than double that, at around 100,000 fighters. To add to this, it is also believed that during that peak period in 2014, ISIS was able to recruit around 6000 new members in a single month, an unprecedented number of fighters.

ISIS is not the first or only Islamist extremist group to actively use women in active roles within the organization, but it is the first one to use women in both the creation and distribution of propaganda for recruitment purposes. Their active use of women and allowing women to take on more roles, however, does not negate the sexist, misogynistic, and often extreme abuse the women continue to face. Its treatment of women has made it one of the world’s worst perpetrators of gender-based violence because of the cruel and inhumane abuse it puts both

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33 Ibid.
Muslim and non-Muslim women\textsuperscript{35}. Despite all this, thousands of women chose to join the group and even rise in its ranks. Much of this is likely thanks to the group’s incredible recruitment tactics and ability to romanticize life in the Caliphate. ISIS has recruited and manipulated more men, women, and children than any other Islamic extremist group\textsuperscript{36}. There is very little evidence that would suggest ISIS is empowering its women but instead uses them as a means towards an end.

**The Women of ISIS**

The women who join ISIS have self-identified as *muhajirat*, a term more often used by historians to refer to the women who protected the Prophet Mohamad\textsuperscript{37}. Women’s roles in terrorism, particularly in Islamic extremist terrorism, are changing. While there are no exact numbers on the number of women who joined ISIS, or who became foreign fighters, it is estimated that the number of Western women who joined ISIS is around 10 percent of the overall number of Western foreign fighters\textsuperscript{38}.

Like many other extremist groups, ISIS has taken advantage of individuals who have little to no knowledge of the religion. Women or men who may be curious about Islam or are curious about radical ideologies may seek the information from others in their communities or online\textsuperscript{39}. To ensure that individuals are radicalized or believe the specific extremist ideologies of the group,

\textsuperscript{35} MADRE. *Gender-Based Persecution and Torture as Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq*. CUNY School of Law, 2017.

\textsuperscript{36} Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018.


groups like ISIS use their recruiters to disseminate specific information and disallow potential recruits from asking others about the religion\textsuperscript{40}.

Social media has been at the core of ISIS’s popularity and ability to be seen around the world. Having been far more successful at their online campaigns than any other jihadist organization, it is estimated that “between 46,000 and 70,000 pro-IS affiliated Twitter accounts were active” in 2014 alone\textsuperscript{41}. Likely, the reason women of ISIS have been able to take on the role of recruiters is that it provides them with new opportunities to engage with a worldwide audience free of many of the constraints they may have otherwise faced\textsuperscript{42}.

When ISIS began building its Caliphate, they also recognized the necessity of women’s involvement. In order to create the utopian society they aimed for, they would need to bring more women in, to ensure the Caliphate continues for generations. ISIS has spent a great deal of resources on targeting and recruiting women and has allowed women to have an active voice in their recruitment planning and activities, primarily via social media\textsuperscript{43}.

In 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called for Muslims all around the world to migrate to the Caliphate\textsuperscript{44}, essentially not discriminating between men, women, or children. ISIS has also focused on the recruitment of educated individuals, both men and women, to build their society.

\textsuperscript{41} Huey, Laura, and Rachel Inch and Hillary Peladeau. \textit{@Me If You Need a Shoutout: Exploring Women’s Roles in Islamic State Twitter Networks}. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 2019. 42:5, pg 445-463.
\textsuperscript{42} Peresin, Anita. \textit{The Western Muhajirat of ISIS}. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 2015, 38:495-509.
\textsuperscript{44} BBC. \textit{ISIS Leader Calls on Muslims to ‘Build Islamic State’}. BBC World News, Middle East, 2014. 
\url{https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28116846}
They have allowed opportunities for women to form organizations and grow in their ranks.\textsuperscript{45}

Women formed the Al-Dawa and Al-Khansaa Battalions, the first all-female entities within the organization.\textsuperscript{46} Within these battalions, women were trained on various skills, including how to wield a weapon and how to recruit other young women.\textsuperscript{47}

Recruiters
Recruiters play an essential role in ISIS functions. They provide guidance, support, and information to potential recruits and to those who are interested in joining. ISIS recruitment, particularly at its peak, came in a variety of methods. This included the allocation of resources to facilitate travel by foreign fighters to join them in the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has spent a significant amount of time, money, and resources to making sure women from all over the world are able to migrate and join the Caliphate.\textsuperscript{48}

Social media has played a key role in ISIS recruitment through its well-established and wide-reaching social media presence. Through social media, it is estimated that over twenty thousand people have joined the organization.

\textsuperscript{45} Almohammad, Assad H. and Anne Speckhard. \textit{The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers}. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Almohammad, Assad H. and Anne Speckhard. \textit{The Operational Ranks and Roles of Female ISIS Operatives: From Assassins and Morality Police to Spies and Suicide Bombers}. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, 2017.
foreign fighters were recruited. ISIS managed to transform social media into its own version of cyber warfare and, in some way, psychological warfare. They have used it to manipulate individuals, reach a worldwide audience, and transmit the messages they want with ease. These campaigns are most commonly conducted on sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. In 2015, 90% of ISIS’ social media use was conducted via Twitter and the number of tweets per day exceeded 200,000.

The recruiter’s role is to disseminate knowledge. In interviews conducted by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism with over one hundred ISIS returnees and defectors, the majority of women claimed that they primarily served as “internet recruiters of both men and women”.

When identifying recruiters online, researches often look for specific activities that would differentiate a recruiter from “fangirls”, who are people tweeting with the goal of being part of the ISIS network. Recruiters more frequently post ISIS propaganda or talk about ISIS ideologies and views on issues, whereas fangirls far less frequently tweet propaganda, but will more regularly retweet content from recruiters.

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54 Ibid.
Studies have shown that ISIS has relied on Western recruits to lead recruitment campaigns to draw in more Western recruits. Female recruiters also promised better housing, employment, and general living conditions seems to have the greatest appeal to most recruits. They provide attractions to the target audience, as they make it appear that life in the Caliphate provides them with women from all over the world, giving the illusion of both the family life that some ask for, as well as the ability to fight for their beliefs.55

Recruitment propaganda includes the use of images such as children playing and going to school, beautiful homes, and creating the image of a euphoric life. They may also provide potential recruits with resources such as Dabiq, an e-book created by ISIS affiliates that provides detailed information about how to make hijrah, along with basic information and tips.56 In addition to providing support, they also regularly tweet “success stories” of others whom they have helped migrate to the Caliphate, thus encouraging others to make the same journey.57

55 Ibid.
57 Witmer, Eric. Terror on Twitter: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and the Involvement of Pro-Jihadist Communities on Twitter. Western University, 2016.
Not only do female recruiters aim to convince people of the attractive lifestyle, they also provide guidance and advice for individuals who are interested in joining, such as providing them with a list of items they can or cannot bring. Recruits are also promised support as they prepare to travel, including the contact numbers for lawyers if they ever need to resolve any issues while in transit. ISIS has allocated a significant amount of resources on recruitment. The Zora Foundation, ISIS’ media branch, was established specifically to provide this type of aid to new and potential recruits. It also prepares them for the challenges and tasks they must learn, including advice on using weapons and administering first aid to wounded fighters. More notably, they also taught female recruits to work on computer design and program editing that would help spread ISIS’ message and recruit more individuals. ISIS has often relied on its far-reaching and decentralized network to send messages and promote their ideologies. This has led to the extremely warped perception of the reality of life on the ground.

In order to increase the number of recruits, ISIS began a female-led social media campaign, with some women taking on leadership roles within the media wing. Their primary goal was to recruit individuals from around the world but focused on Western men and women. The campaigns were offered in multiple languages, primarily English and French, and were often conducted via Twitter because it made for an ideal platform by allowing individuals to more easily conceal their identities. According to research analyzing the influence of Islamic State affiliated men and

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women on Twitter indicated that female-run accounts were viewed more than two times more than those of their male counterparts, indicating that most users were getting their information from the female-run accounts⁶².

In its earlier days, U.S intelligence estimates that the rate of recruitment was around 1000 individuals per month⁶³. As more women began joining, they became more actively involved. Women were given the ability to create their own narratives about life in the Caliphate and were able to share their experiences, share propaganda, and promote ISIS’ ideologies. Social media also appeals to the younger generation. ISIS leadership quickly took notice of this and tasked many women with the role of recruiter. As such, only a few months later, ISIS recruitment numbers grew exponentially, to a peak of around 6000 new members each month⁶⁴. In the months leading to the peak number of recruits, ISIS began creating and disseminating propaganda via social media⁶⁵. It was at this time that beheading videos of journalists were being frequently used as part of the ISIS recruitment strategy of power projection. While it is unclear if these videos were shared more by male or female recruiters, based on studies around Twitter representation, videos shared by female-run accounts were being viewed and shared more frequently⁶⁶.

⁶² Varanese, Joseph A. *Follow Me So I can DM You Back: An Exploratory Analysis of a Female Pro-ISIS Twitter Network*. Western University, 2016.
⁶⁶ Varanese, Joseph A. *Follow Me So I can DM You Back: An Exploratory Analysis of a Female Pro-ISIS Twitter Network*. Western University, 2016.
Young ISIS sympathizers are often influenced by the concept referred to as “jihadi cool”, the idea that the lifestyle is glamorous and fun—a sort of heaven-on-earth. This concept has attracted thousands of youth into the arms of the Caliphate and created a strong base for recruiters to work with. ISIS’ media wing, *al Hayat*, frequently releases propaganda including videos and photos depicting the different sides of the group. This includes brutal and gruesome videos and images such as videos or images of decapitations. This sense of power they have projected appeals to many younger recruits. They also show a friendlier side, including images of women cooking and children playing. The choice to use imagery as part of their recruitment campaign is commonly attributed by researchers to the women who have taken on the role of recruiters. By using videos and images, they are able to serve a larger audience who may not share the same languages or reading abilities, therefore targeting people from all different age groups and educational backgrounds.

**CASE STUDIES**
ISIS is not the first or only extremist group to allow women to take on active roles within the organization. Other militant groups who are acting in the name of Islam have used women and girls, including Al Qaeda and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahdeen (commonly known as al-Shabaab).

Many researchers believe that pro-jihadi groups share four common characteristics: they are ideological projects, international projects, manifest anger, and are committed to effective

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The following case studies on Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda were chosen because of their similarity to the Islamic State, their potential threat to U.S national security, and because they all share these common characteristics. All three groups are established on the principle of following Sharia (Islamic) law, have recruited and attacked on a global scale, pose a threat to international security, and have established well-functioning governance systems.

**Case Study: Al Shabaab**

Somalia is one of the most impoverished countries in the world and has seen a number of militant groups come and go. Somalia’s instability has led it to become a hotspot for terrorism. Al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Somalia, known as Al Shabaab, meaning “the youth”, has been able to recruit non-Somali fighters and carry out attacks within and around Somalia. The group continues to be one of the most formidable groups in Africa. Today, Al Shabaab’s total membership is estimated to be as many as 9,000 fighters, primarily located in Somalia and Kenya, and about one-third of who are believed to be foreign fighters.

Having carried out attacks in Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Djibouti, and Uganda, and killing hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people every year, Al Shabaab has made its name as the deadliest group in Africa. Additionally, unlike countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Nigeria, who have seen a decline in terrorist activity, Somalia has seen an increase in terror

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incidents. The group’s ability to forge international ties to groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS has likely contributed to the increasing number of incidents.

Al Shabaab is often seen as a legitimate opposition to the Somali government. Similarly to ISIS, Al Shabaab has made efforts to establish an Islamic State and regional experts call the group a “largely unified organization.” The group has primarily resorted to guerilla tactics, however; the group has a well-established governance system, including collecting taxes, distributing money, and providing social services to gain the support of the population.

With over 2 million ethnic Somalis in Kenya, Al Shabaab has been able to branch out into the neighboring country. Eastleigh, a small suburb in the country’s capital of Nairobi is known as “Little Mogadishu” and has become a center for Al Shabaab recruitment and radical preachers. Al Shabaab has become involved in youth centers, such as the Muslim Youth Center (MYC), where they have taken over to provide recruitment and training for youths. They have also offered salaries for younger recruits, and offer them bonuses if they join with a wife. In

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76 Ibid.


79 Ibid.

addition to recruiting Somali youths, Al Shabaab has also expanded to recruit from non-Somalis as well, a unique factor that has led to the group’s growth has been its ability to recruit non-Somali fighters and allow them to rise in their ranks. In Kenya, Al Shabaab has become particularly skilled at targeting youth for recruitment by exploiting their grievances, namely, their political, economic, and political grievances. Kenya’s coastal region is also quickly becoming a hotspot for recruitment, as those regions tend to be more lacking in education and employment opportunities, which adds to their frustration with the government.

Because Al Shabaab has focused its recruitment on targeting youth, they have become adept at using social media as a means of recruitment. It allows them to use different social media platforms to gain sympathy and/or stir up debates that would lead to extremist views, all while remaining relatively anonymous. Social media also allows them to be able to more openly justify their actions while simultaneously adding to anti-government conversations. While in-person recruitment continues, the role of social media has played the greatest role in the group’s recruitment tactics and evolvement. Since 2007, at least 22 Americans from the Somali-American community in Minneapolis, Minnesota were recruited almost exclusively through social media, primarily Twitter, indicating that there are communities particularly vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment.

Similarly to ISIS, in addition to recruiting youths, there has been an increasing trend in recruiting educated men into leadership positions, but more notably, a drastic increase in the recruitment of females, who often join the group to become “jihadi brides”. While most of Al Shabaab’s

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women served as wives, some took on additional roles, such as fundraisers and Internet recruiters. However, Al Shabaab does not consider women to be members of the organization, therefore they are not assigned active roles. Most women do not serve in combat positions, but some men trained their wives to use a gun in case they needed to defend their homes. While Al Shabaab focuses its recruitment on males, they have repeatedly kidnapped women and girls to be used as sex slaves or are forced into marriage with Al Shabaab fighters. Women and girls who refuse to do so are killed. Women are not actively recruited nor are they given roles within the group, except in instances in which they are used for suicide missions. In 2011, Al Shabaab trained over 70 female foreign fighters to become suicide bombers. However, even the use of women as suicide bombers remains rare, and women are generally not allowed to participate in operations.

The precise role and scope of women’s involvement in al-Shabaab remains relatively unknown, but researchers believe that specific factors are driving the increasing number of female recruits to Somalia. With the increasing number of educated females traveling to Somalia, researchers believe that their decision to join is either to join their husbands or to seek revenge on the Kenyan government, whom they believe has wrongly treated their friends or families. Others believe that it is to join a group in which they believe has similar beliefs to their own, and believe that they will be given opportunities they did not previously have. However, most women who

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join al-Shabaab will find that the will only become wives, sex slaves, or forced suicide bombers.\footnote{Ibid.}

Similar to ISIS, Al Shabaab has its own media arm, which includes the use of Twitter and various other social media outlets. Al Shabaab was the first group to use Twitter to further their agenda, including live-tweeting during attacks and claiming responsibility for attacks. Tweet and videos are disseminated in English and/or Somali.

Because of West Africa’s remote areas, Al Shabaab often sends recruiters into remote areas to identify potential recruits, using the threat of death to those who resist joining. Unlike Al Qaeda or ISIS, Al Shabaab has used force to gain members. They choose to enter towns and villages and offer them a choice: either join them or die.

**Case Study: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)**

Al Qaeda’s foundation and base stems vary greatly from that of ISIS. While the group has a small and tight-knit leadership circle, their ideology is executed in a decentralized manner. Al Qaeda does not have the goal of creating its own Caliphate but rather urges their supporters to raise awareness of their goals and ideologies within their home countries.

When Osama Bin Laden was stripped of his Saudi Arabian citizenship in 1994, he fled to Sudan and then later to Afghanistan where he trained insurgents in exchange for protection from the Taliban.\footnote{History.com Editors. *Al Qaeda*. History, 2018. \url{https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/al-qaeda}} From there, Bin Laden was able to establish his own network, which became known

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Weimann, Gabrielle. *New Terrorism and New Media*. Wilson Centre, 2014, p. 8.}
as Al Qaeda. Today, Al Qaeda has its own network of fighters all around the world. Researchers estimate that in Syria alone, Al Qaeda has “upwards of twenty thousand men under arms”, with thousands more in Yemen and Somalia.88

One of the most notable differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda is the language they use in reference to women’s roles. For ISIS, women are often referred to as mujahirat, or migrants, who are traveling to the Caliphate to join in the war. Al Qaeda, on the other hand, prefers that women encourage the men to make the migration while she stays home.

Rarely in Al Qaeda’s Inspire magazine is the topic of women discussed, and even less frequently is the topic of women migrating to join Al Qaeda. In much of their written material, they emphasize that jihad and hijrah are for the men, and not duties that a woman is meant to carry out.

Al Qaeda does have a female magazine, al-Shamikha and has now taken al-Risalah, both which provides women platforms to share their experiences. However, al-Risalah appears to have only

one article discussing mujahirat, which came in 2015 when the magazine belonged to Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Al Nusrah Front.\(^8^9\)

Al Qaeda does not encourage women to travel and migrate to their territory. They believe that the most important role of the woman is to be a good housewife who supports her husband as he participates in jihad and raises their children to one day take on those same roles. In a fatwa, or religious declaration, made by then-Al Qaeda-leader Osama Bin Laden, he stated that women play the role of supporter, and “encourage their men and sons to conduct jihad”.\(^9^0\)

Similarly, in 2008, Al Qaeda’s current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, said that “the role of women in jihad is limited to taking care of the home, and that women do not play a role in the global jihad”.\(^9^1\) Despite some pushback from female supporters, Al Qaeda has long emphasized that they do not encourage women’s active roles within the organization.

According to a study which collected data on 36 Al Qaeda affiliated Twitter accounts, none served as recruiters, and about a quarter of them served as “propagandists”, which are defined as women who are actively tweeting or discussing their extreme religious views, without the aim or recruiting others or serving as a point-of-contact for potential recruits.\(^9^2\)

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\(^9^0\) Ibid.

\(^9^1\) Ibid.

The primary role taken by the women of Al Qaeda, according to this study, is as *Baqiya*, which are women who use twitter to “share supportive tweets…[and] pass along AQ propaganda” through retweets. For Al Qaeda, a woman’s role is clear. Emphasized in *Inspire* magazine, women within Al Qaeda are “expected to conform in every way to traditional views of a woman’s place”.

**Summary of the Data**
The figure below identifies the primary role of women in the Islamic State. The data was gathered based on 72 female operatives, for whom data was available. Based on this data, more than half of the women (55%) actively served as recruiters, while 48% remained in their roles as *jihadi brides*.

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93 Ibid.
A study conducted by the Brookings Institution, which looked at ISIS-supporting Twitter accounts from September to December 2014, found that “at least 46,000 accounts were being used by ISIS supporters.” Of those accounts, while most used Arabic as their primary language, about one-fifth of the users used English on their accounts. Twitter has worked actively to shut down accounts of users who are linked to, or engaged in, activity that relates to ISIS or extremist narratives. However, despite thousands of accounts being shut down, many more are created to replace them. Moreover, accounts that were more active or had more followers are the ones more likely to be shut down, leaving thousands of less active but equally impactful accounts still open.

In 2016, a few years after ISIS’s peak, a study of 750 active Twitter accounts was conducted. This study revealed that for ISIS, within these accounts alone, there were about 1500 tweets per day, just under half of which came from women. Comparatively, within the same sample set, nearly 1700 tweets were in support of Al Qaeda, about forty percent of which came from

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96 Witmer, Eric. Terror on Twitter: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and the Involvement of Pro-Jihadist Communities on Twitter. Western University, 2016.
women\textsuperscript{97}. While the numbers are close, they indicate something critical. Al Qaeda’s social media presence has been far behind that of ISIS, yet as ISIS continues to fall, the United States cannot let Al Qaeda rise in the same manner. Al Qaeda’s increasing use of social media, particularly with the rise in women’s active social media presence in support of the group, poses a significant threat to global security.

Al Shabaab has frequently used Twitter to disseminate information through designated “official” Twitter accounts belonging to the group\textsuperscript{98}. In 2013, after an attack was live-Tweeted, roughly 6 accounts belonging to the group were shut down\textsuperscript{99}.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Mohamed, Hamza. \textit{Al-Shabab Say They Are Back on Twitter}. Al Jazeera, 2013. \url{https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/12/al-shabab-claim-they-are-back-twitter-2013121610453327578.html}
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.


### Table 1: Comparing the Role of Women and Number of Recruits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Islamic State (ISIS)</th>
<th>Al Qaeda</th>
<th>Al Shabaab</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of Inception</strong></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal of building a Caliphate?</strong></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary/Secondary Role of Women</strong></td>
<td>Recruiter/Jihadi Bride</td>
<td>Wife/Baqiya</td>
<td>Jihadi Bride/Suicide Bomber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peak Number of Recruits (estimate)</strong></td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>9000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Foreign Fighters (estimate)</strong></td>
<td>&gt;40,000*100</td>
<td>&lt;100</td>
<td>~3000*101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Female Members (estimate)</strong></td>
<td>~5000</td>
<td>&lt;100*</td>
<td>&lt;100 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Method of Recruitment</strong></td>
<td>Social Media (Twitter)</td>
<td>Community Centers/Mosques</td>
<td>Twitter and Radio102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Media Platforms Used</strong></td>
<td>Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram</td>
<td>Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp</td>
<td>Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peak Number of Tweets per Day</strong></td>
<td>~200,000</td>
<td>~2000</td>
<td>&lt;100***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data varies - exact numbers are unknown.  
** Al Shabaab does not consider women to be members-only wives or slaves  
*** Tweets are primarily from “official” Al-Shabaab accounts and numbers vary (live-tweeting during attacks raises the number)

ISIS has shown that the involvement of women, particularly when they take on recruitment positions, has a powerful impact on a group’s strength and reach. When comparing them with the case studies of Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab, there are clear differences in how those groups have strategized their growth. ISIS’ ability to recruit thousands of individuals in a relatively short period demonstrates just how influential the group was.


Al Qaeda focuses on a decentralized network of individuals to expand its influence. Al Qaeda has been around since the late 1980s, meaning that the group has gained its large following over a long period. While Al Qaeda has thousands of fighters, it has taken decades for their numbers to grow. ISIS, on the other hand, was able to reach an unprecedented number of recruits in a fraction of that time.

Al Shabaab, while highly successful in West Africa, is not as successful as its extremist counterparts. Their decision to use violence as a means of recruitment may have the strongest impact on its inability to expand its network or to reach a more global audience.

Figure 3: Success Rate of U.S Foreign Fighters

![Figure 3: Success Rate of U.S Foreign Fighters](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OPSR_TP_Overview-Profiles-Individual-Radicalization-US-Foreign-Fighters_508.pdf)

Figure 3 shows the success rate of individuals from the United States who expressed interest, attempted, or succeeded in joining an extremist group. According to the U.S Department of Homeland Security, 86% of all individuals in their database claimed that the internet played the primary role in their radicalization and/or recruitment\textsuperscript{103}. Additionally, 70% of those individuals

also said that social media and online facilitators were key factors in their radicalization and ability to travel to the conflict zones\textsuperscript{104}.

**Limitations**

The absolute impact of women’s active roles in extremist organizations is difficult to discern given the lack of research and data on the subject. Because of the lack of data on the number of women who were recruiters compared to men, or the number of people women were able to recruit as opposed to men, this study utilized a comparative analysis between ISIS and two extremist groups: Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab. These two groups have not utilized women in the same way as ISIS, but share key characteristics: similar ideologies, recruitment on an international scale, and well-established governance systems. These two groups were chosen because of each group’s relative success in attacking and recruiting at an international scale and the potential threats they pose to the United States. Both groups are ranked amongst the deadliest in the world and used social media to disseminate propaganda.

Published data on these groups is limited to estimates on the peak number of members, number of foreign fighters, and how many women were members and the number of Tweets by each group. Lack of more comprehensive data on recruitment numbers can be attributed to the group’s physical location. For example, because of the weak government in Somalia and much of the country living in rural areas, knowing exactly where Al Shabaab holds territory or exactly how many people or villages have been taken under Al Shabaab control, and thus knowing the precise number of recruits, is a persistent challenge. For Al Qaeda, their decentralized network of members around the world makes estimating the total number of recruits challenging.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
Because of the lack of data regarding the number of women or the direct roles of women within Al Qaeda or Al Shabaab, this study employed data on each group’s use of social media, particularly Twitter, to equally compare the groups. Al Qaeda and Al Shabaab have all used social media for recruitment purposes and to disseminate propaganda. As such, this study looked at social media accounts by individuals claiming to be associated with each particular group and whose accounts explicitly indicated that they were run by a woman. In order to distinguish between women who were tweeting as “fan-girls” versus women who would be serving as propagandists, a look through the types of Tweets or posts was performed. To support this, primary data gathered by researchers on the number of women tweeting who were affiliated with each group was also used to come to the conclusion.

Because Twitter and other social media platforms do have measures in place to regularly flag and shut down accounts associated with designated terrorist organizations, identifying how many accounts were affiliated with each organization varied on a daily basis. Additionally, social media allows for anonymity, and thus women affiliated with these groups have often taken to social media because it allows them to hide behind a screen, which could have further limited the availability of data. Primarily, the ability to hide behind a screen means that anyone can be writing posts or disseminating propaganda, and claiming to be a women or using the image of a woman as their profile picture, which can result in misleading data.

Despite these limitations, the fact remains that accounts that appear to be run by women are still viewed and shared more frequently than those appearing to be run by men. As such, the
argument can still be made that women’s influence in the recruitment process remains to have a strong and significant impact on the group’s ability to recruit from a larger and wider audience.

While it is possible that a number of other factors could have contributed to ISIS’s popularity and ability to recruit such a high number of fighters, analysis of the available data indicates that there is a strong correlation between the roles of women in extremist organizations and the number of people who were recruited.

**Recommendations**

Countries that are actively working to prevent and deter terrorism have often taken the route of the use of force. The use of military power to attack and destroy ISIS territory, or targeting of terrorist cells, has short-term term value; it is apparent that military intervention in the Middle East has failed to deter terrorism. More often than not, military intervention can lead to greater instability by allowing similar groups to build on the grievances of the society and blame the countries of the militaries that have intervened. Additionally, military interventions, along with anti-terror laws and travel bans have only fueled Islamophobia, which essentially hands extremist groups the tools to build their campaigns on.

Policies should be adopted to shrink the arena in which these groups are playing in. Policies should address the conditions that lead to vulnerabilities amongst communities and individuals that could lead to radicalization and susceptibility to extremist propaganda.

Recruiters for terrorist organizations are one of the greatest drives behind their growth and strength, and thus threats to national security.
Three main recommendations can be made:

1. **Monitoring, flagging, blocking, or terminating suspicious accounts**: Authorities and policymakers must pay more attention to online platforms and monitor accounts that follow, disseminate, or otherwise engage with ISIS-affiliated accounts. By flagging and shutting down more of these accounts, there may be a greater chance of reducing and deterring potential migrants.

   While it is nearly impossible to monitor, track, and shut down all accounts of users who are actively tweeting or sharing extremist propaganda, there should be measures in place to automatically shut down accounts that discuss key words or phrases, connect with specific accounts, or tweet or share flagged content.

2. **Rehabilitation and reintegration**: There is a need to establish strong infrastructure dealing with the reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees. Doing so impacts the greater community and reduces the likelihood of individuals feeling they are unable to return home and ultimately seeking other extremist groups who will welcome them in. Through stronger reintegration programs, communities will be more prepared in handling returnees and more aware of what signs to look out for to prevent future radicalization.

3. **Counter-narratives campaign**: There is a need to establish strong counter-narratives campaign that is directed at women. Currently, most countering violent extremism (CVE) campaigns are targeted towards male militants but very few that target women, let alone
women who are involved in the recruitment of others. Counter-narrative campaigns are crucial to countering and preventing radicalization and potential recruitment into extremist organizations. These campaigns must be aimed at showing the reality, lies, and hypocrisy that ISIS and its recruiters, as well as similar groups, have tried to disseminate.

**Conclusion**

Extremist groups have taken advantage of the use of women within their organizations, whether as facilitators or martyrs. The role of women in terrorist organizations has evolved from secondary to more active roles and women have become instrumental in advancing the reach and spread of ideology. U.S policymakers have overlooked the critical role women are playing in violent extremist groups, placing the United States’ counterterrorism efforts at a disadvantage.

Women’s active roles in extremist organizations fuel the group’s ability to advance their ideologies and with the help of social media, allow women a new platform to spread their messages. The U.S government must create policies and programs focused on identifying and preventing the potential radicalization and recruitment of women into extremist groups to reduce the security threat they pose.

Terrorism is an idea, not a person, which makes preventing, predicting, and deterring terrorist attacks one of the greatest challenges governments face. Women’s roles in terrorism have grown drastically with globalization, the feminist movement, easy access to information, and the growing social media platforms. Women have taken on roles in extremist organizations that range from managing logistics to recruiting new members and even to leadership and militant roles. However, despite such increases in women’s involvement, there remains to be (1) little information and data on the subject, (2) few policies made to counter these trends, and (3) very
few organizations that counter such threats. ISIS has also made a name for itself because of the scale of deployment of women for both combative and non-combative tasks.

After several years of operations and resources dedicated to defeating ISIS, the group has lost most of its territorial control. However, the removal of ISIS’ Caliphate has left Syria and Iraq with an extremely volatile power vacuum. This, along with sleeper cells around the world, means that ISIS remains to be a security threat and leaves open the possibility for other groups to emerge or for ISIS to reemerge. In addition, the widespread corruption and dissatisfaction of the governments in both Syria and Iraq that led to the initial emergence of ISIS remains.

A key concern now that the Caliphate has collapsed is the future of ISIS’ women and the future of the women who had sympathized with the group. Women who remain committed to the group or the group’s ideologies may seek other similar organizations. Essentially, the risk of migration by former ISIS women to other groups or ISIS affiliates will increase. Adding on this, many women will likely choose not to return home for fear of repercussions, including prison and/or rejection from their families.

The fall of the Caliphate does not mean the fall of ISIS, and may result in more women wanting to play a more active role, such as trying to restore the Caliphate, continue to recruit new members, promote extremist ideologies, or become perpetrators of violence. Women who leave are imprisoned or migrate to join another group, which poses a significant threat to U.S national security. They are highly motivated, have received military training from ISIS, and have experience and desensitization to extreme violence.
The role ISIS is allowing women to have poses its own security threat and should not be underestimated. For the first time, women are able to participate actively in extremist activities and pave a path for them to build the Caliphate they so desire. This is the primary reason ISIS has been able to recruit and attract so many individuals, male and female, from a global audience. Living in the conflict zone of the Caliphate, women and men alike are likely to have become desensitized to the violence, which can have a lasting impact should they return home. Many women who were taken to prison as the Caliphate collapsed continue to express their readiness and willingness to attack the West.

ISIS women continue to be active on social media and continue to threaten the West. While many ISIS sympathizers are active on social media, many are dormant, making them an even greater threat to security. While recruiters do frequently engage with social media users, those individuals who are viewing the content without actually engaging with it are being exposed to radical ideology and going unnoticed by officials.

As the shift in gender dynamics continues, we must address the growing role of women in violent extremist groups and establish the infrastructure and mechanisms to prevent, deter, and rehabilitate those individuals who were at some point radicalized.
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Appendix A- Definitions

Caliphate: An area or territory under rule by a Muslim leader.

Extremism: Holding a belief (political, religious, ideological, etc.) that is extreme. May also resort to extreme behavior.

Foreign Fighter: Any individual who leaves his/her home country to join a non-State armed group.

Radicalization: A person who hold extremist views, often with the intent of extreme social or political reform. Or, engaging in behaviors that may lead to extremism. (See Extremism)

Terrorism: Any unlawful act of violence against civilians in pursuit of political, religious, or ideological gains.

West: Europe, North America, and Australia.

Propaganda: Biased or misleading information to promote an opinion on a large scale, usually through social media.
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EDUCATION

2018-2019  JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY  
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