MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING TERRORIST GROUPS: A GENDER COMPARISON

by
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Abstract

This study aims to examine gender differences and comparisons when it comes to motivators for joining terrorist or violent extremist organizations. Despite terrorism and the underlying motivation being a popular topic of political discourse and scholarship, there is not adequate discussion on how motivating factors can differ between men and women. This study uses excerpts and data from approximately two hundred interviews conducted by Dr. Anne Speckhard, with former male and female members of the Islamic State (IS), formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This study analyzed these interviews and existing research data for motivators and identified the most common motivators across each gender. This study found that while there were common factors that motivated both men and women to join a terrorist group, there were also some unique factors as well. The identification of unique motivation factors across males and females highlights the importance of establishing counter-terrorism strategies that account for these differences. This paper encourages further research and study of gender differences in motivators for joining terrorist groups and how the differences play an important role into developing counter-terrorism strategies.

Review Committee: Dr. Joana Cook

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I would like to thank my wonderful parents who left behind their families and homes to come to the United States, so that I could grow up in a world without the struggles they faced and pursue the opportunities they never had.

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Sarah Ahmad

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Introduction

The concept of terrorism has been present throughout history, however what exactly counts as the authoritative definition for "terrorism" is greatly debated far and wide by many scholars, historians, and government officials. Paulo Casaca cites Nietzsche who claimed that the history associated with terrorism is in fact what makes it difficult to define terrorism. Why is it so difficult to find a generally accepted definition of terrorism? According to Casaca, "Nietzsche provided part of the clue when he wrote that, only things which have no history can be defined; terrorism has had a very long history."[1] Meaning that throughout time terrorism has exhibited itself in many forms and rooted from many different causes such as religious ideologies and beliefs, social ideologies, and more recently political ideologies. Therefore, terrorism is hard to define in such a specific way when the nature of terrorism is constantly shifting and morphing into something else, that a single definition of terrorism cannot accurately and adequately capture every aspect of terrorism. Nick O'Brien writes that,

> Understanding how and why people are radicalized to the extent that they want to kill others and sometimes themselves is fundamental to countering terrorism. Once the radicalization issue is understood, steps can be taken to introduce deradicalization and counter-radicalization strategies and policies. The best way to understand the radicalization process is to question those who have been radicalized themselves to the point of turning to violence."[2]

A lot of research has already been published on motivations for joining terrorist organizations, but it is heavily focused on terrorism in general or motivations for male terrorists. In order to develop effective long-term counter-terrorism strategies gender differences must be considered. There has been an increase of female participation in terrorist activities and organizations, this is important to take the underlying reasons into account from a counter-terrorism perspective so

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[1] Casaca, Paulo. "Terrorism Revisited: Islamism, Political Violence and State-Sponsorship." Springer International AG, 2017.

[2] O'Brien, Nick. "Interview with a Former Terrorist." *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1, no. 12, Nov. 2008.

that effective mitigation methods for combatting both males and females can be determined. The focus of my research is to gain an understanding of what motivates certain individuals to join Islamic-based terror groups and compare the motivating factors between males and females.

Literature Review

There is a large body of existing research and scholarship stemming from private think tanks, academic institutions, and government organizations on nearly every topic associated with terrorism and counterterrorism. The first section below offers a brief overview on what has been published about terrorism and counter-terrorism strategies. The following section delves into some of what has been already written on motivators for terrorism and how gender can play a role into that.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism

> *There is an illogic to U.S counter-terrorism policy based on three interrelated factors… First, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a counter-terrorism success or failure. Second, public opinion and institutional politics create an environment that encourages policies which produce quick, visible results…Third, there is little public and political confidence in alternatives to the use of military force, such as a deterrence policy.* - Jordan *et. al.*[3]

It has been twenty years since the horrific events of September 11, 2001, and still the United States (much like other countries) continues to struggle with a robust and effective counter-terrorism strategy. Without a doubt, the threat of another September 11 situation is miniscule, and U.S. counter-terror capabilities have improved vastly in quantity and quality since then, but due to the cryptic and shifting nature of terrorism, terrorism will always remain a top national security issue. The constant change in terrorism makes counter-terrorism operations and strategies difficult to execute, alongside the fact that terrorists are not rational actors, plus when

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[3] Jordan, Jenna, Margaret E. Kosal, and Lawrence Rubin. "The Strategic Illogic of Counterterrorism Policy." *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2016): 181–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660x.2016.1261564.

it comes to counterterrorism there are challenges associated with forming foreign alliances, and concerns about violating human rights and taking innocent lives.

Daniel Byman presents "The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*"* as an example for developing counter-terrorism strategies for the United States and other counties.[4] He starts by highlighting the difficulties associated with deterrence when it comes to counterterrorism strategies, "the prevention of terror attacks often relies on deterrence, which demands disproportionate responses to any attack. Reprisals must be severe enough, so the attacker fears any provocation."[5] While deterrence is a great strategy when it comes to dealing with rational actors, it is less successful when dealing non-rational actors (most Non-State Actors) because they do not "fear any provocation" and will instead force rational actors to resort to violence as well. Byman also notes that "terrorism's power is psychological" meaning that it is an ideology and defeating ideology is not a matter of military successes on the field but as the cliché goes, it's more, "winning the hearts and minds" of the terrorists. This is incredibly difficult because Western culture and values are often seen as hedonistic and do not necessarily align with the cultural values and religious beliefs of the terrorists' societies and cultures. One way the United States can combat this issue is to rely on foreign alliances to successfully execute counterterrorism strategies but doing so can present its own unique sense of challenges.

In his book, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror,* Stephen Tankel stresses the importance and limitations of foreign alliances when it comes to U.S. counter-terrorism operations.[6] Tankel compares the War on Terror to the Cold

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[4]Byman, Daniel. "Chapter 25." Essay. In *A High Price: The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism*, 362–82. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[5] Byman, 363
[6] Tankel, Stephen. *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror*. Columbia University Press, 2018.

War to exemplify why foreign alliances against terrorist organizations are more difficult to form than alliances against Nation States. Tankel writes that during the Cold War "the single overarching U.S objective was to defeat the Soviet Union, and containment was the strategy for doing so."[7] He writes that the United States wanted to diminish Soviet influence as much as possible and that eventually the game tuned into NATO vs. the Russians, and as a result the U.S had to increase its alliances with foreign nations. Tankel highlights that during the Cold War era the U.S was only interested in defeating the Soviet Union (and "communist takeover") rather than the internal affairs of its allies, which is not necessarily the same case when it comes to the War on Terror. Tankel concludes by writing that during the Cold War era everyone agreed that the enemy was the Soviet Union, and it didn't matter how each nation defined "terrorism". But in the post 9/11 world, "Washington sometimes pressed for actions against jihadist groups or infrastructure that partner nations did not deem to be dangerous to them and actually considered useful against other internal or external threats." And that even when foreign allies might share common objectives the U.S is now asking way more than it had ever done before such as more aggressive support like foreign law enforcement and military aid, the unintended violation of human rights. An example that comes to mind is the United States' relationship with Pakistan when it came to dealing with the Taliban. Pakistan offered support and promises to curb the organizations activities within its borders, but as a matter of fact the Taliban was providing Pakistan security against its Western border and cutting them off would not be in Pakistan's best interest. Simply put, just because the United States sees a particular terrorist group as a problem does not necessarily mean that its allies and foreign partners see it the same way.

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[7] Ibid.

In the article, "Human Rights Abuses and Counterterrorism Cooperation," Emilie Hafner-Burton and Jacob Shapiro examine the United States' violation of human rights in the context of counterterrorism operations. They claim that "two big assumptions fuel current mobilization against and policy discussions about the U.S. war on terror and its implications for human rights. First, terrorism creates strong pressures on governments—especially democracies—to restrict human rights. Second, these restrictions are not only immoral and illegal, but also counterproductive to curbing terrorism."[8] There is no arguing that some U.S counterterrorism strategies like the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" and drone strikes violate basic human rights and have led to the loss of innocent lives. Hafner-Burton and Shapiro claim that "the empirical evidence does not yet stack up to a simple answer one way or the other about whether the repressive policies have either worked or backfired."[9] Using kinetic means to further counter-terrorism strategies can only offer temporary solutions, killing a terrorist organizations leader will not prevent them from recouping with an even more powerful leader. Until the United States and other countries utilize counter-terrorism strategies that can fight ideologies the problem of terrorism will always be present in some form.

Motivations for Joining Terrorist Organizations

The literature and research studies cited in this section mostly focused on motivations for terrorism in general; the various scholars agree for the most part that the biggest motivations include religious ideologies, financial hardships, and a desire to belong to some type of community.[10] The only type of "disagreement" amongst the scholarship listed below is the

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[8] Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., and Shapiro, Jacob N., "Human Rights Abuses and Counterterrorism Cooperation," Political Science and Politics, Vol. 43, No. 3, (July 2010), pp 415-419
[9] Hafner-Burton et al. 418
[10] Brown, Ryan Andrew, Todd C. Helmus, Rajeev Ramchand, Alina I. Palimaru, Sarah Weilant, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Liisa Hiatt, What Do Former Extremists and Their Families Say About Radicalization and Deradicalization in America? Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1071-1.html.; Borum, Randy. "Contemporary Psychological Research on Terrorism." Essay. In Psychology of Terrorism,

degree to which each motivator plays a role. Some suggest that that "identity" and "belonging"

are the most important factors, while others acknowledge and accept those factors as motivators

but would instead argue that "financial hardship" and/or "ideology" play a bigger role in

someone choosing to or being forced into joining a terrorist organization.

In her study, Allison G. Smith, does not explicitly mention motivations behind individuals

joining terrorist organizations or committing acts of terrorism like the other scholars, instead she

lists and explains many risk factors and indicators of someone who is the most prone to joining a

radical group.[11] Some of the risk factors and indicators she includes are,

- o Having a history of criminal violence
- o Having a Terrorist Friend
- o Having a Deep Commitment to an Extremist Ideology
- o Being Unemployed
- o Being socially isolated
- o Having Psychological Issues
- o Having a Lower Socio-Economic Status
- o Being distant from one's family
- o Being Single
- o Living alone
- o Being Male[12]

Many of these risk factors are like and feed into the motivators mentioned by other authors such

as, such as the need to belong to a community, poor financial circumstances, and ideological

beliefs.

These factors are consistent with the findings presented in a RAND study where the

researchers focus on what motivated individuals from the United States to join Islamic (mainly

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22–29. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 2004.; Office of Justice Programs, and Allison G. Smith, Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us (2018).

[11] Office of Justice Programs, and Allison G. Smith, Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us (2018).

[12] (OJP and Smith, ii-iii)

Sunni) terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, since September 11, 2001.[13] The

researchers gathered their data from the data set for University of North Carolina sociologist

Charles Kurzman's *Muslim American Involvement with Violent Extremism, 2016* and the

Department of Justice's (DOJ) list of public, unsealed terrorism and terrorism-related

convictions since September 11, 2001. Cases that were missing from these two data sets were

obtained from other sources such as thinks tanks and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

files.[14] The authors start of their findings by stating that, "most conceptual paradigms agree that

the multistep pathway to violence is caused by a "complex mix of personal, political, and social

drivers" involving "multiple push/pull factors"; unfortunately, "very little [is known] about the

temporal ordering of risk factors . . . across terrorists."[15] They go onto to explain the process of

radicalization,

> At the beginning of the process an individual typically experiences feelings of personal or
> group relative deprivation based on subjective or objective perceptions."[16] The
> individuals then seek out and show a receptiveness to new religious and/or political
> influences; debate and explore new beliefs while challenging old ones: and begin to form
> new identities in order to rectify perceived injustices. Later, worldviews may shift
> further, attitudes harden, and blame of other out-groups increase as individuals continue
> to socialize with like-minded individuals with shared grievances (either in person or
> online), demonstrate deference to thought leaders, differentiate and retreat from the
> mainstream, and channel discontent toward specific targets."[17]

Essentially what the researchers are getting at is that in most cases many people felt alone and

removed from society, which made it easier for them to empathize with whatever recruitment

method or propaganda they were subjected to. One important, albeit somewhat obvious, notion

presented in this study includes the idea that each case is different. While many individuals share

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[13] Williams, Heather J., Nathan Chandler, and Eric Robinson, Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist
Organizations from 9/11 to Today. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2545.html.
[14] (Williams et al. 7)
[15] (Williams et al. 15)
[16] *ibid*
[17] (Williams et al. 15-18)

common motives, individual circumstances and personal intentions can vary person-to-person and every big motivation factor can several underlying ones as well.[18] All of this can be tied into examining an individual's psychological and situational dispositions.

In his book, *Psychology of Terrorism,* much like the title suggests, Randy Borum focuses on the psychological factors behind terrorism and explains several cognitive theories and biological factors that can contribute to the reasoning behind why someone may choose to join a terrorist organization. For the purposes of this study, I focused on Chapter 5, "Contemporary Psychological Research on Terrorism" of the book where Borum discusses some of the work conducted by other researchers and social factors for motivation.[19] The first author he cites is Martha Crenshaw, who writes, "that there are at least four categories of motivation among terrorists: (1) the opportunity for action, (2) the need to belong, (3) the desire for social status, and (4) the acquisition of material reward."[20] Borum then boils down everything to three motivational factors which are, perceived injustice, identity, and belonging.[21] These three factors are in agreement with what is presented in the RAND studies and other scholarship cited on this topic.

Money is a very common motivator for why individuals do many things in life, it's also a common reason as to why someone may join a terrorist organization. Jennifer Kavanagh further explores the idea that poverty is a factor as to why someone might join a terrorist organization.

> "Economic arguments receive an especially large amount of attention in both the academic and the popular press"[22] The simplest economic argument blames poverty and unemployment for creating desperation and hopelessness among the masses, which drives them to join terrorist organizations, either to receive the social services such

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[18] (Williams et al. 37)
[19] (Borum, 22)
[20] (Borum, 24)
[21] (Borum, 25)
[22] Kavanagh, Jennifer. "Selection, Availability, and Opportunity: The Conditional Effect of Poverty on Terrorist Group Participation." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 1 (February 2011): 106–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002710374713.

groups provide or due to a general lack of other opportunities. Research that tests for this relationship finds a more complicated set of patterns. Specifically, while macroeconomic decline does seem to be associated with higher incidence of terrorism, terrorists themselves are not drawn from the poor, uneducated elements of society."[23]

I somewhat agree with the last part of Kavanagh's statement, while it may be true in Western societies that terrorists mostly come from circles that are not poor or educated, in many Middle Eastern countries the terrorists are in fact poor and uneducated. Joining a terrorist group for these people can in fact offer motivation in the form of financial relief. Kavanagh hypothesizes that,

> "a conditional relationship between poverty, education, and terrorist group involvement and argue that poverty increases the likelihood of membership in terrorist organizations only for those with high education. I suggest that as a result of terrorist group selection preferences and the low opportunity costs for militant group membership that exist in economically depressed macroeconomic environments, highly educated, poor individuals in any society should be most likely to participate in terrorist group activities."[24]

The reasoning behind this argument is that "terrorist groups focus their recruiting resources on individuals they expect to become the most productive terrorists, they are likely to expend especially strong efforts to attract highly educated and skilled individuals."[25]

The second argument she presents for her case is the opportunity cost for participation in terrorist or militant activity, Kavanagh states that,

> "In a strong market economy, more highly educated and skilled individuals have lucrative market options and high opportunity cost to participation in terrorist group operations. However, in weak or impoverished economies, the lack of market options reduces the opportunity costs of group participation for highly educated individuals. In contrast, opportunity costs to participations for less educated individuals are likely to be constant across eco nomic conditions. Lower opportunity costs in weak economic markets make these educated individuals more susceptible and available for recruitment, increasing the likelihood of their membership."[26]

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[23] (Kavanagh, 106)
[24] (Kavanagh, 107)
[25] (Kavanagh, 109)
[26] (Kavanagh, 110)

Kavanagh then goes into the details of her study such as the methodology, data sources, and results. Her results supported her hypothesis, which is that there is a conditional relationship between poverty and education level when it comes to motivations for terrorism.[27]

Poverty or other financial reasons as a motivator for terrorism are the first thing that usually come to mind. Both the need and want for financial compensation can drive people to extreme amounts of desperation and recruiters for these organizations use this fact to their advantage.

In the chapter, "Prevention of Recruitment to Terrorism", of *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, Ahmet Yayla presents the motivations for terrorism from a recruitment point of view. He states that there are two types of recruitment "opportunistic" and "targeted or talent" recruitment, for the purpose of this study "opportunistic recruitment" is most relevant .[28] Yayla writes that, "The first type is "opportunistic recruitment," where recruiters try to recruit people whom they already know, with whom they already have connections, or with whom they can connect through a variety of means."[29] This is somewhat related to "belonging" and "identity" as motivators for joining terrorist organizations. People are more likely join to a certain organization if other members of their community or people they know participate in those organizations as well.

Of all the motivators presented in the scholarship the most convincing and common seem to be ideological factors pertaining to religion and politics followed by financial motivations. Which makes sense if you think about it, taking an individual's psychological factors or extreme

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[27] (Kavanagh, 125)
[28] Yayla, Ahmet S. "Prevention of Recruitment to Terrorism." Essay. In *HANDBOOK OF TERRORISM PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS*, edited by Alex P Schmid, 1st ed., 412–57. The Hague: International Centre for Counterterrorism, 2020.
[29] (Yayla, 424-25)

force out of consideration for a moment, one can assume that if a person were to commit a terrorist attack the motivation would have to extremely strong such as a very passionate belief system or great desperation for money and survival.

Hypothesis and Methodology

Hypothesis: Men and women likely will have different motivations for joining terrorist groups, while also sharing some common motivators such as ideology and financial factors.

Methodology:

Ideally the best way to conduct this type of research would be to go interview the same number of males and females from various Islamic radical organizations across the same demographic groups and socio-economic class about the circumstances and/or reasoning behind why they joined (perhaps willingly or unwillingly) the terrorist groups and compare answers across genders; however, that methodology is not feasible for the scope of this project. In fact, the biggest challenge I was presented with researching this topic was collecting data myself or finding sources of raw data from other researchers. In the literature cited in the previous section, the scholars had access to data sets pertaining to terrorists or the means to collect data in the field.

The main body of data for my research comes from interviews conducted by Dr. Anne Speckhard, Director of The International Center for the study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) between November 2015 and December 2019. As mentioned in the cited study, the interviews "were conducted in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, the Balkans, Europe, and Central Asia with ISIS prisoners, returnees, and defectors. The purpose was to learn about their recruitment history,

motivations for joining, travel, experiences inside the group, disillusionment over time, and defection, return or capture."[30]

Dr. Speckhard has used these same interviews as a data source across multiple research studies and publications. The complete raw dataset is not available publicly, but in her research article, "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 in-Depth Interviews of Isis Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners", Dr. Speckhard provides total counts for the 182 men and 38 women for the different motivational factors and influences that caused them to join ISIS and other Islamic based terrorist organizations, I used these data counts alongside with the content analysis I performed on the interview snippets that were publicly available on the ICSVE website.[31]

Originally, I came across some of this data as a part of her "Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project". The purpose of this project is to "break the ISIS brand and flood the Internet with counter-narratives to fight with what ISIS is saying about the ISIS "caliphate" and introducing alternatives to the narratives employed by the terrorist group to attract recruits."[32] [33] Since the videos are aimed to present a counter-narrative , it's important to note that that can be biased which affects the reliability of the sources since information may have been omitted in the excerpts. The original interviews were conducted in person with a psychologist and some of the videos were published on YouTube and Facebook.

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[30] Speckhard, Anne, and Molly Ellenberg. "Isis in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 in-Depth Interviews of Isis Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 82–127. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.1.1791.
[31] Ibid.
[32] https://www.icsve.org/project/memes/
[33] The interviews include members from groups other than just ISIS

For each interview, I read the snippets (39 total), which included the individual's picture and direct quote on why (and in some cases how) they joined the terrorist group and identified the main motivator according to the codes below (derived from common interview themes and literature above). I excluded some snippets because they did not mention any reasons for joining the group -but rather talked about their experience while being a part of ISIS or Al-Qaeda.[34] An issue with these interview snippets is that they are just snippets and don't provide the full responses to the question "what made you join ISIS" or even other questions in the interview, which if provided, would have better help identify other themes and reasons for joining. The snippets also do not contain the full context of the interviewee's circumstances or situation. The remaining data sets are tables provided in Dr. Speckhard's publication about her interviews with the former terrorist organization members. I added a column, "majority" to indicate whether mostly males or females mentioned that factor or if it was about the same.

Data
Content Analysis: "ISIS Defectors Speak Out" [35]

Codes

Code	Meaning
Religious Reasons	Individual believes that joining terrorist organization (TO) will bring them closer to God, and grant them eternal paradise and/or they are serving their religious duty
Financial Reasons	Individual joined TO because of money related matters
Convinced through Propaganda* *Propaganda varies for men and women	Individual joined TO base on online propaganda (videos, websites, etc.)
Belonging	Individual joined TO because it offered a sense of community and family
Adventure	Individual joined TO because it seemed fun and thrilling

Table 1: Codes for content analysis based on 39 interview snippets.

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[34] https://www.icsve.org/project/memes/
[35] https://www.icsve.org/project/memes/

Code Tree
      Why Did the individual Decide to Join ISIS? (n=39, 31 males and 8 females**)**

Code	Count
Religious Reasons	**20**
• Promise of Paradise	6
• Freedom from religious oppression	6
• Other religious reasons	8
Financial Reasons	**6**
• Support Family	1
• Generate Income	2
• Other financial reasons	3
Convinced through Propaganda	**4**
Belonging (Community)	**7**
Adventure	**2**

Table 2: Code Tree: this dataset was not adequate to compare the two genders because males significantly outnumbered females, which is why the dataset from "ISIS in their own words" was used for the remaining analysis.

After reading the 39 male and female excerpts and by looking at the code counts from the interview data set, it is apparent that for this sample, the number one reason someone joined a terrorist organization was primarily for religious reasons. Religious reasons include the prospect of dying as a martyr and achieving an eternal place in paradise or the organization promising a haven to practice Islam with full religious freedom. Religion as the number one motivator in the case for someone joining ISIS makes sense, since ISIS "calls itself a caliphate and claims religious authority over all Muslims."[25]And would therefore use religion as it's number one tactic for recruiting people. One of the interviewees stated that, "if you want to know more about your religion, you need to go to ISIS. Because there is the home of the real Islam." This was the same sentiment shared by most people interviewed included in the data set; religion is the most important aspect of life and when joining they genuinely believed that ISIS was offering everything Islam was about.

The second biggest reason why male individuals chose to join a terrorist organization was something that I had identified as "wanting a better life" or belonging to a community. Most of the interviews were conducted with Muslims and Muslim converts in Western countries like Belgium, France, Germany, etc. These countries do not have predominantly Muslim populations which can result in feelings of isolation and oppression, according to multiple interviews ISIS offered these Muslims an open and welcoming community and enticed them with the prospect of joining a forever "brotherhood".

Joining a terrorist organization to financially support family members and generate income was another main reason many males chose to join ISIS; they were desperate for money and ISIS seemed to offer a lot of it. Islam and many Eastern cultures place a heavy emphasis on family and the importance of a man's responsibility to provide for his children/parents; ISIS used that belief to emphasize the need for money in certain interviewees' lives. Some interviews mentioned watching online propaganda that organizations had published where they highlighted the injustices caused by the non-believers and how if someone joined ISIS or Al-Qaeda, they would be making the world a better and more just place. It was through the same propaganda where ISIS also highlighted all the religious benefits and opportunities that it offered including dying a martyr and entering heaven forever.

All the data tables below are from "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 in-Depth Interviews of Isis Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners."[36] In this data set, n=220, 182 males and 32 females, pre-dominantly former ISIS members.

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[36] (Speckhard 90-106)

Influence	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Majority
Spouse/Partner Influence	2.2%	55.3%	Women
Parent Influence	3.8%	15.8%	Women
Sibling Influence	6.6%	5.3%	Same
Extended family Influence	9.9%	5.3%	Men
Friend Influence	35.7%	13.2%	Men
ISIS Recruiter Influence	25.3%	7.9%	Men
Preacher Influence	19.8%	0.0%	Men
Internet Recruiter Influence	10.5%	18.4%	Women
Passive YouTube Influence	24.7%	13.1%	Men
Passive Facebook Influence	11.6%	7.9%	Men
Passive Twitter Influence	5.5%	7.9%	Same
Passive WhatsApp Influence	1.6%	2.6%	Same
Passive Telegram Influence	1.6%	0.0%	Men
Passive Other Internet Influence	1.1%	0.0%	Men
Mainstream Media Influence	19.2%	10.5%	Men
Prison Influence	5.5%	0.0%	Men

Table 3: Influences cited by the male and female participants as to why they joined the terrorist group. Out of the total 16 influence factors, only three (sibling influence, passive Twitter influence, and passive WhatsApp influence) were mentioned the same number of times by both men and women. The top three cited influences for men were "Friend Influence, ISIS Recruiter Influence, and Passive YouTube Influence". The top three cited influences for women were "Spouse/Partner Influence, Internet Recruiter Influence, and Friend Influence." Note: Participants could have mentioned more than one type of influence.

Vulnerability	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Majority
Criminal History	13.7%	5.3%	Men
Prison History	10.4%	0.0%	Men
Emotional Abuse	0.0%	7.9%	Women
Physical Abuse	1.7%	7.9%	Women
Sexual Abuse	0.0%	2.6%	Women
Emotional Neglect	1.7%	0.0%	Men
Physical Neglect	0.0%	0.0%	Women
Domestic Violence Exposure	1.7%	5.4%	Women
Household Substance Abuse	1.7%	7.9%	Women
Household Mental Illness	2.2%	0.0%	Men
Parental Separation/Divorce	8.8%	21.0%	Women
Incarcerated Household Member	1.1%	5.2%	Women
Deceased Parent	12.1%	7.9%	Men
Unmarried Parents	1.1%	7.9%	Women
Father Had Multiple Wives	5.0%	0.0%	Men
Family Conflict	9.3%	23.6%	Women
Personal Substance Abuse	13.2%	5.3%	Men
Poverty	24.2%	26.3%	Same
Left Home Early	2.7%	10.5%	Women
Personal Divorce	3.8%	7.9%	Women
Unemployment/Underemployment	19.2%	2.6%	Men
Prior Trauma	11.6%	23.6%	Women

Table 4: Factors that made the men and women more vulnerable to joining the terrorist group.

Out of the 22 vulnerability factors both men and women only mentioned "poverty" the same number of times. The top three vulnerability factors mentioned by male participants were "Poverty, Unemployment/Underemployment, and Criminal History". The top three vulnerability factors mentioned by women were, "Poverty, Prior Trauma, and Family Conflict". Note: Participants could have mentioned more than one vulnerability factor.

Motivation	Men Mentioned	Women Mentioned	Majority
Basic Needs	18.70%	13.2%	Same
Employment	22.6%	5.3%	Men
Personal/Family Safety	4.4%	13.2%	Women
Family Ties	4.4%	42.1%	Women
Immediate Sexual gratification	0.0%	0.0%	N/A
Emotional Relationship Escape	5.5%	0.0%	Men
Adventure	4.4%	2.6%	Men
Romance	0.5%	15.8%	Women
Masculine Identity	1.7%	N/A	N/A
Feminine Identity	N/A	5.3%	N/A
Islamic Identity	28.6%	50.0%	Women
Discrimination	7.2%	13.2%	Women
Ideology-Related Hassling	3.3%	2.6%	Same
Ideology-Related Arrest	0.5%	0.0%	Same
Belonging	6.0%	5.3%	Same
Personal Significance	8.8%	5.3%	Men
Helping Purpose	30.8%	21.0%	Men
Anger Purpose	13.2%	2.6%	Men
Caliphate Ideology	22.5%	13.1%	Same
Jihad Ideology	19.3%	7.9%	Men
Hijra Ideology	9.3%	7.9%	Same
Takfir Ideology	2.2%	2.6%	Same
Anti-Western Ideology	6.6%	0.0%	Men
Sunni Rights	11.5%	0.0%	Men
Eternal Rewards	4.4%	5.3%	Same
Eternal Honor	0.5%	0.0%	Same
Redemption/Forgiveness	1.1%	2.6%	Women
Rehabilitation	5.5%	0.0%	Men
Fear of Hell	1.6%	5.3%	Women
Tricked	0.5%	2.6%	Women

Table 5: Motivation factors mentioned by the male and female interview participants. Out of the 30 motivation factors, nine factors ("Basic needs, ideology-related hassling, ideology-related arrest, belonging, caliphate ideology, hijra ideology, takfir ideology, eternal rewards, and eternal honor") were mentioned the same number of times across both genders. The top three motivators mentioned by male participants were, "Helping Purpose, Islamic Identity, and Employment".

The top three motivators mentioned by female participants were, "Islamic Identity, Family Ties, and Helping Purpose". Note: Participants could have mentioned more than one motivating factor.

Discussion

The data set from the interviews contained a total 220 participants, 182 men, and 38 women. The difference the total number of men and women is important for two reasons, first it highlights the differences in participation numbers between men and women. Second, it can speak towards the fact that it is even more difficult to reach women who have participated in these activities perhaps due to cultural or religious restrictions. The combined number of factors between the "Influences, vulnerabilities, and Motivations" tables are sixty-eight, out of those only thirteen factors are mentioned the equally across both genders. This implies that counter-terrorism strategies cannot be designed to target just one gender but must be implemented so that the unique factors of both genders are considered. A possible explanation for some of the differences in the number of times a factor is mentioned more by one gender than the other is the culture and customs of the interviewees.

The datasets support the hypothesis that while men and women can have common motivations for joining a terrorist organization, each gender has its unique factors as well. For example, 55.3% of the females interviewed mentioned "Spouse/Partner Influence" as a factor in what led them to joining the group while only 2.2% of the males mentioned the same factor. Similarly, 22.6% of the males listed "Employment" as a motivation factor while only 5.3% mentioned the same motivation. A possible explanation for some of the differences in the number of times a factor is mentioned more by one gender than the other is the culture and customs of the interviewees. For example, many Islamic sects believe that a women must obey and listen to her husband hence the reason 55.3% of women listed their spouse as an influence as opposed to the 2.2% of men who mentioned the same reasoning. The same concept can be used

to explain the discrepancies between the number of times men mentioned "employment" related reasons to that of women. In many Islamic disciplines, males are expected to be responsible for finances and providing for the family which is why employment might be bigger motivating factor for men than women to join a terrorist group.

There are some factors like "employment, poverty, family, religion" that are mentioned multiple times as influences, vulnerabilities and motivators. These specific factors are consistent with the motivations in the above-mentioned research studies and literature. For instance, many of the authors mentioned poverty and religious-ideology as common motives for someone to join a terrorist organization[37], the majority of factors mentioned by both men and women (Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5) can fall into the same broader categories related to poverty and religious ideology. All the risk factors that can make someone more susceptible to joining a terrorist group as mentioned by Allison G. Smith, i.e.,

- o Having a history of criminal violence
- o Having a Terrorist Friend
- o Having a Deep Commitment to an Extremist Ideology
- o Being Unemployed
- o Being socially isolated
- o Having Psychological Issues
- o Having a Lower Socio-Economic Status
- o Being distant from one's family
- o Being Single
- o Living alone
- o Being Male[38]

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[37] Brown, Ryan Andrew, Todd C. Helmus, Rajeev Ramchand, Alina I. Palimaru, Sarah Weilant, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Liisa Hiatt, What Do Former Extremists and Their Families Say About Radicalization and Deradicalization in America? Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1071-1.html.; Borum, Randy. "Contemporary Psychological Research on Terrorism." Essay. In *Psychology of Terrorism*, 22–29. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 2004.; Office of Justice Programs, and Allison G. Smith, Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us (2018); Yayla, Ahmet S. "Prevention of Recruitment to Terrorism." Essay. In *HANDBOOK OF TERRORISM PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS*, edited by Alex P Schmid, 1st ed., 412–57. The Hague: International Centre for Counterterrorism, 2020.
[38] (OJP and Smith, ii-iii)

are all (or somewhat similarly) mentioned either as an influence, vulnerability, or motivational factor by males, females, or both. The findings (majority mentioning religion or finance related motivations) from the content analysis were also consistent with the results from the dataset above and the cited scholarship. Knowing that these factors can make someone more likely to join a terrorist organization can be used as guidance for establishing policies and strategies to combat the aspects of terrorist specifically related to these factors. Furthermore, knowing that these factors, even if they are common across both genders, can vary in how much they influence men versus women or vice versa and that in turn factors in the counterterrorism strategy calculus.

Motivational factors for terrorism stemming from religion or political based ideologies are more difficult to counter than motives stemming from factors related to poverty or community because it's difficult to change mindsets and beliefs that have been engraved in these communities for years by persevered figures and religious leaders in the community. Both men and women mentioned "helping others" as a motive for joining a terrorist organization, Speckhard's research study mentions that "helping others" in many cases was the individual's way of helping the people of Syria through joining ISIS and fighting Bashar Assad's regime for his injustices.[39] Like religion, perceived injustices are not likely to diminish or change through Western anti-terror campaigns because in situations like these the individuals have personal experience relating to the events in Syria making it easier for ISIS to recruit them for its agendas. Local and foreign governments can try to create more jobs and offer financial assistance to offset poverty related challenges but it's more difficult to change mindsets when in many cases terrorist propaganda villainizes governments, especially Western ones.

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[39] (Speckhard 90-106)

Conclusion

This paper aimed to highlight the differences between males and females when it comes to motivations for joining terrorist groups and organizations. Existing scholarship on this topic and the research conducted in this study indicates that men and women can in fact have different motivations when it comes to participating in terrorist organizations and activities. Additionally, external factors such as socio-economic status, personal circumstances, education levels also play a role in what can motivate someone to join these groups or more vulnerable to recruitment. While this research is helpful in gaining deeper context behind motives across both genders, a study with an equal male and female sample size would provide opportunities for deeper analyses. Gaining an understanding of these factors and motivators can and should be used to develop effective counter-terrorism strategies that offer a permanent solution.

Terrorism is not a problem that is going disappear overnight or probably even within the next decade. There is still so much on the topic that is unknown the difficulties associated with conducting research on the topic only exacerbates the issue. Further avenues of research on this topic can include examining members or former members of groups other than ISIS or Islamic-based groups in general, studying different motivations between genders on violent-groups whose ideologies are more political rather than religious. Environments where classified research can be conducted on the topic should be more focused towards examining the issue by focusing on the underlying causes rather than identifying quick and temporary solutions.

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Curriculum Vitae

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