

# The future of the Islamic State's Women: assessing their potential threat

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All former Islamic State members pose a unique threat or lack thereof based on their individual circumstances, but female members of the Islamic State seem to generate a particularly polarized response. Practitioners need to integrate gender analysis into their assessment of individual members of the Islamic State in order to understand the potential threat that these men and women pose and mitigate that threat effectively. To do so, practitioners need to understand the wide variety of roles that women have played in the Islamic State, how conflating women in the oft-used “women and children” of the Islamic State has in downplaying the agency of women, and how gendered media reporting can introduce bias into counter-terrorism practitioner’s assessment of the threat. This article will explore each of these issues and present an approach to assessing the potential threat posed by women in the Islamic state.

## Introduction

In recent months, the question of what to do with foreign members<sup>1</sup> of the Islamic State has been overshadowed by the global COVID19 pandemic. The health crisis should instead result in an increased focus on the issue. Foreign Islamic State members are being held in crowded prisons and camps, and are at serious risk of being infected by the virus and further spread the virus. Despite this, little action has been taken to deal with the foreign members of the Islamic State. Currently, four main options are being exercised by states, but without coordination or consensus: hold them in (indeterminate) detention in Syria, try them for their crimes in Syria or Iraq, try them at an international tribunal, or repatriate them to their home countries to face arrest, prosecution, and/or reintegration.<sup>2</sup> All of these options present risks in terms of potential re-engagement by the foreign members of the Islamic State. All former Islamic State members pose a unique threat<sup>3</sup> (or lack thereof) based on their individual circumstances, but female members of the Islamic State seem to generate a particularly polarized response. Ultimately, practitioners need to integrate gender analysis into their assessment of individual members of the Islamic State in order to understand the potential threat that these men and women pose and mitigate that threat effectively. To do so, practitioners need to understand the wide variety of roles that women have played in the Islamic State, how conflating women in the oft-used “women and children” of the Islamic State has in downplaying the agency of women, and how gendered media reporting can introduce bias into counter-terrorism practitioner’s assessment of the threat. This article will explore each of these issues and present an approach to assessing the potential threat posed by women in the Islamic state. Policy recommendations flowing from this analysis include:

- a. The development/implementation of gender awareness training for counter-terrorism practitioners and the development of tools and policies to support intelligence and evidence collection based on threat (and not just gender);
- b. The development of standardized threat assessment tools that incorporate (but do not rely solely on) gender;

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, membership in the Islamic State is conceived broadly. This categorization does not address the nuances of different recruitment schemes or the role of coercion. Coerced recruitment has only minimal bearing on the current threat that individuals may pose due to the shifting nature of intent, indoctrination processes, etc. It remains highly relevant for the potential prosecution of Islamic State members, however, and this article acknowledges that there is no binary distinction between perpetrator and victim in the case of members of the Islamic State – many are both.

<sup>2</sup> See Leah West, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Jessica Davis, Policy Options. “Where’s the Plan for Canadian ISIS Members in Custody Overseas?” Accessed November 20, 2019, Brian Jenkins, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. “Options for Dealing with Islamic State Foreign Fighters Currently Detained in Syria,” May 29, 2019. <https://ctc.usma.edu/options-dealing-islamic-state-foreign-fighters-currently-detained-syria/>, and Emma Broches, “Accountability for Islamic State Fighters: What Are the Options? - Lawfare.” Accessed November 20, 2019. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/accountability-islamic-state-fighters-what-are-options>.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article, threat is defined as intent and capability to engage in terrorist activity, drawing on a similar definition in Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman. “Indicators of terrorist intent and capability: Tools for threat assessment.” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 3 (2015): 215-231. Terrorist activity itself refers to travelling to join a terrorist group, conducting terrorist attacks (or attempting to), and supporting terrorist groups and terrorist actors through activities such as financing. Practitioner literature also suggests considering planning and preparation activities as part of the threat assessment in investigations. Canadian Security Intelligence Service Indicators of Mobilization to Violence (Terrorism). Available from [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/csis-scrs/documents/publications/IMV\\_-\\_Terrorism-Research-Key-findings-eng.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/csis-scrs/documents/publications/IMV_-_Terrorism-Research-Key-findings-eng.pdf) Accessed 2019 11 01

- c. The analysis of prior counter-terrorism investigations potentially impacted by gender bias and identification of lessons learned;
- d. The development of media training and guidelines for reporting on women / gender in terrorism; and
- e. A commitment from policy advocates and practitioners to assess and treat women and children separately terms of their criminal responsibility and potential threat.

The implementation of these policies internationally will help states assess the potential threat posed by female members (or former members) of the Islamic State in a way that incorporates gender, but is not blinded by it, ensuring a more accurate and evidence-based approach to threat assessment and counter-terrorism practices.

## Women's roles within the Islamic State

Women were recruited into the Islamic State on an unprecedented scale,<sup>4</sup> enabled by modern communication technologies that helped women overcome traditional barriers to entry into terrorist groups such as lack of information about the group, lack of extremist social network, and a lack of publicized role for women.<sup>5</sup> Understanding the roles that these women played in the group can inform assessments about their potential for further terrorist activity. Their prior roles, training, and capabilities can speak to future possibilities and their likelihood of success, although this will also be informed by whether or not they maintain a terrorist intent. Many women also engaged in terrorist activity without formally joining the Islamic State – instead, they perpetrated (or attempted to perpetrate) attacks in the name of the group outside of Islamic State territory, or supported the group in other ways.

One of the most visible roles for women in the Islamic state proper was that of mother and wife, but they were also recruiters<sup>6</sup> and enforcers of sharia law, served in the Islamic State's intelligence apparatus<sup>7</sup> and in other aspects of the state and its institutions.<sup>8</sup> While women were first recruited into the Islamic State to fill less operational roles, a shift in the Islamic State's official position on women in combat occurred between December 2016 and July 2017. In December 2016, women were encouraged to engage in defensive jihad, while by July 2017, they were encouraged to "take up arms in combative jihad."<sup>9</sup> The group's first attempted female suicide bombing occurred in

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<sup>4</sup> Gina Vale, *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*, ICCT Policy Brief, October 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Davis, *Women in modern terrorism: from liberation wars to global jihad and the Islamic State*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 2-3

<sup>6</sup> See Alexandra Sims, "Sally Jones: Isis recruiter 'issues series of terror threats against UK cities' over Twitter", *The Independent*, 25 May 2016, available from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/sally-jones-isis-recruiter-issues-series-of-terror-threats-to-uk-cities-over-twitter-a7049066.html> accessed 2019 11 01, and Rachel Davis, "What Do They See? A Look at the Appeal of IS to Young Muslim Women Raised in the United Kingdom", *Illini Journal of International Security*, 1:1

<sup>7</sup> Vera Mironova, Ekaterina Sergatskova, & Karam Alhamad, "ISIS' Intelligence Service Refuses to Die" *Foreign Affairs*. November 22, 2017. Available from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2017-11-22/isis-intelligence-service-refuses-die> Accessed 2017 11 24

<sup>8</sup> Hamoon Khelghat-Doost, "The Strategic Logic of Women in Jihadi Organizations." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 10 (2019): 853-877, p.868

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Winter & Devorah Margolin, *The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State*, CTC Sentinel 10(7), August 2017

February 2017,<sup>10</sup> while the group's first successful attack by a woman occurred in June 2017.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the foreign women in the Islamic State aspired to carry out attacks, be they in Syria, Iraq, or in their country of origin, and they may have been trained in this activity.<sup>12</sup> According to the returnees interviewed by French journalist David Thomson, all the women in the Islamic State wanted to fight.<sup>13</sup> The group may have actively encouraged women to train as female suicide bombers: they established the Al-Zawra school, which provided education and training for women, including in explosive belts and suicide bombings as well as domestic work, first aid, Islam and Sharia law, social media and computer programs.<sup>14</sup> There were also other sporadic media reports of women being trained as suicide bombers for the group. For instance, in October 2016, news reports surfaced of a woman thought to be responsible for recruiting female suicide bombers. She was reported to have fled the Islamic State with a financier for the group.<sup>15</sup> The Islamic State also referred to women engaging in combat operations in its internal documents and celebrated their actions, and there has been no evidence of an explicit and outright prohibition on women in combat.<sup>16</sup> The fall of the caliphate has affected these roles by limiting women's involvement in the state apparatus, but many roles remain intact, and in one of the largest detention facilities for women who joined the Islamic State, al-Hol camp, they continue to engage in many of these activities,<sup>17</sup> even replicating the structures of the Islamic State itself.<sup>18</sup>

There have been relatively few female suicide attacks in Syria and Iraq despite evidence suggesting the existence of trained and willing female suicide bombers within the Islamic State. It remains possible that training groups did exist, but the members were killed during the heavy fighting and bombings of 2016-2017. Alternatively, these groups may have been fictitious, meant to encourage recruitment while also serving as an information operations campaign against the group's enemies. Whatever the case, the potential for female Islamic State members to engage in a variety of terrorist activity needs to be taken seriously, and the possibility exists that some of the women currently detained in Syria were trained in combat and/or to conduct terrorist attacks.

Female supporters of the terrorist organization have not been confined to Iraq and Syria; the group also has female supporters around the world who spread propaganda, engage

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<sup>10</sup> Mohamed Mostafa, IS female bomber arrested in eastern Mosul before attacking school, Iraqi News, 27 Feb 2019, available from <https://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/female-bomber-arrested-eastern-mosul-attacking-school/> Accessed 2019 11 07

<sup>11</sup> Reuters, Female suicide bomber kills 31 in busy Iraqi market, New Straits Times, 10 June 2017, available from <https://www.nst.com.my/world/2017/06/247444/female-suicide-bomber-kills-31-busy-iraqi-market> Accessed 2019 11 07

<sup>12</sup> In this instance, this refers specifically to the foreign female contingent of the Islamic State due to lack of research on Syrian and Iraqi female members of the group.

<sup>13</sup> David Thomson, *Les Revenants. Ils étaient partis faire le jihad, ils sont de retour en France*. Le Seuil, 2016. p.180-1

<sup>14</sup> "Cooking and Killing: Islamic State Opens Finishing School for Girls", Haaretz, 18 October 2014, available from <https://www.haaretz.com/is-opens-finishing-school-for-girls-1.5316777> Accessed 2019 11 02

<sup>15</sup> Amir Abdallah, "ISIS finance and recruitment official disappear with millions of dollars", Iraqi News, October 26, 2016. Available from <http://www.iraqnews.com/iraq-war/isis-financial-recruitment-officials-disappeared-along-millions-dollars/> Accessed 2017 02 10

<sup>16</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "ISIS's Female Suicide Bombers Are No Myth" Foreign Affairs, September 22, 2017 available from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-09-22/isis-female-suicide-bombers-are-no-myth> Accessed 2019 11 01

<sup>17</sup> Gina Vale, *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*, ICCT Policy Brief, October 2019. p.6

<sup>18</sup> Natalia Sancha, "ISIS women impose their own caliphate in Syria's Al Hol camp", El Pais, 25 October 2019, available from [https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/10/25/inenglish/1571990542\\_345221.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/10/25/inenglish/1571990542_345221.html) Accessed 2019 11 01

in recruitment and radicalization activities, and plan and conduct terrorist attacks. Outside of the caliphate, women have been removed from male authority,<sup>19</sup> and have taken on operational roles. They have engaged in plots or terrorist attacks in the name of the Islamic State in a wide variety of countries including the US,<sup>20</sup> UK,<sup>21</sup> Spain,<sup>22</sup> Tunisia,<sup>23</sup> Indonesia,<sup>24</sup> and Canada,<sup>25</sup> to name a few. Women have also been involved in support activities for the Islamic State, including financing.<sup>26</sup>

These examples demonstrate the variety of roles that female Islamic State members and supporters have engaged in on behalf of the group, above and beyond the role of wife or mother. Understanding these roles should inform future assessments of the potential threat female members of the Islamic State may pose, and open avenues for investigation into terrorist activity beyond that of individuals engaging in attack planning – many of these support roles are crucial for the survival and development of terrorist groups, including future iterations of the Islamic State.

## Gendered reporting on women in political violence

The counter-terrorism response to women in the Islamic State has likely been influenced by the highly gendered language used by media when reporting on the subject, despite evidence of the wide variety of roles that women have held in the Islamic State. A cursory glance at media reporting reveals those biases:<sup>27</sup> women in the Islamic State have been called “ISIS Wives”, “Jihadi brides”, “ISIS Widow”, etc.”<sup>28</sup> In reality, women have played (and continue to play) a much wider number of roles than simply “mother” or “wife” in the Islamic State. The unfortunate combination of “women and children” is also

<sup>19</sup> Gina Vale, *Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps*, ICCT Policy Brief, October 2019. p.9

<sup>20</sup> Lizzie Crocker & Dana Kennedy, *Is Tashfeen Malik a New Kind of Female Terrorist?*, Daily Beast, 2015 04 12. Available from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/is-tashfeen-malik-a-new-kind-of-female-terrorist> Accessed 2019 11 01

<sup>21</sup> Lucia Binding, “Woman charged with planning to bomb St Paul’s Cathedral”. Sky News, 16 October 2019, available from <https://news.sky.com/story/woman-charged-with-plot-to-plant-bombs-in-central-london-11837197>

<sup>22</sup> Dilip Kuner, “Double blow to jihadists in Spain”, EuroWeekly, 23 July 2019, available from <https://www.euroweeklynnews.com/2019/07/23/double-blow-to-jihadists-in-spain/> Accessed 2019 11 02

<sup>23</sup> “Tunisia Security Forces Arrest 4 Active Terror Rings”, Aawsat, 1 December 2018, available from <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1486326/tunisia-security-forces-arrest-4-active-terror-rings>

<sup>24</sup> “How Indonesian women are lured to jihad”, DW, 14 May 2018, available from <http://www.dw.com/en/how-indonesian-women-are-lured-to-jihad/a-43781840>

<sup>25</sup> Shaliza Bacchus, “Woman facing terror-related charges in alleged Canadian Tire attack continues to decline counsel”, CBC news, 11 October 2017, available from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/rehab-dughmosh-superior-court-1.4349523> Accessed 2019 11 02

<sup>26</sup> Jason Keyser, *Mother of four charged in Chicago with helping ISIS and Al Qaeda*, Christian Science Monitor. February 7, 2015. Available from <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Latest-News-Wires/2015/0207/Mother-of-four-charged-in-Chicago-with-helping-ISIS-and-Al-Qaeda> Accessed 2019 11 02

<sup>27</sup> There is an extensive body of research on representations of female militancy in the media. See: Brigitte L Nacos, “The portrayal of female terrorists in the media: Similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 435-451, Maura Conway and Lisa McInerney. “What’s love got to do with it? Framing ‘JihadJane’ in the US press.” *Media, War & Conflict* 5, no. 1 (2012): 6-21, and Alice Martini, “Making women terrorists into “Jihadi brides”: an analysis of media narratives on women joining ISIS.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): 458-477.

<sup>28</sup> This list was compiled as part of an informal Twitter survey. Contributors to the list include Alexis Henshaw, Naureen Fink, Joana Cook, and many others through the course of their commentary on the media’s use of language in describing women of the Islamic State. See: @jessmarindavis, TWITTER (March 5, 2019, 7:40am) <https://twitter.com/JessMarinDavis/status/1181001748892307456>

frequently used, diminishing perceptions of women's agency in terrorist activity and equating their mental capacity and criminal liability with that of children.

The gendered nature of reporting on women engaging in terrorism and political violence has implications for practitioners and scholars alike. While media reports tend to sensationalize the role of women and award disproportionate media attention to an attack perpetrated by a woman,<sup>29</sup> their motive is often questioned and tend to emphasize personal issues and motivations instead of political ones. Gendered reporting has the potential to impact whether or not the attack gets included in datasets about terrorist incidents. In other cases, the gender of the attacker is not reported at all (and/or assumed to be male). As a potential consequence of this type of reporting, many open source datasets on terrorist incidents have under-reported women's involvement or have not captured gender as a variable. The lack of the inclusion of gender as a variable in these datasets means that scholarly work looking to include gender is more difficult. Ultimately, when media reporting and scholarly research on the issue of terrorism excludes an analysis of gender, or includes gender as an explanatory (or exculpatory) factor, this can impact how practitioners perceive the threat of female terrorists.

## What now for the women of the Islamic State?

In the near term, there are several potential outcomes for the women who joined the Islamic State. For those that no longer support the group, the threat they pose is likely minimal, although their assertion of abandoning the group and ideology needs validation (through ongoing monitoring of those individuals, as no reliable "de-radicalization" test currently exists), particularly in light of research that suggests that terrorism re-engagement / recidivism rates are somewhere between 3%<sup>30</sup> and 61%.<sup>31</sup> Those that remain supporters of the group and in detention in the region will continue to impose a mini-caliphate that may serve to support the remnants of the Islamic State and impose Islamic State ideology on their children. This could have very little impact on the insurgency or could provide logistical support to the group, but is most likely to have a modest impact on morale for the Islamic State fighters, given the restrictions on the women in detention.

Alternatively, the foreign women may be repatriated to their home countries where they may face prosecution. Many states have struggled with the prosecution of their citizens (particularly women) who travelled to join the Islamic State due to issues around collection of both intelligence and evidence in the conflict zone, but also potentially related to lack of prioritization of evidence collection for the women in the Islamic State, combined with a poor understanding of the roles they may have held in the Islamic State. Women may have been assigned fewer investigative resources over the course of their time with the Islamic State due to the perception that they were less of a threat. Some women may also escape from detention in Syria, following which they may attempt to return to their home countries (an option for foreign women), may attempt to travel to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.1

<sup>30</sup> Depending on whether the authors studied re-engagement or recidivism, the rates vary significantly. For a thorough discussion on the state of the literature on terrorist recidivism and re-engagement, see Thomas Renard, "Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 4 (April 28, 2020), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/overblown-exploring-the-gap-between-the-fear-of-terrorist-recidivism-and-the-evidence/>.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle, and John G. Horgan. "Returning to the Fight: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Reengagement and Recidivism." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, November 18, 2019, 1–25

other theatres of Islamic State activity, or may try to rejoin the remnants of the group. In any of these cases, the individual threat they pose needs to be assessed, and appropriate counter-terrorism action taken.

## Implications for Practitioners

Concerns exist about whether law enforcement and security services in most (if not all) countries demonstrate a bias in their understanding of women who engage in political violence or support terrorist groups. In a US context, Alexander and Turkington demonstrated that “men and women engaged in terrorism-related activity receive differential treatment from government institutions.”<sup>32</sup> In Canada, Schmidt found that gender (and racial) stereotypes affect counter-terrorism work.<sup>33</sup> In Europe, legal response to female jihadists has been found to be less “muscular” than responses to male jihadists; when women are charged, their sentences vary significantly.<sup>34</sup> These studies point to potentially broader issues in counter-terrorism in terms of biased threat assessments: gender stereotypes can lead flawed assessments of the threat that individuals pose and result in differential treatment based on gender rather than intent and capability.

In the near term, the sheer number of preconditions and factors that can set the stage for terrorism over the long run<sup>35</sup> prevent accurate analysis about whether or not the women of the Islamic State will engage in more suicide attacks. However, long-term trends indicate that women will increasingly engage in operational terrorist activity, and their involvement in operational support roles such as financing, logistical support, and recruitment has been underestimated. Practitioners should expect an increasing presence of women in terrorist organizations of all types and in all roles.

Statistically speaking, women have primarily been wives and mothers in the Islamic State and to a lesser extent have taken on more operational roles. But counter-terrorism practitioners cannot concern themselves solely with statistical likelihood; they must be alert for outliers, in this case women, inspired or directed by the Islamic State, engaging in terrorist activity. Understanding how individuals came to join the Islamic State will be important, although capabilities developed while with the group, and current intent, speak most strongly to potential threat. Many Islamic State members will (and do) claim to have abandoned their extremist ideas. These assertions need to be verified and their actions will need to be monitored to ensure that they do not engage in terrorist activities.

How long individuals will need to be monitored will vary greatly, but some may require monitoring for years.<sup>36</sup> Recent studies have found that there was a relatively high re-engagement rate for individuals who involuntarily collectively disengaged from terrorist activity,<sup>37</sup> as is potentially the case for many Islamic State women. While judgements

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<sup>32</sup> Audrey Alexander & Rebecca Turkington, Treatment of Terrorists: How Does Gender Affect Justice? CTC Sentinel. September 2018, 11(8)

<sup>33</sup> Rachel Schmidt, “Addressing Stereotypes and Unconscious Bias in Canadian Counter-Terrorism: Where Does GBA+ Fit In?” Forthcoming (2019). SSHRC & GAC: International Policy Initiatives Challenge.

<sup>34</sup> Florence Gaub and Julia Lisiecka, Women in Daesh: Jihadist ‘cheerleaders’, alive operatives? European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Brief, October 2016, available from [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_27\\_Women\\_in\\_Daesh.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_27_Women_in_Daesh.pdf) Accessed 2019 11 16

<sup>35</sup> Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*, Routledge, 2011, p.34–43.

<sup>36</sup> David Malet & Rachel Hayes, Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1-19.

<sup>37</sup> Altier, Leonard Boyle, and Horgan, “Returning to the Fight.” p.12

about how long an individual will need to be monitored cannot be derived from statistical evidence, that evidence can inform overall policies and planning activities in terms of resource allocation. Malet & Hayes' research on foreign fighter recidivism provides a good baseline, suggesting that most "foreign fighters" will need to be monitored for at least six months, but some for as long as three years.

A number of policy recommendations should be implemented by law enforcement and security services, and in some cases by international organizations with counter-terrorism mandates, in order to address the threat that female members of the Islamic State could pose, and better position counter-terrorism practitioners to detect and deter the ongoing participation of women in terrorist groups:

1. States should implement enhanced gender awareness training for counter-terrorism practitioners (in law enforcement and security services certainly, but also for anyone working in counter-terrorism policy and practice) with a specific emphasis on the role of women in the Islamic State and other terrorist groups. Research has demonstrated that terrorist laws and counterterrorism measures, specifically in Europe, the United States, and Canada have focused on men rather than women as a terrorist threat. Inconsistencies in how female and male members of the Islamic State are dealt with work to the advantage of female members, who are usually acquitted of offences.<sup>38</sup> This training should not be confined to "gender specialists"<sup>39</sup> and should apply broadly across case managers, intelligence collectors, and analysts, as well as others tasked with decisions around intelligence and evidence collection and threat assessment. This training will also position practitioners to anticipate women's involvement in future terrorist groups.
2. All states with individuals who joined the Islamic State should develop tools and policies to ensure that intelligence and evidence is collected for all individuals suspected of joining the group. Ensuring the collection of evidence and intelligence for all genders will help prevent law enforcement and security services from succumbing to a "positive security bias."<sup>40</sup> Members of the Islamic State (male and female, and in detention and not), comprise a diverse population, and the level of threat they may represent is varied as well.<sup>41</sup> This will also help to ensure that resources are assigned appropriately with an eye to both threat mitigation and possible prosecution, and support objective and evidence-based threat assessments. International organizations working to collect evidence of crimes committed by Islamic State members should also consider how gender may impact their work, particularly around evidence and assumptions about women's roles in atrocities and crimes against humanity.
3. Law enforcement and security services should develop standardized threat assessment tools that make practitioners' judgements about the threat explicit. This

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<sup>38</sup> Florence Gaub and Julia Lisiecka, Women in Daesh: Jihadist 'cheerleaders', alive operatives? European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Brief, October 2016, available from [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_27\\_Women\\_in\\_Daesh.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_27_Women_in_Daesh.pdf) Accessed 2019 11 16

<sup>39</sup> Gender specialists are often women, and in Schmidt's article, one interviewee referred to this as the "gender ghetto," describing how isolated this function can be in counter-terrorism spaces. Schmidt, p.9

<sup>40</sup> Florence Gaub and Julia Lisiecka, Women in Daesh: Jihadist 'cheerleaders', alive operatives? European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) Brief, October 2016, available from [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief\\_27\\_Women\\_in\\_Daesh.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_27_Women_in_Daesh.pdf) Accessed 2019 11 16

<sup>41</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, Options for Dealing with Islamic State Foreign Fighters Currently Detained in Syria, CTC Sentinel, May/June 2019 12 (5)

can help ensure that considerations of gender are included but do not dominate the assessment. It is critical that standardized assessment tools be used (at the very least) within a jurisdiction; ideally, these assessment tools could be standardized across jurisdictions with similar legal frameworks to deal with terrorism, and best practices shared.<sup>42</sup> As legal and social procedures are developed to deal with the return of ISIL members to their home countries, the risk is that women may “slip through the cracks” and play a role in future ISIL-directed or inspired violence.<sup>43</sup> Standardizing and implementing these tools would help prevent female Islamic State members from ‘jurisdiction shopping,’ looking for the jurisdiction in which they are less likely to be successfully prosecuted or surveilled.

4. Law enforcement and security services should engage in a reflexive research and lessons learned exercises to shed light on how prior counter-terrorism investigations and measures may have been influenced by assumptions about gender roles. Identifying specific cases and possible measures and policies (in addition to the above) to prevent recurrence can also reduce the risk of underestimating the potential threat posed by women.<sup>44</sup>
5. International organizations and member states should support the development of media training and guidelines around the reporting of women / gender in terrorism and political violence. This training and these guidelines should be developed with an eye to accuracy in reporting and reducing the sensationalism of reporting (particularly as relates to women in terrorism), while providing background information to media about how women have engaged in political violence historically. Ensuring accurate and neutral reporting about women could also help shift practitioner responses to women in terrorism and political violence.
6. International organizations such as the United Nations should emphasize the need to treat women and children as separate entities, and indeed each person as an individual, with their potential threat assessed accordingly. Encouraging states to see children as much less of a threat (if one at all), and women as potential perpetrators of crime,<sup>45</sup> is likely to be the best approach.

In any counter-terrorism investigation, individual assessments of the threat is required.<sup>46</sup> Judgements cannot be made simply based on gender or age or statistical probability. At the same time, these are factors that speak to possible terrorism pathways and avenues

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<sup>42</sup> Department of Homeland Security, Countering Violent Extremism: The Use of Assessment Tools for Measuring Violence Risk, Literature Review, March 2017, available from [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OPSR\\_TP\\_CVE-Use-Assessment-Tools-Measuring-Violence-Risk\\_Literature-Review\\_March2017-508.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/OPSR_TP_CVE-Use-Assessment-Tools-Measuring-Violence-Risk_Literature-Review_March2017-508.pdf) Accessed 2019 11 16

<sup>43</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Vivian Hagerty, and Logan MacNair, The Emigrant Sisters Return: The Growing Role of the Islamic State's Women, War on the Rocks, 2 April 2018, available from <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/the-emigrant-sisters-return-the-growing-role-of-the-islamic-states-women/>

<sup>44</sup> For literature on the importance of lessons learned in counter-terrorism, see Erik J Dahl, “The Plots That Failed: Intelligence Lessons Learned from Unsuccessful Terrorist Attacks Against the United States.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 8 (August 1, 2011): 621–48, and Gregory F. Treverton, “Terrorism, Intelligence and Law Enforcement: Learning the Right Lessons.” *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 121–40.

<sup>45</sup> While this policy brief focuses on the threat that women may pose, many women (and men) in the Islamic State may have also been victims of crimes.

<sup>46</sup> Radicalization and mobilization to terrorist action are “distinct but intertwined processes, and the relationship between them is unique to each individual.” Indicators of Mobilization to Violence (Terrorism). Canadian Security Intelligence Service (report). Available from [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/csis-scrs/documents/publications/IMV\\_-\\_Terrorism-Research-Key-findings-eng.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/csis-scrs/documents/publications/IMV_-_Terrorism-Research-Key-findings-eng.pdf)

for disengagement and de-radicalization,<sup>47</sup> as well as likely threat. Law enforcement and security services should be prepared for all possibilities in their assessment of women in the Islamic State while also considering the possibility that any member of the Islamic State (regardless of gender) may choose to voluntarily disengage from the group and ideology. To date, the policy discussion surrounding Islamic State members (both former and current) has stagnated on these factors. It is incumbent upon practitioners to see all members of the Islamic State as potential threats and assess them accordingly. Fundamentally, an evidence-based approach to threat assessment is critical, but this remains a challenge, particularly in dealing with gender. As Nacos succinctly put it in 2005, “the implementation of anti- and counterterrorist policies must not be influenced by the mass-mediated images of female terrorists because they do not reflect reality.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Rachel Schmidt, "Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies." Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society, 2018

<sup>48</sup> Brigitte L Nacos, "The portrayal of female terrorists in the media: Similar framing patterns in the news coverage of women in politics and in terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28(5) (2005): 435-451 p.435

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# The future of the Islamic State's Women: Assessing their potential threat

Jessica Davis

8 June 2020

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