

February 2022

Tactical Mistakes: Women's Role in Terrorism

Laura Daniel
Liberty University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp>



Part of the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Military and Veterans Studies Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daniel, Laura (2022) "Tactical Mistakes: Women's Role in Terrorism," *Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol2/iss2/8>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

Introduction

Women have played a role in terrorism for decades both abroad and domestically. From Samantha Lewthwaite to Puji Kuswati, women have committed grievous acts in the name of terrorist organizations and their ideologies. While women oftentimes work primarily from behind the scenes in these organizations by transporting weapons and materials, raising funds for the organization, and turning out propaganda to gain more recruits and increase their standing on the world stage, they also play a part in actively violent acts such as suicide bombings and as “freedom” fighters. Women are woven into terror organizations in many roles that are both important and necessary for the groups continued survival. For many in Western society it is unthinkable that women could be terrorists or willing participants in acts of terrorism, given the common conception of women as nurturers and providers.¹ However, history in both previous decades and more recent years reveals multiple examples of the significant role that women have played in active violent terrorism. This significance is often underestimated by counterterror officials and thus leads to less effective counterterror policies being enacted. Understanding the full scope of the multitude and importance of the roles that women could play in terrorist organizations is key for counterterrorism policy be made to effectively combat and deradicalize female terrorists.

Brief History of Women in Terrorism

Many people typically equate terrorism with male-dominated leadership, but historically and culturally this is not always true.² Women have had a long history of participating in terrorist acts as well as orchestrating them from the sidelines. One such example is Samantha Lewthwaite, a 29 year old British citizen who was present in the terror attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in 2013. In this attack she was seen not only participating in the killing of hostages but also giving orders to the other militants belonging to the Al-Shabab terror group. She has been accused of ordering the deaths of multiple people as well as being behind an attack on a Mombassa Police Station that consisted of six other female terrorists.³ Women also play an important role in maintain the sustainability of terror organizations through recruiting efforts and offering their children to the cause. While it is unlikely that women will ever outnumber men in recruits or operations for most groups, partially due to many terror groups’ emphasis on traditional gender roles as wives and mothers, they are still important tactically today for the surprise they can bring to attacks. This is exhibited through the unidentified woman on July 8, 2017, in Mosul who detonated an explosive device while being escorted through the city ruins by Iraqi Security Forces,⁴ the 35 women in 2008 who carried out suicide bombings in Iraq, and the 80 women that were recruited by Samira Ahmed Jassim in Iraq to carry out attacks north of the city of Baghdad in 2009.⁵

¹ Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, “Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism,” *Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge* 24 (May 2011): Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes: Outskirts online journal: The University of Western Australia (uwa.edu.au)

² R. Kim Gragin and Sara A. Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2009), iii.

³ Amanda A Willows, “Female Perpetrated Terrorism and Suicide Bombings” (Masters Thesis, Angelo State University, 2017), 3-4.

⁴ Charlie Winter and Devorah Margolin, “The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State,” *Combating Terrorism Center* 10, no. 7 (Aug. 2017).

⁵ Willows, “Female Perpetrated Terrorism,” 2.

In the Muslim world, women have participated in terrorism at some level for centuries. The *Mujahidaat* (female fighters carrying out *jihād*) is a term that was coined by the first historians of Islam to honor the women who protected Muhammad during the early Islamic wars of the seventh century.⁶ In these early years during the seventh century, the female fighters were defenders of not only Muhammad but also Islam—participating in *jihād* and putting all they had into defending what they believed. Historical *jihād* provides examples for modern-day jihadist women to live up to, such as Um ‘Umara who fought on the battlefield alongside men against the enemies of Islam.⁷ As centuries went on, the *Mujahidaat*’s focus on defending Islam did not change, but their tactics and how they went about achieving their goals did. Rather than remain in traditional roles such as logistics and other behind-the-scenes work, the *Mujahidaat* began to mirror their male counterparts in areas such as suicide bombing and tactical understanding. In the 1970s and 1980s, propaganda pieces were written directly to women calling them to back up their men in the cause of *jihād*, as seen in the Soviet-Afghan War, during which magazines were published by Pakistani women to call Afghan women to back their men during the war.⁸ And more recently, arguments made by Danish jihadis in the mid-2010s asserted that women are permitted to go so far as to disobey other Islamic laws when acting in defensive *jihād* against those who are hostile to Islam.⁹

What Leads Women to Terrorism?

Women have been active participants in 60% of armed rebel groups over the past decade.¹⁰ In many cases, these women carried out acts that would be classified as acts of terrorism, such as planting bombs in urban areas.¹¹ Some women join organizations by force, others voluntarily join out of belief in the ideology of the organization, and others join out of necessity for survival.¹² An example of this would be women willingly joining Boko Haram to complete Koranic education, since only 4% of girls in the regions where Boko Haram operates finish secondary school.¹³ Being used by the organization to meet its end goals is the price that many must pay when it comes to gaining resources or furthering their education. Some women are looking for protection and often resources that the terrorist organization is willing and able to provide, though it often comes at a price. Many of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers in the early 2010s were women who sought the protection of the organization.¹⁴

Women also join or participate in terrorist organizations due to their husbands’ or family members’ involvement. Women who marry into terrorist organizations often participate behind the scenes, taking care of children, indoctrinating them, and recruiting others to join their cause.¹⁵ Women also join out of religious zeal, as seen with the *Mujahidaat*. In Anyaan Ali’s book *The Challenge of Dawa*, Ali explains how the ideology of *Dawa* (pronounced Da-Wah) motivates

⁶ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E Gentry, eds., *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

⁷ Sara Jul Jacobsen, “Calling on Women: Female-Specific Motivation Narratives in Danish Online Jihad Propaganda,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Aug 2019), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Jacobson, “Calling on Women,” 17.

¹⁰ Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstien, “Women in Terrorism Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners,” *Counsel on Foreign Relations*, May 2019, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*.

religious zealots, specifically those of the Islamic faith, into *jihad*.¹⁶ *Dawa*, or “the call”, is used in the Islamic faith to call those to prayer and service; however, radical *Dawa*, as Ali points out, is more than just a call into the faith: it has been used as a call to present Islam as an alternative to western civilization.¹⁷ While it is true that some women are forced into terrorist organizations and are used, many others see it as a calling to true faith.¹⁸ It is in the radical *Dawa* ideology that many women embrace their roles as terrorist and see it as the highest calling in Islam.¹⁹

Women’s Role in Terrorist Activities

Whether a woman is led into terrorism by radicalized ideology or by force, their roles are expansive and important to their organization. Roles in logistics are an important position for women to hold. Logistics is often more appealing to women who are being recruited, as it is considered less dangerous because they are not in the direct line of fire like many *jihad* fighters, theoretically making it a more suitable job for a woman.²⁰ However, sometimes this logic of “less harm” when it comes to logistician role can be misplaced. Women made up 26 percent of all terrorism related arrests in Europe in 2017, an increase from 18 percent the previous year.²¹ The counterterrorism approach of targeting a terror groups’ logistics and propaganda outreach network means women logisticians risk arrest as well as retaliation, just like their terrorist fighters and operative counterparts.²²

Perhaps more appealing to women than logistics, however, is the role of recruiting. In this setting, they can be a part of advancing the ideology and goals of their organization without compromising family obligations to their husbands and their children. Especially in the Digital Age, women are able to spread the ideology of the group online while at the same time indoctrinating their families and children into the group’s beliefs.²³ This is highlighted by ISIS’s heavy reliance on female online recruiters, with over 40% of female members serving in the role. This made them indispensable to the organization’s recruitment efforts and spreading their ideology across the internet.²⁴ Women in recruiting roles can also be used to raise funds and spread propaganda for the group.²⁵ They have the ability to engage in mandated *jihad*, furthering their cause and ideals without facing life-threatening situations. Additionally, ISIS has taken advantage of technological advances and the softer image women present to gain new recruits. 20% of ISIS recruits from the West are women, as a result of targeted propaganda tailored to appeal to a western female audience.²⁶ In 2010, for example, Malika el-Aroud was sentenced to eight years in prison for establishing and leading a terror group in Belgium. She made use of the internet to extend her

¹⁶ Ayaan Ali, *The Challenge of Dawas*, Hoover Institute, 2017.

¹⁷ Ali, *The Challenge of Dawas*, 35.

¹⁸ Bigio and Vogelstien, “women in Terrorism,” 6.

¹⁹ Ali, *The Challenge of Dawas*.

²⁰ Gragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*.

²¹ Bigio and Vogelstien, “Women in Terrorism,” 1.

²² Gragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*.

²³ Bigio and Vogelstien, “Women in Terrorism.” 1.

²⁴ Amanda Spencer, “The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State,” *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol 9, No 3 (Fall 2016) 91-92.

²⁵ Sara Mahmood, “Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan,” *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism* February 2019, 15.

²⁶ Bigio and Vogelstien, “women in Terrorism,” 5.

reach, gathering up to 1500 hits on her website every day.²⁷ Another woman, Colleen LaRose, was self-radicalized through the internet and managed to recruit other women to the *jihad* cause before her arrest in 2009.²⁸ Counterterrorism organizations cannot overlook tactics like these because women recruiters work behind the scenes, mainly on social media platforms.²⁹

While many of the roles women play are behind the scenes, many are chosen - or even willingly choose - to take the role of suicide bomber.³⁰ Suicide bombing gives a shock factor which brings media attention to terrorist organizations thus providing a greater amount of media coverage and renown for the groups in question.³¹ These attacks have the added bonus of not only garnering media attention from the outside world and creating more martyrs to inspire their own, but they also produce the same amount of casualties and damage as attacks made by their male counterparts.³² Suicide bombing, regardless of the bomber's sex, often becomes a topic of discussion—the sensationalizing of someone willing to give themselves so fully to a cause is a strong statement. However, it is particularly disturbing to the public when the suicide bomber is a woman, as it seems to go against a woman's nature of caring and loving.³³ It is important to note, though, that suicide bombers, whether they are women or men, are not always irrational thinkers or out of their mind. Female suicide bombers are motivated by a number of different factors such as the promise of a better future in the afterlife than their current circumstances. Other factors include the idea that they will be hailed as a hero, a martyr that will be mourned and worshiped through the Islamic world. Religious beliefs alone can be a great motivating factor in women when it comes to female suicide bombing.³⁴

Tactical Mistakes of Counterterrorism Efforts in Combatting Women Terrorists

It should not be a surprise that terrorists use women in any way that they can. Terrorists know they need women, whether it be for their compassionate demeanor or family-building skills. Women in terror groups can shame men into joining in greater numbers and, particularly in those groups hoping to build a nation-state for themselves, provide longevity through family building.³⁵ However, women are often disregarded by counterterrorism efforts and are seen as the victims of circumstance rather than actors of their own free will. It is a tactical mistake to overlook the rise of women terrorists. Women are often overlooked by counterterrorism organizations, despite serving in roles ranging from fundraising and community support to the foundation of violent movements and leading positions.³⁶ Therefore, it is equally as important to acknowledge the unique role that women play in counterterrorism efforts, specifically in alleviating female terrorist threats.

²⁷ Mia M. Bloom, "In Defense of Honor: Women and Terrorist Recruitment on the Internet," *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 150.

²⁸ Willows, "Female Perpetrated Terrorism," 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*.

³¹ Mahmood, "Negating Stereotypes," 15.

³² Cyndi Banks, Introduction: Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Gendering Terrorism, *Women & Criminal Justice*, (2019) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2019.1633612>.

³³ Roxana Apalaghie, "Gender-Based Efforts to Counter Female Suicide Terrorism," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22, no.1 (2013).

³⁴ Gragin and Daly, *Women as Terrorists*.

³⁵ Mahmood, "Negating Stereotypes", 15.

³⁶ Bigio and Vogelstien, "Women in Terrorism."

Women are able to mitigate against the threat female terrorists expose counterterrorism efforts to. In the West, women have taken up positions to prevent terrorism in government departments and agencies, as well as in the private sector; women who live in the Middle East and Near-Eastern countries also possess the unique role of preventing terrorism in their countries. “Women are already on the front lines when it comes to preventing and countering violent extremism in their communities. Yet their voices remain sidelined from mainstream counterterrorism debates.”³⁷ Women are the biggest asset to countering women terrorists as they are able to view the issue from a woman’s perspective in ways that male members of the counterterrorism community cannot.³⁸

Another tactical mistake of counterterrorism is underestimating women terrorists. Gender based biases and stereotypes regarding women and their role in society continue to lead policymakers to underestimate their roles in acts of terrorism, leading to a reduction in the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts.³⁹ Women are commonly viewed as nurturers and unlikely to be a group that participates in violent actions in society.⁴⁰ Such underestimation of female-led terrorism is a dangerous mistake on western counterterrorism efforts.⁴¹ At the same time because of this common underestimation female terrorists gain advantages allowing their attacks to prove more effective and harder to anticipate or prepare for.⁴²

Female Terrorism Mitigation Methods

Mitigation of female participation does not always have to start on a federal level; these efforts start in the community, just as mitigation against male participation does. Community efforts are a useful tactic and can produce results, even if they are on a smaller scale. “Women-led civil society groups are particularly critical partners in mitigating violence, though counterterrorism efforts too often fail to enlist them.”⁴³ Unfortunately, oftentimes civil society groups that reach out to vulnerable women are not considered relevant or useful by many counterterror officials and remain underfunded, due to the focus of traditional efforts being on preventing the radicalization of men. This leads to counterterror policies that are created without input from local women who best know how to reach and prevent radicalization or deradicalize women.⁴⁴ These views are slowly changing however, as governments begin to see the dangers of ignoring such an often-overlooked danger. In March 2019, for example, the United States government passed the Women and Countering Violent Extremism Act, which acknowledges that women are active in all roles of terrorism and attempts to correct blind spots in current counterterror practices.⁴⁵ Several existing gender-based counterterror outreach programs, such as the UK-based *Prevent* program, have had limited success in deradicalizing women. They still often

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jakana L. Thomas, “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing: Assessing the Effect of Gender Norms on the Lethality of Female Suicide Terrorism.” *International Organization* 75, no. 3 (2021), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/wolves-in-sheeps-clothing-assessing-the-effect-of-gender-norms-on-the-lethality-of-female-suicide-terrorism/D9BFE04ECEDC0DC9E96818C0FBA6DE8B>

³⁹ Mahmood, “Negating Stereotypes,” 11.

⁴⁰ Willows, “Female Perpetrated Terrorism,” 8.

⁴¹ Apalaghie, “Gender-Based Efforts.”

⁴² Thomas, “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing.”

⁴³ Bigio and Vogelstien, “Women in Terrorism.”

⁴⁴ Bigio and Vogelstien, “women in Terrorism,” 9.

⁴⁵ Thomas, “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing.”

fail reach significant numbers of vulnerable women as they often rely on traditional male centric policies that overlook women's unique positions in society.⁴⁶

It is essential to not forget the ideology of radical *Dawa*, which is the driving force behind women who are deeply devoted to radicalized Islam.⁴⁷ Rehabilitation programs for female terrorists fail to recognize the underlying problems that led to their radicalization. Such programs do not see how radical *Dawa* ideology fits into the underlying cause of many turning to terrorism. Missing the puzzle piece of radical *Dawa* is a tactical mistake and can make the difference between successful counterterrorism and preventing future terrorists. Education of counterterrorism organizations, NGO's, and other tertiary groups on radical *Dawa* and its ability to radicalize women who are not seen as typical targets for radicalization.

Lastly, a hurdle to preventing female terrorism is children, specifically the children belonging to the female terrorists. Children complicate the situation, often putting counterterrorism officers in a quandary as to how to deal with the protective services and other resources needed to help them. Often children are radicalized through their parents, including their mothers, which stems back to the issue of radical *Dawa* leading to the need to deradicalize them but in ways that are less intrusive than those used on adults while maintaining the parental rights of the mother.⁴⁸ Better access to education, job opportunities and training for vulnerable women would provide them and their families with stability and a counterbalance to the draw of radical *Dawa*.

Recommendations

For national governments and counterterror policymakers to close the gaps created by continued underestimation of women's roles and importance in terror groups, they must make several changes. First, they must begin by making use of women who are dedicated to preventing the radicalization of other women and the deradicalization of those who already have become part of terror organizations. Taking note of the role women have played in suicide attacks and other acts of violence, The Iraqi Ministry of the Interior alongside the United States took steps to implement a security program that trained local women to help prevent female led suicide bombings.⁴⁹ Other nations however have not taken initiative, whether due to political or cultural barriers, to bring more women into the realm of counterterror. In Pakistan, for example, as of 2011 less than one percent of the national police force was female while in Indonesia less than five percent of the national army and police force was made of women.⁵⁰

Secondly, counterterror policymakers as well as those on the ground must overcome societal and gender-based biases towards women as unlikely to take part in violent acts being victims of circumstance. These biases prevent security personnel from viewing women as suspects, leading to women being less likely to be searched or detained for interrogation.⁵¹ Often,

⁴⁶ Rachel Schmidt, "Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies" (Carleton University: 2018), 30 https://www.tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/WP18-07_Schmidt.pdf

⁴⁷ Ali, *The Challenge of Dawas*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mahmood, "Negating Stereotypes," 17.

⁵¹ Thomas, "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing."

even critiques of counterterror policies fail to mention women as anything more than politically inactive wives and mothers.⁵²

Conclusion

In recent decades counterterror policymakers have often overlooked the important role that women have played in terror groups. This has led to counterterror policies proving less effective than they could be both in countering the recruitment of those women being targeted by terror groups and in catching those women who have already been recruited. Mitigating female recruitment into terrorist organizations starts at the community level, with women being involved in other women's lives. Resources, including education and training for counterterrorism organizations and better social resources for vulnerable women are needed to keep vulnerable women out of desperate situations. Additionally, the input of women in counterterrorism policymaking and criminal justice is vital as well to curtailing terrorist efforts. Men cannot always reach women in desperate situations that, at times, push women into joining terrorist organizations. Better policy choices that offer greater women involvement in crafting solutions need to be implemented so that female terrorists and their children do not fall through the cracks. Women are not only victims of terrorism but active participants in such activities, and overlooking an underlying cause such as radical ideology is a tactical mistake when capturing both male and female terrorists.

⁵² Schmidt, "Duped," 27.

Bibliography

- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. *The Challenge of Dawa: Political Islam as Ideology and Movement and how to Counter it*. Sandford, CA: Hoover Institution Press (2017).
https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/ali_challengeofdawa_final_web.pdf
- Apalaghie, Roxana. "Gender-Based Efforts to Counter Female Suicide Terrorism." *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2013). <http://www.questia.com/read/1P3-2991790521/gender-based-efforts-to-counter-female-suicide-terrorism>.
- Banks, Cyndi. "Introduction: Women, Gender, and Terrorism: Gendering Terrorism." *Women & Criminal Justice* 29, no. 4-5 (2019): 181-187,
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2019.1633612>.
- Bigio, Jamille, Rachel Vogelstien. "Women in Terrorism Hidden Threats, Forgotten Partners." *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2019. https://cfrd8-files.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Discussion_Paper_Bigio_Vogelstein_Terrorism_OR.pdf.
- Corcoran-Nantes, Yvonne. "Unnatural Beings: Gender and Terrorism," *Outskirts: Feminisms along the Edge* 24 (2011), <http://www.questia.com/read/1G1-257766054/unnatural-beings-gender-and-terrorism>.
- Gragin, R. Kim, and Sara A. Daly. *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2009,
<http://www.questia.com/read/123911198/women-as-terrorists-mothers-recruiters-and-martyrs>.
- Jacobsen, Sara Jul. "Calling on Women: Female-Specific Motivation Narratives in Danish Online Jihad Propaganda." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 4 (2019): 14-26. Accessed August 18, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26756700>.
- Mahmood, Sara. "Negating Stereotypes: Women, Gender, and Terrorism in Indonesia and Pakistan." <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Negating%20Stereotypes-%20Women%20Gender%20and%20Terrorism%20in%20Indonesia%20and%20Pakistan.pdf>
- Schmidt, Rachel. "Duped: Why Gender Stereotypes are Leading to Inadequate Deradicalization and Disengagement Strategies" (Carleton University:2018) https://www.tsas.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/WP18-07_Schmidt.pdf
- Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry, eds. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011.
- Spencer, Amanda N. "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic

State." *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016): 74-98,
<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss3/6>

Thomas, Jakana L. "Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Assessing the Effect of Gender Norms on the Lethality of Female Suicide Terrorism." *International Organization* 75, no. 3 (2021).
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/wolves-in-sheeps-clothing-assessing-the-effect-of-gender-norms-on-the-lethality-of-female-suicide-terrorism/D9BFE04ECEDC0DC9E96818C0FBA6DE8B>.

Willows, Amanda, A. "Female Perpetrated Terrorism and Suicide Bombings." *Masters Thesis, Angelo State University*, 2017.

Winter, Charlie and Devorah Margolin. "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State." *Combating Terrorism Center* 10, no. 7 (2017).