The Islamic State's War on Women and Girls

Prepared statement by

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee: thank you for inviting me to testify today. It is my honour and pleasure to be here for this important discussion.

My name is Sasha Havlicek, founding CEO of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a London based 'think and do tank' that has been working on extremism, across ideologies, since 2007. I am honoured to have been invited here today to give testimony about the growing spectre of female radicalisation and the unprecedented numbers of girls and women joining ISIS.

My testimony draws from the research my Institute is leading in this domain, including a unique dataset based on the social media accounts of Western women that have migrated to The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) territory[1]. It also draws on the understanding we have acquired of the radicalisation process through initiatives like the *Against Violent Extremism (AVE) Network*, the largest global network of former extremists in the world, which my Institute runs. I additionally draw on research we have done on the way in which terrorist organisations are using the internet and social media, and from our experience trialling pioneering interventions and counter-narrative initiatives on and offline to start to

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[1] Saltman, E. and M. Smith (May 2015), *Till Martyrdom do us Part: ISIS and the Gender Phenomenon*, (Institute for Strategic Dialogue: London), http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Till_Martyrdom_Do_Us_Part_Gender_and_the_ISIS_Phenomenon.pdf.

engage with 'at risk' youth and compete with the extremist propaganda machine. Finally, I draw from my experiences leading conflict resolution programmes in the Balkans where, in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars, I witnessed the seeding of an extremist ideology, alien to the local Islamic culture and traditional religious practices; a phenomenon mirrored in so many parts of the world.

My testimony will attempt to address the following questions:

- What is the nature and extent of ISIS's female radicalisation and recruitment drive?
- Why and how are they succeeding in engaging women and girls in such high numbers, including from Western countries?
- What are the expectations of those that travel to join ISIS and the reality of life once they arrive?
- Does this phenomenon matter? Do these women pose a threat, and can we do anything to counter this rising trend?

1) A shifting terrorist landscape: Understanding women, not just as victims, but as perpetrators of extremism

There is nothing new about women in extremist and terrorist organisations. On the contrary, across ideologies and throughout history, women have played a range of active, sometimes leading, roles in extremist organisations, from ethno-nationalist and separatist movements like the PLO, the Red Army Fraction and the LTTE to far-right groups and those who advocate violence in the name of religion. As protagonists for their causes, they have taken on roles in logistics, fundraising and propaganda dissemination as well as violent combat.

However, there is a tendency within Western societies (as well as security agencies), to view women, particularly Muslim women, singularly as victims of fundamentalist ideology.

It is, of course, true that women are disproportionately affected by the consequences of radicalisation and terrorism, not least as victims of conflict. ISIS in particular has perpetrated abhorrent crimes against women, leveraging sexual violence as a tool for embedding the concept of inferiority and enforcing a rule of terror within their territory.

These atrocities of sexual violence, enslavement and the torture of women should in no way be discounted in their severity.

However, no matter how shocking and counter-intuitive, despite the brutally violent images associated with ISIS, there are girls and women choosing, of their own volition, to join ISIS. And they are doing so in unprecedented numbers, subscribing and submitting voluntarily to their ideology and to their rule. We must not be blind to this important development. This is a trend on the rapid rise, with serious consequences. Indeed hardly a week has passed over the last year without news of a woman participating in extremism or terrorism. From Denver to Vienna, so called 'Caliphettes' are running away from home on their own or in small groups to emigrate to ISIS territory.

The growing numbers of ISIS women are proving to be as much agents of that fundamentalist ideology as men – as propagandists, encouraging other women and shaming men into travelling to Syria; as inciters of violence, goading those who cannot get to the battleground to do as much damage as possible at home; as brutal, sometimes violent, enforcers of strict pre-modern Islamic penal codes (as in the case of the Al-Khansaa all-female moral police in Raqqa); and as the mothers of the next generation of Jihadists.

And while the numbers of female recruits to the so-called 'Caliphate' outweigh the numbers of women migrating to other theatres of foreign conflict[2], women have been a focus within the jihadist context far before the emergence of ISIS.

Indeed, the engagement of women by Jihadist groups has been a core tactic and the roles women play within these organisations reflects both the ideologies behind the terror and the long-term goals of a group. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which later evolved into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), is arguably the ideological forefather of what we now know as ISIS. Al-Zarqawi had already begun the recruitment of women to the jihadist cause and used them both for logistics and suicide bombing missions. While ISIS does not currently use women as combatants, it has augmented its female recruitment drive internationally with unprecedented success.

It is estimated that thousands of women worldwide have willingly travelled to ISIS territory in support of the 'Caliphate' and, while this has been occurring for a period of over a year and a half, insufficient attention has been paid to the trend and to the significance of female involvement. This phenomenon must be taken into account seriously as a key part of a fast evolving terrorist landscape.

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[2] It should be noted that there is very little data on the numbers of women traveling to other theatres of conflict, which poses a problem for comparative analysis.

2) Western female migrants to ISIS: Facts, figures and emerging trends

At the beginning of 2015, 4,000 foreign fighters from Western countries alone were estimated to have travelled to Syria and Iraq since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, and of these some 550 were thought to be women who had emigrated to ISIS territory[3]. That number is significantly higher now, though we don't have an accurate assessment. Estimates from countries in the region like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Tunisia are well into the thousands though there is even less reliable, comprehensive data on the phenomenon in these contexts.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue has for the last year been compiling the largest known database that tracks and monitors Western females who have willingly migrated to ISIS territory. Our female database is attached to the larger Male Foreign Terrorist Fighter database run by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political (ICSR) out of Kings College London, allowing us to monitor relationship statuses, group dynamics and the effects of martyrdom on the female cohort.

Using open source data, our researchers have been tracking and archiving the social media accounts and blogs of these women across different social media platforms and then mapping their on- and offline networks and relationships[4]. In order to grow and retain this sample of females, our researchers use a 'snowball' technique, where female ISIS migrants are identified among the networks of other known ISIS members. The women have been designated as ISIS migrants if they self-identify as such and appear to reside in ISIS-controlled territory. The ISD-ICSR database has also grown using evidence from photographs, online interactions with other ISIS accounts and reports to help determine the probability that the person is geographically in Syria or Iraq. We have, moreover, interviewed former extremists who are now working as mentors to women convicted of extremist and/or terrorist related offences.

We refer to these ISIS women as migrants rather than foreign terrorist fighters because, at present, ISIS prohibits women from entering combat. The 119 women tracked in the database includes 13 separate nationalities across the West, with the majority originating

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[3] Hoyle, C, A. Bradford and R. Frenett, (January 2015) *Becoming Mulan: Female Western Migrants to ISIS*, (Institute for Strategic Dialogue: London), strategicdialogue.org/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.PDF.
4 It should be noted that we do not communicate with the females we track. The reasoning for this is twofold; firstly, the vast majority of questions we would want answered about the conditions, roles and modalities of their migration, as well as the reasons that they went are addressed openly in their online accounts and blogs. Secondly, communication could put the female directly at risk.

from Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, France and Germany and smaller numbers from Finland, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Austria, Norway, Bosnia and the United States.

56% of the women we track are currently married, most to foreign terrorist fighters with similar national or at least linguistic backgrounds. We know from our research that once in ISIS territory, linguistic groups tend to live in proximity to each other as most foreign recruits do not speak Arabic or local dialects.

As many as 30% of the women we track are already widowed. These numbers have increased significantly in the last 6 months. At least 13% of these women have shared, on their social media accounts, that they have children - with a number of them becoming pregnant while in ISIS territory. This number is likely to be much higher as many omit posting photos or writing about their children online for safety reasons.

The most striking feature of the dataset is the diversity of the profiles of these women. Female migrants that we track range from 14 to 46 years of age, though the majority are between 15 and 25 years of age. There is a large proportion of 16 year olds and, overall, we see the age of female recruits diminishing, with the youngest known recruit being a 13 year old girl from Germany. Indeed, Western female recruits are by and large younger than male recruits, in part as a function of ISIS' drive to recruit ever younger girls. Not only is there a greater need to supply wives for the thousands of foreign terrorist fighters from all over the world who have already joined ISIS, but also these men want women that speak their language while also being young enough to ensure they are unwed and 'untainted'.

While many women from the Middle East have travelled with husbands or families, the majority of the women we track from the West have gone as single females, often in pairs or within small groups. Ethnicities and family backgrounds vary, and while many come from a range of Muslim family backgrounds there is also a high rate of converts to Islam joining the movement[5]. Educational levels range from secondary school through high school and even post-graduate levels. While some of these women might be considered 'underprivileged', many others have high-level qualifications, including female doctors.

These factors are testament to the universal appeal of ISIS and the success of its highly sophisticated recruitment strategies. This diversity also highlights why it so difficult to draw an actionable profile of individuals that may be more vulnerable to ISIS recruitment.

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[5] Looking at the Muslim population as a whole and % of radicalisation versus the group of converts as a whole and % of radicalisation, there is a higher rate of radicalisation among converts. globalecco.org/en_GB/ctx-v1n1/violent-converts-to-islam

3) Why is this happening? 'Pull vs. push' factors, 'Brand Caliphate' and the role of ideology

In my view, one of the reasons that so many years after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks we still lack a coherent, strategic, international policy approach to the rising challenge of extremist recruitment is that there continues to be a lack of consensus over the drivers of radicalisation and the nature of the phenomenon that we are facing. While 'push factors' have received a great deal of attention over the years, 'pull factors' have been largely ignored.

Push factors

For a long time, governments viewed this problem largely through a socio-economic, integration or equalities lens. Yet, if economic inequality and social marginalisation were the primary drivers of extremism, the Roma community in Europe should pose the greatest terrorist challenge on the continent. Moreover, as our dataset shows, women who join ISIS defy easy categorisation on socio-economic grounds.

There is no question that Muslim millennials that have grown up in a post 9/11 media environment, in which Muslims and Islam are constantly 'bad news', are faced with a serious identity crisis and many young Muslims in the West will face discrimination and prejudice. This, often mixed with a set of foreign policy grievances, as well as personal traumas, feeds the vulnerabilities that extremists prey on.

Of the girls and women that we have been tracking, the most common grievances that they talk about as their drivers for leaving their home countries and emigrating to Syria can be categorised as follows:

1) Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, including questioning their own identity and belonging within a Western culture;
2) Feeling that the international Muslim community or the 'ummah' is being violently persecuted; and
3) Resentment over the lack of international action in response to this persecution.

This is very much in line with the underlying male grievance narrative that 'nobody is doing anything to help our brothers and sisters in Syria, in Palestine, in the Central African Republic'. Historical revisionism brings a myriad of past and present conflicts under the simplified umbrella of 'Islam under attack'; of 'us versus them'.

For women, layers of identity-based questioning are added to this. What does it mean to belong, to be a Muslim female in a Western world? The Western 'emancipation' project is

seen as a ruse, as a means to sexualise women. 'Look at *Victoria's Secret* and the role of women play as objects'. The so-called 'Islamic State' presents the opportunity to live free of such "tyranny"; the opportunity to gain solidarity, sisterhood, belonging and (self)-respect. Joining ISIS is presented to and among the women as an emancipator and as an empowering project.

'Push factors' - real and perceived grievances - while likely to make a person more vulnerable to the overtures of extremists and their propaganda, and important to address, is only part of the picture. Though they were placed at the centre of government responses for many years, 'push factors' on their own provide an incomplete and inadequate explanation of the widespread radicalisation and recruitment phenomenon we see today.

What has too often been missing from Western analysis, policy and operational responses is an understanding of the central role that an interlinked set of 'pull factors' play. While we recognise that ISIS represents a game-changing shift in the dynamics of violent extremism, our perspective on the rise of ISIS needs to be wider.

Strategic and tactical pull factors

Well before ISIS and the onset of the digital era, the vastly well-resourced global propaganda recruitment machine of Wahhabi Salafism, began making a play for the centre of gravity in Muslim culture and religious practice around the world. Gradually and insidiously it eradicated the expression of diverse, indigenous Islamic traditions and practices and sowed the intellectual foundations of the monolithic Islamist extremist movements we are facing today. This aggressive export and funding of an arcane ideology has gone essentially unchallenged for three decades, visibly changing cultural and religious practices around the world in a way that disproportionately affects women, and in many places sees girls, in particular, breaking with their mothers' and grandmothers' traditions.

That is why, despite differences in ethnic origins, Islamic traditions and practices, and despite differential levels of integration and equality - and indeed different foreign policy positions of governments – a common stream of Islamist extremism can be found everywhere today.

The role of the non-violent aspects of this ideology should also not be underestimated. We have seen that those Western countries in which Islamist extremist networks have been able to thrive most have proven to be the countries yielding the highest numbers of foreign terrorist fighters and female migrants. Al Muhajiroun in the UK, Ansar al Haqq in France and

Sharia for Belgium are just a few such examples of groups that toe the line of legality while mainstreaming extremist narratives.

The onset of the digital era has simply hyper-charged this propaganda recruitment machine. ISIS is the 'cherry on the cake', rather than the cake itself, and the 'elephant in the room' is the large-scale support emanating from the Gulf region for this ideological spread.

While, at the strategic level, this global ideological backdrop is essential to comprehend, at the tactical level the 'pull factors' consist of a mixture of 'Brand Caliphate' and the extremely sophisticated, tech savvy, communications machinery that ISIS has mounted.

From the iconic memes, to the go-pro footage from the field that mimics the imagery of popular video games, to the Twitter amplification apps and peer-to-peer - in this case, girl to girl - engagement that would be the envy of most social media marketing companies, ISIS has taken the Jihadist propaganda machine to the next level with obvious effect.

ISIS's has enabled decentralised messengers to spread their ideology through online and offline channels. By allowing decentralised voices – women, foreign fighters, supporters from any pocket of the world – to spread ISIS propaganda, the extremist message has become localised. Messaging is fluent, colloquial and turns local grievances into an international call to arms.

The internet has played a key role in increasing female participation in Jihadist groups. While they would have been excluded from the offline networks that once characterised Jihadist recruitment, the online world has provided women with an arena in which they can have real agency. ISIS has been particularly successful at leveraging that potential, supporting the prolific use of social media by ISIS women, especially Western women. ISIS has understood all too well the PR and recruitment value they represent.

As noted above, joining ISIS is seen as and represented by these women as a sort of emancipatory project. A 'jihadi girl-power' sub-culture has emerged on social media networks, clearly rooted in Western culture while simultaneously rejecting it. The propaganda image below clearly demonstrates this trend, parodying well-known Western beauty-industry advertisement campaigns.

As well as providing practical advice to girls about how to get to Syria, what to bring, and how to avoid the scrutiny of parents and security services, narratives about belonging and sisterhood are extremely prominent across the social media accounts of the women in our dataset and constitute an important part of the 'pull' narrative.

'Brand Caliphate'

But by far the most important 'pull' factor in the recruitment of women has been 'Brand Caliphate'. While a number of women travelled to Syria with their husbands in the early months of the Syrian conflict, it is only since the announcement of the Caliphate that we see numbers of unmarried women start to make the journey to Syria. That is because 'Brand Caliphate' represents more than just fighting. It represents the building of an 'Islamic Utopia' and as such it offers people a diversity of roles as part of its state building project.

This is heavily emphasised in ISIS statements. To women, their message is 'we praise your divine role as wife and mother to the next generation. You are not objects, we value you'. In ISIS's negotiations with the Jordanian government regarding the pilot they held hostage and later killed, they chose to demand the release of Sajida al-Rishawi, a women imprisoned on terrorist charges for an attempted suicide bombing attack linked to Al-Qaeda in Iraq,

predecessor to ISIS. This was designed to send a very strong message to women about how ISIS values and protects its sisters.

The 'Caliphate' offers adventure, belonging and sisterhood, romance, spiritual fulfilment and a tangible role in idealistic utopia-building. Very few youth sub-cultures or movements can claim to offer so much.

The reality of the 'Caliphate' is what distinguishes ISIS from al-Qaeda and other jihadist organisations. The fact of occupying a geographical territory, which actually and purely manifests the ideology rather than merely ideals and hopes, is extremely significant. This territory has created a destination point, giving real-world credibility to ISIS's message.

4. The narrative vs. the reality on the ground

The social media output of female recruits living in ISIS territory gives us an important new lens into behavioural patterns, processes of radicalisation and community dynamics. This includes insights - though incomplete - into what life is like in ISIS territory. Platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Ask.fm, Instagram and Tumblr allow us to analyse not only the strategic role of women within ISIS but also give a better understanding as to why and how these individuals left their home countries and what roles females play once in ISIS territory. These insights are crucial in informing and improving policy, prevention methods and de-radicalisation approaches.

Once in the so-called 'Caliphate' women primarily play a domestic role. Women in ISIS territory are forbidden from leaving the confines of the home without supervision and pre-agreed permission. Their core responsibilities are to marry within a maximum of three months of their arrival, reproduce in order to populate the 'Caliphate', and to care for their husbands.

This reality seems contradictory to their activist online roles, the Jihadi girl-power sub-culture they espouse and the levels of brutality expressed in their communications. They are equally - if not more - violent than their male counterparts in their language online and are aggressive in their incitement of hatred and violence. To assume they were 'naïve' or 'ignorant' to ISIS' brutality would be incorrect. While the term 'jihadi brides' is an over-simplified term, women are not ignorant that their primary role will be to marry a jihadist and produce the next generation. This narrative alone plays on a sense of adventure embedded in the physical journey, as well as the promise of marrying a jihadist fighter, who offers his bride a place in paradise if killed in battle.

Despite their limited individual freedom of movement, women are given light military training, indicating that their roles could change in the future. Reports and research has also shown that they are given intensive religious training and some Arabic language training to immerse them in their new home. Certain groups of Turkish and Middle Eastern women have also been given more active roles, such as through the Al-Khansaa Brigade, in being morality police of other women, and even in carrying out violent punishments for women who are note conforming to their strict Shariah Law.

So while it is important to remember that many of these girls are minors and a type of grooming has been applied, it is equally clear that many of these women are genuinely committed ideologically to their cause. So, despite the violent pronouncements, the mass of images of fully-covered women baring firearms and the emancipatory narratives they share about leaving the West, they submit willingly to the largely domestic role women are allocated and to the martyrdom of their husbands. While it sometimes sounds reluctant, they remind each other of the structures they have committed themselves to, and warn would-be female recruits not to travel with the wrong expectations.

I have stressed this before on twitter but I really need sisters to stop dreaming about coming to Shaam and not getting married. Wallahi [I swear to God] life here is very difficult for the Muhajirat and we depend heavily on the brothers for a lot of support. It is not like the west where you can casually walk out and go to Asda/Walmart and drive back home ... even till now we have to stay safe outside and must always be accompanied by a Mahram [chaperone].[71]

Post from: Umm Layth, 9 April 2014, http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com [last accessed 28 November 2014]

5) Do these women matter? Are they a real threat?

To answer this question, we should be looking to the value they hold for ISIS.

Although ISIL currently prohibits women from engaging in warfare these women have been equally radicalised to glorify ISIL's violent endeavours, tweet, share and like the most gruesome of content and insight violence in others. Many have also openly discussed their own desires to participate in violence.

Examples of female migrants to ISIS wanting to participate in the violence:

Umm Ubaydah @FlamessOfwar, 20 November 2014
'So many beheadings at the same time, Allahu Akbar [God is the greatest], this video is beautiful #DawlaMediaTeamDoingItRight'
https://twitter.com/FlamessOfwar [last accessed 28 November 2014]

Umm Irhab @MuslimahMujahi1, 20 August 2014
'I was happy to see the beheading of that kaafir [non-believer], I just rewinded to the cutting part. Allahu akbar! [God is the greatest!] I wonder what was he thinking b4 the cut'.
https://twitter.com/MuslimahMujahi1 [last accessed 28 November 2014]

Umm Ubaydah @FlamessOfwar, 10 October 2014
'my best friend is my grenade … It's an American one too Lool. May Allah allow me to kill their Kanzeer [pig] soldiers with their own weapons.'
https://twitter.com/FlamessOfwar [last accessed 28 November 2014]

Umm Khattab @UmmKhhattab_, 8 December 2014
'Laaawl me and the akhawats [sisters] thought maybe murtads [apostates] were in the city lool I put the belt on and everything.'
https://twitter.com/UmmKhhattab__ [last accessed 8 December 2014]

This last one is in reference to her reaching for a possible suicide or grenade explosive belt as she hears gunshots outside showing the willingness to react in a violent martyrdom fashion.

umm shaheeda @ShaheedaUmm · Nov 28
Ya Ameerul mu'mineen plssss give us Woman also the alownees to press the Button :(#duqma#longing#islamic State #blow up the kuffar

↩   ⟲ 5   ★ 5   •••

umm shaheeda @ShaheedaUmm · Nov 28
Allahu akbar !!!!!@arraqqah_IS

↩   ⟲   ★   •••
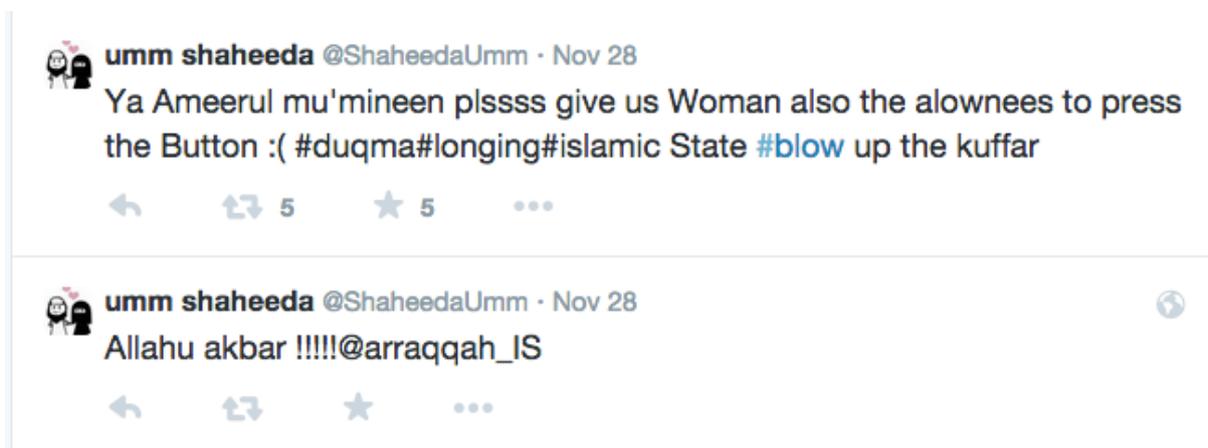
> 8 notes - 4 September, 2014
>
> Anonymous: wut do you think about the killing of steven
> sotlof
>
> I wish I did it

New migration patterns

Jihadist strategy has always relied on asymmetrical warfare, changing tactics and movements to create a constantly shifting frontline. We are already witnessing the development of new migration patterns with Western female migrants. Just a fortnight ago, our researchers identified newly recruited women seemingly travel directly to ISIS-affiliate controlled areas in Libya rather than Syria and Iraq.

The three women were tracked to Libya. Two of them appear to be British, frequently mention other 'offline' peers, including women that live in the same compound as them. Two of these three are not yet married and it appears that all three travelled independently of each other, without familial relationships. One of these women appears to have been in ISIS-held areas of Libya since at least April this year.

ISIS's state-building efforts are scaling up and their attempts to expand the caliphate to regions with strong affiliate strongholds are already well underway. The recruitment of women to these areas is a firm part of that strategy.

6. What should we do to address this growing threat?

You cannot beat the challenge of radicalisation through drones and border measures. In order to have an impact on the conveyor belt of radicalisation and to 'drain the swamp' from which extremists recruit, we need to put in place a proportional soft-power competition strategy to close the gap that has emerged between their sophisticated, well-resourced, 24/7 global propaganda recruitment machinery and our response, which is not.

A quote of Osama bin Laden's from 2002 gives a clear indication of how centrally important propaganda is for extremist groups: "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods. In fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles." During the Cold War, the need to invest in the soft-power battle of ideas was well understood. In the UK last year, we spent £40 million on prevention (and UK spending on

'prevention' trumps other European countries' spending). We spent $26 billion on training the Iraqi Army over the last decade.

A serious soft-power competition strategy cannot be limited to a series of Twitter campaigns and cannot be delivered through government counter-messaging centres. It needs to combine aid budgets with diplomatic efforts, bringing real muscle to the equation. In this way, countering extremism can be mainstreamed across different areas of international engagement.

We need to be clear about the objective of this soft-power strategy: it cannot simply be to reduce the number of individuals joining ISIS. It must be to redress the growing tide of support for, and sympathy with, the underpinning ideology of ISIS – and, by extension, the plethora of organisations, including al-Qaeda, which subscribe to that ideology. This means that we must work at both the immediate, tactical, hard edge of prevention and de-radicalisation and at the strategic level to counter the underlying ideology.

At a strategic level, we must work to undermine 'Brand Caliphate', which has done more for the Jihadi cause writ large, but also for female recruitment, than anything else. While there is clearly a geostrategic dimension to this, regardless of military outcomes, 'Brand Caliphate' needs to be exposed and delegitimised. From an intellectual, political and theological standpoint, those voices that can speak authoritatively about the heresy and inauthenticity of this 'Caliphate', as well about the real outcomes for Muslims living under its rule, must be uplifted. As part of this, we should be providing support to local individuals and groups trying, usually with little or no financial support, to protect indigenous cultural traditions, sites and heritage, to promote diversity within Islam against the monolithic vision propagated by the extremists.

Amplifying such perspectives and voices is an intrinsic part of confronting the extremist propaganda machinery which has gone unchallenged for so long. While governments have largely been focused on trying to get problematic material off the internet, our findings indicate that such 'take down' approaches tend not to be effective. The speed at which accounts get removed is very slow (this happens primarily through referral programmes by governments and now Europol to internet companies that then have the responsibility to remove content themselves), and the speed at which they get replaced under a different name or on a different platform is very fast.

Not only is this 'whack a mole' phenomenon not effective, but our research indicates that removal of accounts - censorship - may in fact increase the influence of extremists. In our

database of ISIS women, the second accounts of women who have had their primary accounts taken down tend to have more followers.

Equally, as larger platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube increase their take down measures, there is an online migration of extremist networks onto smaller, less regulated platforms, making surveillance and tracking all the more difficult. This is not to say that certain types of take down measures may not be effective. We are exploring the potential impact of removing whole social networks at once for instance. But, in my view, this can only ever be a partial response.

We need to focus more attention on competing actively with the extremists instead, engaging young people directly in a space that we have ceded to the extremists, and developing credible counter-narratives[6].

Credible voices are essential in reaching vulnerable, would-be recruits. There is evidence that survivors of extremist attacks, escapees and defectors can engage people flirting with extremist ideologies, as well as those that are already radicalised, in a more influential way than any other constituency. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue has built up and runs the largest global network of former extremists in the world, *Against Violent Extremism (AVE)*, in collaboration with Google Ideas and the GenNext Foundation. But more women are needed. It will be important to build out the network to include female defectors, escapees and survivors, and governments can help to asses and access returnees and defectors around the world.

However, while these stories and credible voices are important, on their own they tend not to have the tools or resources to reach the target audiences they would need to at scale or on an ongoing basis. As such, their influence is currently limited. We need therefore to build a civil society-led counter-narrative machinery to support the production and amplification of targeted, data-driven, counter-narrative campaigns and interventions, deployed with professionalised technology and communications support, just as the extremists' propaganda is. Data analytics must underpin this machinery, both to target audiences and to monitor the impact of campaigns on an ongoing basis, ensuring optimal and cost effective delivery. Perhaps most importantly, this is not a 'one size fits all' domain: different approaches are applicable depending on where people are along the radicalisation spectrum.

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[6] See: R. Briggs and S. Feve (January 2014) *Policy Briefing: Countering the Appeal of Extremism Online* [strategicdialogue.org/Inspire_Radicalize_Recruit.pdf] and *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* [strategicdialogue.org/CounterNarrativesFN2011.pdf] (both Institute for Strategic Dialogue: London)

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue is trialling a range of campaigns and interventions through its counter-narrative *Innovation Hub,* bringing credible voices and ideas together with the creative, tech and communications capabilities needed to have impact.

Partnerships with Google, Facebook and Twitter have been critical in this domain. An earlier pilot programme run with YouTube saw counter-narrative material that was reaching only some 50 randomised users online turned into a campaign that engaged 50,000 targeted users (people searching for information about how to get to Syria for Jihad) in just 6 weeks. At the sharper end of the radicalisation spectrum, our *One2One Initiative* is connecting former extremists directly to young people expressing extremist views and sympathies on social media networks with a 30% positive engagement rate so far.

However, there is currently a major gap in counter-narratives and outreach targeting 'at risk' girls and women. We urgently need to develop messaging that specifically targets female audiences. Female returnees and defectors in particular could provide a powerful counter-narrative to the messaging of ISIS's female recruits. But to do this well we need to understand the dynamics of women in extremism better and research in this space is still in its infancy. There is a great need for more comprehensive data. While we have some insights into the phenomenon in the West, we have very little data and information coming from the regions around ISIS-controlled territory. Even within the West, figures are often fairly sporadic and out-dated. German intelligence reported at the end of June that 100 of the 700 German nationals in ISIS territory are women, with half of those women being younger than 25. The last estimate from the UK government on the number of women that travelled to join ISIS was 60 in October 2014; it is likely that this figure is now closer to 100-120. We need more consolidated, up to date data.

We must continue work to pinpoint the narratives that are drawing women into this movement in significant numbers so that we can develop targeted, relevant counter-narratives and counter-measures. And we need to have a better understanding of the connections between the wider social phenomena, including the homogenisation of religious and cultural practices around the world, and the rise of female extremist agency.

But, the ultimate key is to prevent processes of radicalisation in the first place and to inoculate the next generation against falling prey to extremist propaganda. That requires an educational approach that teaches critical thinking (specifically in relation to internet consumption), alongside programmes that sensitise young people to extremist propaganda. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue has worked with partners in the education sector to develop *Extreme Dialogue*, a critical thinking inoculation programme, combining hard-hitting emotional films based on the stories of former extremists and survivors of extremism

with an online set of tools and guides for teachers and social workers to use in either formal or informal educational settings. This has been rolled out in Canada and will be introduced in Europe this year, but much more is needed, and governments can and should help to get such programmes distributed in schools and communities.

On a practical level, as this challenge grows, we also need more women acting as practitioners in the counter-terrorism, counter-extremism and de-radicalisation spaces. In particular, female case workers will be vital in managing the inflow of women returning from Syria and Iraq. The inclusion of female practitioners is not just an issue of equality. In de-radicalisation and prevention work, gender dynamics are important for the necessary cognitive openings. Male practitioners will not be able to engage with young females that are 'at risk' of radicalisation in the same way that fellow female practitioners can, not least because of the fundamentalist gender roles solidified within radicalisation processes.

We must comprehend extremists as social movements and, as such, women are central to both their adoption and rejection. We need to develop networks that intimately understand their local contexts; that are able to reach out to young women on a peer-to-peer basis; and that are empowered to work on countering violent extremism (CVE). We need to support role models within communities, exposing young women to new perspectives and opportunities. As such, we are working together with the convening power and support of the US Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) to bring together a network of women from around the world that are working on CVE. On June 8-9 2015, in partnership with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), we convened the first global *Women and Extremism Summit* in Washington DC. More robust infrastructure and support needs to be given to women within the CVE sector and we hope this initiative will contribute to that end by helping to spur counter-narrative content that targets girls and women as well as address the research lacunae that still exist in his domain.

Finally, we must continue to argue for human rights for women in countries with extreme regimes in power. This is of importance in itself, but it also helps to avoid charges of selective application of the West's stated principles, and hypocrisy, even if only partially.

We are currently losing the battle of ideas. They have a significant head-start and enormous human and financial resourcing. However, we have a small window of opportunity to scale up the programmes and approaches we know work, and to supercharge the counter-narrative, creating the sort of communications competition strategy that will ultimately drown ISIS out on the internet and beyond.

Recommended Reading:

Available on the ISD website: **www.strategicdialogue.org/publications**
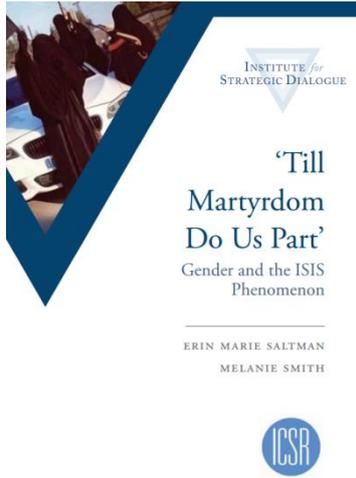
'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon

Erin Marie Saltman & Melanie Smith, May 2015

Representing the second instalment of our Women and Extremism (WaE) programme, this report explores the phenomenon of Western females travelling to Syria and Iraq in support of ISIS. It first elaborates upon the motivations for these women and girls to migrate, explores some of the diverse range of profiles that have been monitored, and clarifies the role that they are likely to encompass once arriving in ISIS-held territory. Additionally, the report aims to elucidate how current government prevention and de-radicalisation infrastructure may be adapted to deal with this trend.
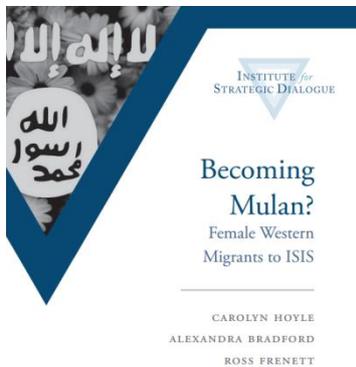
Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS

Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford and Ross Frenett, January 2015

Launching our Women and Extremism (WAE) programme, this report focuses on those women that have travelled from the West to ISIS held territory in support of the terrorist organisation. The first in a series of reports, this research draws on our database of known female migrants to ISIS and analyses their reasons for joining the group, the threat they pose and how to stem the flow of women joining ISIS.