



New Zealand
Security Intelligence
Service
Te Pā Whakamarumarū

Security Intelligence Report | SIR

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Women and girls as perpetrators of violent extremism

Key Points

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1. (R) There is a long and varied history of women and girls supporting and committing acts of violent extremism, despite stereotypes that women, and especially Muslim women, within extremist circles are passive and submissive.
2. (R) Unaddressed, such stereotypes can hinder the detection, prevention, and disruption of violent extremist activities involving women. It is therefore important for security services to understand how women, especially those in New Zealand, might differ from their male counterparts when radicalising and mobilising toward violent extremist acts.
3. (R) ISIL, for example, attracted a large female following—initially as wives, mothers, and non-combatants—who increasingly have been encouraged to act in defence of ISIL's caliphate, including possibly in future insurgency activities in Syria and Iraq, and terrorist attacks in other countries.
4. (R) However, women and girls do not need to spend time in the physical presence of ISIL members, or any other violent extremist group, to radicalise and mobilise to an attack.

Context

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5. (R) This report explores the subject of women and girls radicalising and mobilising towards all forms of violent extremism, and draws specifically on violent Islamist extremist examples due to the current prevalence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Overview

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6. (R) When women commit or support acts of violent extremism or join terrorist groups, their family, friends, the media, and political leaders often portray them as brainwashed victims, passive participants, or misguided romantics. While these narratives may hold truth for some women, they are incomplete representations which can strip women of their agency and accountability when they associate with violent extremism. In turn, security services and law enforcement agencies may mischaracterise and possibly underestimate the security threat these women pose.

Challenges to law enforcement agencies and security services

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7. (R) Extremist women with a capacity for violence can present challenges to the current detection, prevention, and disruption methods relied on by security services and law enforcement that have in the past largely responded to threats from male extremists. Addressing these challenges will involve the following:

Understanding how women are involved with violent extremism

8. (R) To confront any unconscious bias that women in extremist circles are typically non-violent and passive, law enforcement agencies and security services need to understand how women and girls have actively contributed to violent extremism in recent history. Women have engaged in violent extremism as planners, fundraisers, recruiters, couriers, propagandists, spies, alibi providers, and supporters. Women have also physically carried out violent extremist acts themselves as suicide bombers and combatants.
9. (R) There is no all-encompassing profile for women who support terrorism and engage in violent extremism. Their backgrounds vary widely in education, wealth, religion, culture, and ethnicity. In the previous half-century women have supported a range of extremist causes and groups from the secular and nationalist to the religious and sectarian.
10. (R) The locations of these extremist activities are similarly diverse; women have conducted suicide attacks in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Israel, Iraq, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria and Turkey. ~~s6(a), s6(b)(i)~~

Rethinking gendered stereotypes as a result

11. (R) Although terrorist groups may rely on gender stereotypes of women as non-violent, women participate in such groups in ways that are clearly far from passive. If the general public, security services, and law enforcement uphold these stereotypes, women and girls are afforded greater strategic and covert potential than their male counterparts to undertake violent extremist behaviour. As a result of these stereotypes, women and girls may attract less suspicion and face less chance of being detected and disrupted in their violent extremist activities.

12. (R) For example, clothing associated with Muslim women such as the niqab or burka can effectively conceal suicide vests and other weapons. Gender and cultural sensitivities that prohibit male security officials from looking under, or patting down such female clothing, can allow for women—or men dressed as women—to gain unchecked access to areas of public, political, security, or religious significance in ways that male counterparts are less able.
- i. (U) In August 2017, a Taliban militant dressed in a burka killed a NATO soldier and two civilians in a suicide attack outside of Kabul, Afghanistan.
 - ii. (U) In June 2015, the government of Chad banned the burka following two suicide bomb attacks conducted by male militants wearing the garment to obfuscate their intentions. Cameroon enforced a burka ban in July 2017, fearing similar attacks.
13. (R) Through understanding women and girls who engage with violent extremism as diverse actors who are sometimes willing and enthusiastic agents of violent extremism, law enforcement agencies can more accurately assess the potential threat they pose. In turn they can be held appropriately responsible for their actions.

Boko Haram

(R) Boko Haram is a prime example of a terrorist group exploiting perceptions of women to enable terrorist attacks and capitalise on the resulting media attention. Over the past several years in West Africa, the ISIL-affiliated terrorist group has systematically deployed hundreds of women and girls as suicide bombers, inflicting thousands of fatalities. While many of these women are assumed to have been coerced, some are believed to have volunteered.

Identifying possible differences in radicalisation and mobilisation by gender

14. (R) To improve the chances of identifying, preventing, and disrupting violent extremist activity carried out by women and girls (for example, travel to join a terrorist group, or attack plotting), it is critical to understand how women and girls may differ when radicalising or mobilising to violent extremism.
15. (U) Questions to consider include:
- i. (U) How important is the role of the Internet in radicalising women and girls?
 - ii. (U) Are women and girls more or less likely to radicalise or mobilise alone?
 - iii. (U) Are women and girls more or less inclined to voice their violent extremist beliefs and intentions to others?
16. (R) Security services that have long focussed on male extremists may find that such differences in the radicalisation and mobilisation of women and girls to violent extremism are an intelligence gap.

Example: the threat from ISIL-affiliated women

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17. (R) In the contemporary security environment, violent Islamist extremism is the dominant violent extremist narrative, despite there being many forms of violent extremist ideologies, such as right-wing violent extremism. In particular, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) succeeded in inspiring many men and women to travel to the (now near-dissolved) 'caliphate' that the group declared in parts of Iraq and Syria in June 2014. Marriage, child-bearing, recruitment, and propaganda dissemination were key functions asked of and performed by women in the caliphate. These roles have not been passive; ISIL women have

been explicit in their support and encouragement of violence, and have been instructed to raise the next generation in accordance with ISIL's violent extremist doctrine.

18. (R) Although ISIL's conservative ideology initially dictated domestic roles for women within the 'caliphate', the imminent territorial defeat of ISIL in Iraq and Syria appears to have altered this stance. Foreign national women in ISIL-held territories have received weapons training, carried out patrols, worked as couriers, supported attack planning, and conducted suicide attacks against counter-ISIL checkpoints and forces.
 - i. (R) In October 2017, in a marked shift away from ISIL emphasising the domestic role of women in its territories, the 100th edition of ISIL's official media publication *Al-Naba* encouraged women to fight on the battlefield alongside men in defence of the 'caliphate'.
 - ii. (U) An Iraqi security official reported to media that ISIL had deployed dozens of women as suicide bombers during the battle for the city of Mosul in mid-2017.
19. (R) As ISIL is increasingly pushed out of the territories it seized in Iraq and Syria, it is likely that some women will continue to take on operational and combat roles to mitigate ISIL's ongoing loss of male fighters, and contribute to any ISIL insurgencies in lost territory.
20. (R) Other ISIL-affiliated women have attempted the difficult feat of leaving ISIL-held territories, sometimes with family or friends. Many women seek to leave the region altogether, either to return to their home countries or travel to a third destination. Some ISIL-affiliated women departing Syria and Iraq will likely retain extremist links and possibly continue to undertake activities in support of ISIL or violent extremism in the name of Islam, including by the commission, planning, or undertaking of terrorist acts.
21. (R) However, women do not need to spend time in ISIL territories in order to commit to ISIL's ideology and seek to support the group. Some women who have not travelled to the caliphate have planned and executed attacks in support of ISIL in several countries. Future planning and attacks by women are likely.
 - i. (U) In December 2015, a woman and her husband conducted an attack at an event for the husband's workplace staff in **San Bernardino**, USA, killing 14 people and seriously injuring 22. The couple was praised by ISIL official media for their attack.
 - ii. (U) In September 2016, three women attacked the Central Police Station in **Mombasa**, Kenya, with a petrol bomb and knives. The attack injured two police officers and was assessed as ISIL inspired.
 - iii. (U) In December 2016, an Indonesian woman was arrested and accused of planning to commit a suicide bombing in the name of ISIL at the Presidential Palace in **Jakarta**.
 - iv. (U) In July 2017, British authorities charged a 17-year-old girl with terror offenses for planning a mass-casualty attack in **London**, with the online counsel of a Syria-based ISIL fighter.

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NZSIS Contact: Intelligence Publications Manager s6(a)

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