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The continuing ISIL threat and the role of women

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s unprecedented recruitment of foreign men and women has triggered a global response – from prevention, interdiction, intelligence, and even forceful interventions in Syria and Iraq by a global coalition of actors. The group's physical "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, as well as its satellite "province" in Libya, have fallen to local forces with the support of the international coalition. However, the group continues to actively launch attacks in these areas and maintains a broad area of operation. Recent attacks in faraway countries like Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been claimed by ISIL, demonstrating that the ISIL threat continues to evolve.

One way that the threat has evolved is through its use of women in violence. As my coauthors and I correctly predicted in 2015-16 in our book chapter on ISIL's gendered recruitment of both men and women, when ISIL's physical territory was retaken and foreign recruitment stopped, ISIL began using women in combat operations in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.¹ Female ISIL supporters/members also carried out terrorist attacks in places like the United States of America, Sri Lanka, and France. We argued that the use of women was less of a top-down shift in policy from ISIL's central or regional leadership (though they have always reserved this as an option) and more of a breakdown of command and control. In what ways was our hypothesis correct and in which ways was it flawed?

My new research project updates our understanding of ISIL's strategy with regard to the recruitment and use of women in violence, taking into consideration the spread of ISIL's reach to new geographic areas and the fundamental transition in the group's physical reality from a territory-holding "caliphate" to an insurgent force operating in isolated areas around the world. I also examine the issue of captured female ISIL supporters (such as those held in Syria) and returnees and evaluate the risks involved.

Why this is relevant:

Now, more than ever, the question of women and girls' involvement in ISIL (including their participation in violence) is critical. Al-Hol, the largest detention camp controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has a population of more than 70,000 people – mostly women and children from Syria – but also some 10,000 foreign citizens.

¹ Dallin Van Leuven, Dyan Mazurana, and Rachel Gordon, "[Analysing the Recruitment and Use of Foreign Men and Women in ISIL through a Gender Perspective](#)," in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttery, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (T.M.C. Asser Press/Springer Verlag, 2016), 97–120.

Despite paternalistic and problematic views that have denied women and girls' agency to support ISIL, the majority of the detainees in the camp are radicalized. There have been many instances of violence (including throwing rocks, shootings, and stabbings) as well as continued pledges of loyalty to ISIL and calls for the group to free them from the camp (which, in camp residents' words, is currently run by "infidels"). In July 2019, a homemade black flag of ISIL was hoisted in the camp, to the cheers of onlooking women and children.

Without understanding the potential for women and girls' use of violence, it will not be possible to adequately and safely work to deradicalize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate them back into society.

Challenges to this research:

Due to ISIL's degradation, including systemic cyberattacks on the group's media infrastructure, it is difficult to obtain credible information regarding ISIL's policy on this front.

In addition, ISIL's supporters will often downplay their own roles or represent their motivations and actions in ways that are meant to reduce their own culpability in the eyes of others.

Finally, should the reason for women and girls' involvement in violence be driven (as hypothesized) by a breakdown of command and control, this would be more difficult to determine through the gathering of evidence.

Current gaps in the literature:

While the literature is replete with studies regarding women and girls' radicalization and recruitment in ISIL, there is hardly any published research that addresses the reasons *why* or *why not* women participated in violence in the last stages ISIL's so-called "caliphate" and "provinces" or how this may change in the future.

Methodology and research process:

Due to the difficulty of accessing the population (i.e. female detainees in camps like al-Hol, but also ISIL commanders), much of the research will require a gendered analysis of ISIL-generated materials, recent research, and recent interviews.

I also seek to interview key informants who have had direct experience interviewing female ISIL supporters and male and female commanders, which will allow me to gather their insights. In addition, I will leverage private research made available through other sources.²

² Beginning in November, I may begin a grant-funded research assessment on related issues in Northeast Syria. Although the research questions will be different, the data collection process will likely present opportunities to glean relevant data that can help illuminate this research's main objectives.

Intended impact:

This research can elucidate current strategic and tactical thinking of ISIL's leadership with respect to the role of women. It will also help security actors and countering violent extremism practitioners better understand the motivations of women and girls to engage in (or resist to engage in) violence. These insights can sensitize security actors to these gender dynamics and highlight the importance of including women and girls in deradicalization and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programming.