
(WO)MEN IN TERRORISM:
FROM CHECHNYA'S *BLACK WIDOWS* TO THE WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC STATE

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Abstract

This research paper addresses a theme that is generally ignored in the political science and international relations literature – women in terrorism. Women are typically viewed as passive or coerced actors in terrorism rather than active perpetrators of violence. This perception hinders counter-terrorism policies and perpetuates gendered assumptions about women's roles in terrorist groups. This research paper challenges traditional assumptions about women and violence; it explores the roles of women in modern terrorism through a case study of two groups: The *Black Widows* in Chechnya and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The paper is structured as follows. Part One introduces the phenomenon of women in terrorism, and includes a discussion on the international issue of defining terrorism as well presents a theoretical framework on women, gender, and terrorism. Part Two applies a case study approach to assess women's participation in the *Black Widows* and in the Islamic State to highlight many of the false assumptions about women's roles in terrorist activities. Lastly, Part Three examines how women can be strategic partners in counter-terrorism practices and policies. A focus on women in terrorism can enhance knowledge and make a valuable contribution to the field of international relations.

Part One: An Introduction to Women in Terrorism

Introduction

“It is woman who teaches you today a lesson in heroism, who teaches you the meaning of Jihad, and the way to die a martyr’s death ... It is a woman who has shocked the enemy, with her thin, meager, and weak body ... It is a woman who blew herself up, and with her exploded all the myths about women’s weakness, submissiveness, and enslavement.”

- “It’s a Woman!” Editorial, *Al-Sha’ab*, 1 February 2002¹

The above excerpt, from an editorial in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Sha’ab*, highlights the false perception that women are not credible or likely perpetrators of violence. Popular opinion typically considers women as victims of male-instigated violence, including terrorism.² The very statement that women are terrorists seems to be a contradiction considering the predominant assumptions about women and violence. Most notions of what it means to be a woman emphasize passiveness, peacefulness, mothering, and interdependence.³ This perspective is further entrenched when taking into consideration women from regions that are believed to be extremely oppressive, such as those in the Middle East and North Africa.⁴ A warning published on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that “terrorist organizations behind the attacks want to exploit the advantages of dispatching females to perpetrate them... under the

¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Female Suicide Terrorism - Consequences for Counter-Terrorism*, Background Paper, Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2005: 2., <http://www.osce.org/odihr/15170?download=true> (accessed May 10, 2017).

² Karla J. Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 26, no. 3 (2003): 172.

³ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 3.

⁴ Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 172.

assumption that a female is thought of as soft, gentle, and innocent and therefore will arouse less suspicion than a man”.⁵ The webpage further explains that the integration of women into terrorist activities can range from suicide bombers to facilitators involved in both the planning and perpetration of terrorist attacks.

This research paper challenges traditional assumptions about women and violence. It explores the roles of women in modern terrorist groups through a multiple case study of terrorist groups in Europe and the Middle East – the *Black Widows* in Chechnya and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The paper will begin by outlining the research question, followed by a discussion of the international issue of defining *terrorism*. It will then provide an overview of terrorism research, highlighting a neglect of focus on women in this field. A conceptual framework is introduced, one that centers on women, gender, and terrorism, to provide a theoretical foundation as well as point out gaps in terrorism research. Part Two explores the role of women in modern terrorist groups through an analysis of two case studies. Part Three concludes with a discussion of the implications of a gendered approach to counter-terrorism policy. The study of women in terrorism can be a valuable approach to the development of counter-terrorism policies, practices, and responses. In addition, an enhanced focus on women in terrorism can advance knowledge and make an important contribution to the field of international relations.

⁵ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Role of Palestinian Women in Suicide Terrorism*, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA-Archive/2003/Pages/The%20Role%20of%20Palestinian%20Women%20in%20Suicide%20Terrorism.aspx> (accessed May 11, 2017).

Research Question

Women in terrorist groups are an understudied phenomenon; the study of female terrorists is rarely acknowledged as a subject that can add to the understanding of terrorism or how to counter it.⁶ Consequently, there remain many unanswered questions about women in terrorist groups. *Who are they? Why do they become terrorists?* While these are intriguing questions, uncovering women's *motivations* to join a terrorist group delves into the field of psychology and thus will not be explored in detail. This paper seeks to answer the question, "What are the roles of women in modern terrorist groups?"

A case study approach is the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are posed.⁷ Its main advantage is its deeper understanding of specific instances of a phenomenon.⁸ A multiple case study, a variant that includes two or more observations of the same phenomenon, allows the researcher to analyze data within each situation and across different situations.⁹ Applying a multiple case study approach to the phenomenon of female terrorism will illustrate a more complete picture of women's involvement in terrorism. Answering the research question can enhance counter-terrorism policy by facilitating the development of a comprehensive strategy for combating terrorism and reducing political violence.

⁶ Karla J. Cunningham, "Countering Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 2 (2007): 113.

⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3rd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 5.

⁸ Michael Lewis-Beck, Alan E. Bryman, and Tim Futing Liao. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, Sage Publications, 2003.

⁹ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 9.

Defining *Terrorism*

It is important to first establish a working definition of terrorism for the purposes of this research paper. Jessica Davis, an Ottawa-based writer and researcher on women in terrorism, suggests that part of the problem with terrorist studies, its lack of boundaries and clear disciplines, is partly due to the definitional dilemma.¹⁰ Therefore, anyone that aims to study terrorism must incorporate a working definition to ground the research, the actors and elements it includes, and how those things are interpreted.¹¹ Definitions are crucial to empirical research; if a concept is not clearly defined, it is difficult to include it in a comparative study.¹²

Both domestic and international organizations struggle to agree upon a common definition of terrorism.¹³ Even the United Nations has yet to reach an internationally-agreed upon definition.¹⁴ Following the September 11th attacks, the United Nations Security Council adopted unanimously Resolution 1373 on September 28th, 2001 - a counter-terrorism measure mandating all member nations to take proactive steps to combat terrorism, including increasing criminalization and implementing harsher sentencing for terrorist acts, freezing funds of those financing terrorist activities, sharing intelligence, and enforcing tighter border controls to prevent

¹⁰ Jessica Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017), 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Brian J. Phillips, "What Is a Terrorist Group? Conceptual Issues and Empirical Implications," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27 (2014): 226.

¹³ Maj. Marne L. Sutton, "The Rising Importance of Women in Terrorism and the Need to Reform Counterterrorism Strategy," *United States Army Command and General Staff College* (2009): 4, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA506225>.

¹⁴ David Cortright, George A. Lopez, Alistair Millar and Linda Gerber-Stellingwerf, "Global Cooperation against Terrorism: Evaluating the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee," in *Uniting Against Terror*, ed. David Cortright and George A. Lopez (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 44-45.

the migration of terrorists.¹⁵ However, a central problem still existed— the international community had not adopted a comprehensive definition of terrorism.

The international issue of defining terrorism has several implications. Firstly, the lack of a comprehensive definition hinders the development of a global and unified stance against terrorism. On a practical level, the inability to define it presents an obstacle to concretizing the meaning, implementation, and impact and effectiveness of United Nations resolutions and treaties regarding counter-terrorism issues.¹⁶ Counter-terrorism law and policy depends upon its definition. If the international community or an individual state is to address terrorist activity, it must first define its parameters. “This foundational question is of the utmost importance in determining who a state or international body will consider a terrorist and, therefore, who will be subject to the stricter laws, diminished rights protections, and harsher penalties that are concomitant with the designation of terrorism”.¹⁷ Moreover, it has been suggested that the absence of a common definition thwarts counter-terrorism operations as well as limits the effectiveness of both domestic and international efforts to combat terrorism while maintaining the rule of law and fulfilling human rights obligations.¹⁸

Beginning with a non-rigorous approach to the definitional question of terrorism, when asked to visualize a terrorist, most people will likely picture someone like Osama bin Laden, or more generally someone with dark skin, and probably Muslim. They envision a man. These myths and misperceptions surrounding the idea about who terrorists are and what terrorism is,

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council (SC), Resolution 1373, September 28, 2001, [https://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/specialmeetings/2012/docs/United%20Nations%20Security%20Council%20Resolution%201373%20\(2001\).pdf](https://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/specialmeetings/2012/docs/United%20Nations%20Security%20Council%20Resolution%201373%20(2001).pdf)

¹⁶ Sudha Setty, "What's in a Name? How Nations Define Terrorism Ten Years after 9/11," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 33, no. 1 (2011): 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

are harmful because they feed into gender stereotyping and hinder counter-terrorism efforts.¹⁹ Predicating definitions of terrorism on the assumption that terrorists are men masculinizes the approach to terrorism studies.²⁰

There are a multitude of definitions of terrorism which are often in tension with one another. Across all definitions, several common denominators emerge – violence, civilian targets, and political goals.²¹ Political motivation is the most debated element in the definitional conundrum. A survey of 109 definitions found that sixty five percent incorporated political motivation.²² Based upon review of several definitions proposed by terrorism scholars, a working definition was selected that best fits within the parameters of the research question. It is the working definition developed by Jessica Davis for her research on women in modern terrorism. However, in contrast to Davis, the definition in this paper incorporates political objectives because as the case studies will demonstrate, political objectives must be considered when applying a gendered lens to terrorism to challenge assumptions that women are inherently *apolitical*. Further, it is important to note that the understanding of terrorism in this research paper focuses on the *tactic* of terrorism. Therefore, terrorism will be defined as an act, tactical in nature, that targets civilians, infrastructure, and military forces for political objectives.

¹⁹ Susan N. Herman, "Women and Terrorism: Keynote Address," *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 31, no. 2 3 (2010): 260.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, "Women Terrorists," *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 31, no. 2 3 (2010): 287.

²² Phillips, "What Is a Terrorist Group," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 227.

Literature Review

This section will begin with a general survey of terrorism research as it is crucial to understand the legitimate and widespread concerns that exist in this field. A review of research on female terrorism subsequently follows. The problem with the terrorism research agenda, according to scholar Martha Crenshaw, is that the field is plagued by the enduring challenges posed by the lack of a definition, as highlighted in the previous section. Crenshaw further extends her critique by positing that the field of terrorism studies suffers from an inability to build a cohesive, integrated, and cumulative theory as well as the event-driven nature of terrorism.²³

The three thousand lives lost on September 11th, 2001 brought a new urgency to the question of what leads a person to engage in political violence. The research on terrorism after 9/11 fueled an academic tradition that peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁴ After the events of 9/11, the field of terrorism studies catapulted to the forefront of academic interest and policy concern worldwide.²⁵ The United States and other national governments prioritized the study of the causes and responses to terrorism. A variety of studies explored the etiology of terrorism, including incident, perpetrator, and organizational-level explanations, the structures of terrorist groups, and the effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies.²⁶ The increased funding and attention dedicated to terrorism studies after 9/11 vastly improved the quantity and policy

²³ Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century," *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000): 405.

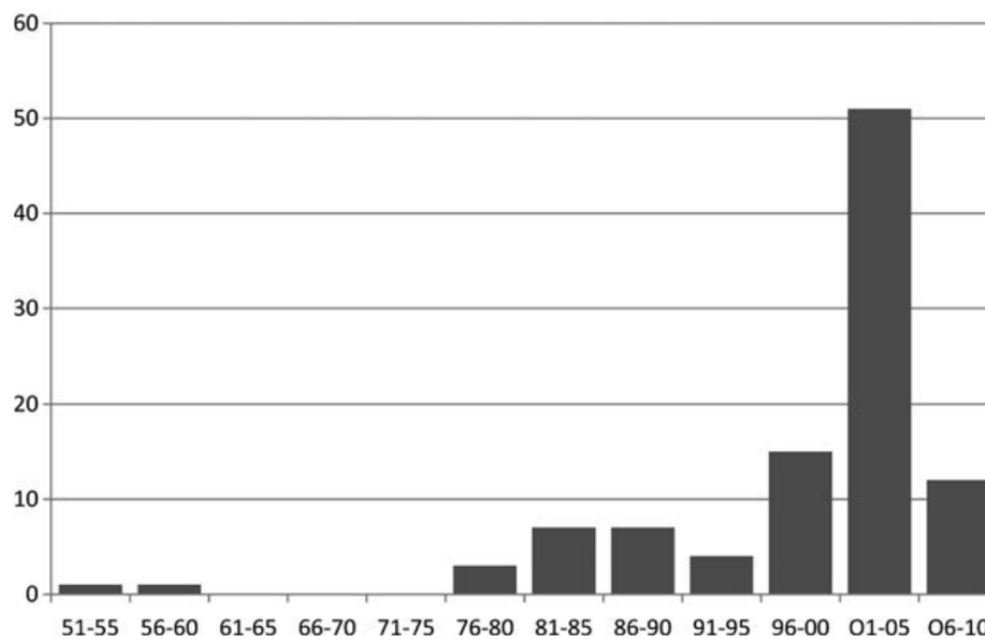
²⁴ Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 (2014): 566.

²⁵ Magnus Ranstorp, "Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction," *Cass Series on Political Violence*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 3.

²⁶ Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak and Jeff Gruenewald, "The Future of Terrorism Research: A Review Essay," *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39, no.4 (2014): 353.

relevance of the research. For example, a 2008 study found that while 150 terrorism books were published in 2000, nearly 2000 were published in 2002, and a new terrorism book is published every six hours.²⁷ Figure 1 illustrates this trend by showing the results of a study on the one hundred most cited articles in terrorism studies and their period of publication.²⁸

Figure 1: Period of Publication of Most Cited Terrorism Articles



The key trend identified in this research is the extent to which the list is dominated by recent articles; sixty-two percent have been published since 9/11 and there is a perception that this dominance will only deepen.²⁹ Though the *quantity* of terrorism research drastically improved, worries remain regarding the *quality*. Reviews continue to find problems, particularly that despite the abundance of research papers, articles, and books, there has been only a minor shift

²⁷ Andrew Silke, "Research on Terrorism: The impact of 9/11 and the Global War on Terrorism," in *Terrorism informatics: Knowledge Management and Data Mining for Homeland Security*, ed. H. Chen, E. Reid, J. Sinai, A. Silke, & B. Ganor (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 2008), 28.

²⁸ Andrew Silke and Jennifer Schmidt-Petersen, "The Golden Age? What the 100 Most Cited Articles in Terrorism Studies Tell Us," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no.4 (2015): 698.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 700.

towards more rigorous data collection and analysis.³⁰ Again, these weaknesses can be partly attributed to the long-running disagreement of what constitutes terrorism as well as the methodological constraints to studying terrorist groups in dangerous regions.

In his stark analysis, Marc Sageman contends that research on terrorism has stagnated. He concludes that:

“It is hard to escape the judgment that academic terrorism research has stagnated for the past dozen years because of a lack of both primary sources and vigorous efforts to police the quality of research, thus preventing the establishment of standards of academic excellence and flooding the field with charlatans, spouting some of the vilest prejudices under the cloak of national security”.³¹

This harsh perspective is not shared by everyone. Alex Schmid, while acknowledging that considerable problems exist, argues that there is significant cause for optimism in the field of terrorism studies. “Looking back over four decades of terrorism research, one cannot fail to see that, next to much pretentious nonsense, a fairly solid body of consolidated knowledge has emerged. In fact, Terrorism Studies has never been in better shape than now”.³²

A Review of Female Terrorism

Arguably, there is one area of terrorism studies that is not in good shape – women. Not surprisingly, there is a neglect of focus on female terrorism research. Studies on terrorism have traditionally focused on men, due to the long-standing belief that women are inherently less aggressive and less violent than their male counterparts. However, as will be explored in the

³⁰ Ibid., 693.

³¹ Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 8.

³² Alex Peter Schmid, “The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research,” (London: Routledge, 2011), 470.

following sections, female participation in terrorist networks is increasing “regionally, logistically, and ideologically”.³³ As women’s involvement has increased, so too has research on this phenomenon, which is reflected by an increase in the number of publications. Like general terrorism studies, female terrorism research explores a wide range of issues across various disciplines, including political science, international relations, women’s studies, criminology, and psychology. It is almost not surprising, then, that the growth in female terrorism research has produced a valuable, yet unintegrated wealth of knowledge.³⁴ It is crucial to derive a coherent narrative to understand the phenomenon of female terrorists as it is likely to play a key role in the development of counter-terrorism strategies and policies.

Research produced in the 1970s and 1980s focused on females fighting the guerilla wars in Latin America, the psychological factors underlying female participation in terrorist activities, and on female involvement in the Russian Revolution. Interestingly, Russian women during the Revolution were generally viewed as idealistic, though perhaps misguided, heroines who fought against a despotic tsarist regime.³⁵ It was a woman, Vera Zasulich, who heralded the beginning of terrorism in Russia in 1878 by an attack on the governor of St. Petersburg. In the following year, when the first Russian terrorist party, “People’s Will”, was formed, it included ten women in its original executive committee.³⁶ Modern day Chechen female terrorists are often considered irrational and immoral, whereas their Russian forerunners attracted widespread support, and women like Zasulich were heralded as *heroes*. Lastly, the 1990s witnessed a growth of research

³³ Cunningham, “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 172.

³⁴ Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009): 499.

³⁵ Amy Knight, "Female Terrorists in the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party," *The Russian Review* 38, no. 2 (1979): 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

on Irish terrorists. Research on women in terrorism has increased since 2000, with a range of foci and disparate events covered across disciplines. This broad range of foci can be criticized for its juxtaposition of competing hypotheses with no comparison between or across findings.³⁷ This paper seeks to address this critique.

In a 2009, Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor published the first meta-analysis of female terrorism research by identifying trends and common themes across the literature to date. Research on female terrorism follows the same general timeline as the broader field of terrorism studies (see Figure 2).³⁸ In their analysis of 54 publications on female terrorism, the researchers found that 38 works (70%) appeared after 2002.³⁹ Overall, they identified six primary foci in the literature- history and overview of female terrorism, perceptions of female terrorists in the media, roles of female terrorists, motivation and recruitment, environmental enablers, and other (see Figure 3).⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 500.

³⁸ Jacques and Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 502.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 504.

Figure 2: Frequency of Publications on Female Terrorism

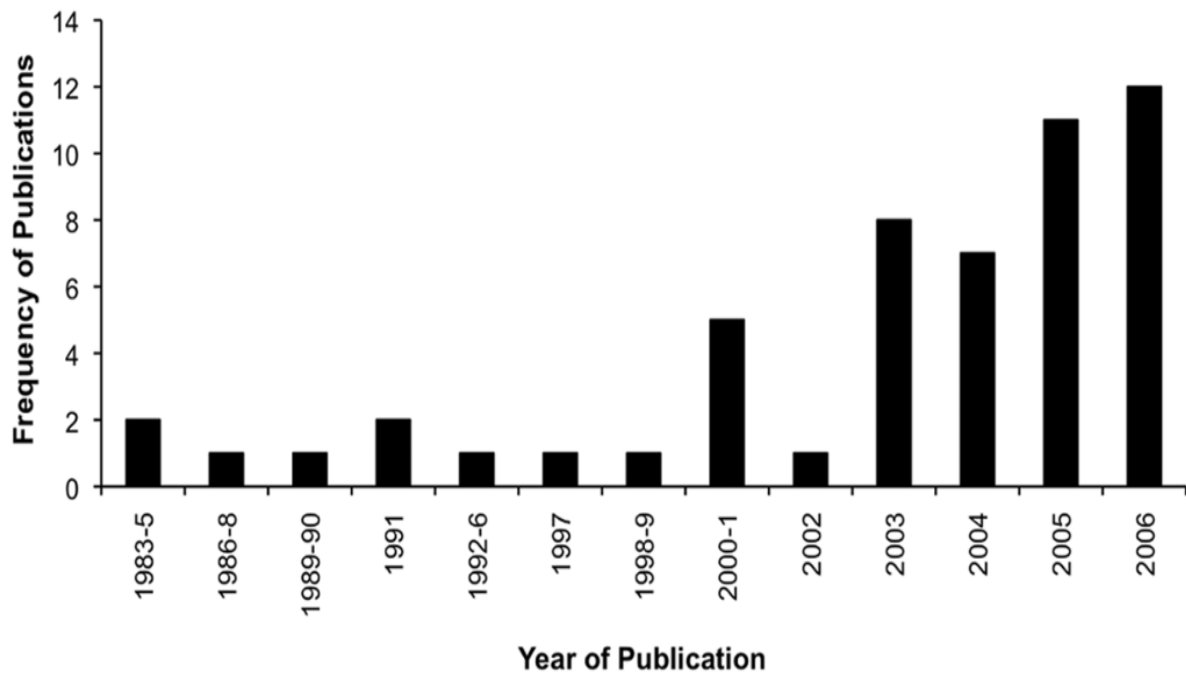


Figure 3: Main Focus of Articles on Female Terrorism

Article focus	Focus category	Main focus	Secondary focus
Overview of female terrorism	Overview and history of female involvement in terrorism	22	7
Details of women in specific conflicts			
Perceptions of female terrorists	Perceptions and media	11	4
Feminism, female terrorism and society	Feminism and gender studies	6	11
Women's roles	Women's roles	6	14
Motivation and/or recruitment	Motivation and recruitment	5	30
Impact of religion on female involvement	Environmental enablers	3	9
Criminology			
Countering female terrorism	Other	1	2

Based on Figure 3, it appears that a lesser number of articles focus on feminism and gender studies and women's roles in terrorist groups, two categories that form the foundation of this paper. Further analysis by Jacques and Taylor on six articles primarily focusing on feminism and gender studies suggests that the literature is divided. Some articles, such as the work by Berko and Erez⁴¹, argue that Palestinian women in terrorism are an aspect of systematic gender oppression and that female Palestinian terrorists are mere tools of male Palestinian society. This argument serves to minimize women's agency in terrorist activities and leaves a key area of international relations unexplored.

In contrast, other articles by Alison, Gentry, and West emphasize the importance of applying a gendered lens to women in terrorism because it can contribute to a better understanding of the field.⁴² These articles will be used to further the argument in this paper that the inclusion of gender perspectives on female terrorism can facilitate a broader understanding of women's involvement and roles within terrorist groups. Jacques and Taylor also identified the roles that women play within terrorist groups based on their analysis of 54 publications (Figure 4).⁴³ The two case studies in Part Two of this paper will expand upon these typologies and offer new insights on the roles of women in terrorist groups, especially within the Islamic State, where women are increasingly involved in the group's recruitment efforts.

⁴¹ Anat Berko and Edna Erez, "Gender, Palestinian Women, and Terrorism: Women's Liberation or Oppression?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30, no. 6 (2007): 511.

⁴² Miranda, Alison, "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security," *Security Dialogue* 35, no.4 (2004): 447-463. Caron Gentry, "The Relationship between New Social Movement Theory and Terrorism Studies: The Role of Leadership, Membership, Ideology and Gender," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no.2 (2004): 274-293. Jessica West, "Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows': Reproducing Gendered Divisions," *Innovations: A Journal of Politics* 5 (2004): 1-16.

⁴³ Jacques and Taylor, "Female Terrorism: A Review," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 508.

Figure 4: Women's Roles in Terrorist Groups

Group	Sympathisers	Spies	Warriors	Warrior leaders	Dominant forces	Suicide bombers	Participation grown?
European left-wing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
LTTE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Domestic Latin Am.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
IRA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
American right-wing	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
ETA	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Palestinian	✓	✓				✓	✓
Chechen	✓					✓	✓
International Latin Am.	✓						
Irish Loyalists	✓						
Al Qaeda						✓	✓

Note: ✓ = Females are often found in these roles within the group.
 ✓ = Females positioned in these roles are typically exceptional and rare.

It is important to note that Jacques and Taylor's review was published in 2009, and thus only considered the literature to date. Since then, the world has continued to witness a surge of women's involvement in terrorism, especially due to the rise of the Islamic State and the fundamental role of women within the group. The study of female terrorism continues to grow and expand rapidly, but nonetheless research remains relatively sparse. New research aims to address the gaps highlighted in Jacques and Taylor's review, such as moving away from outlining general details towards more specifics and theories explaining which women become involved, when they get involved, and how they get involved. This paper intends to address the research gaps by providing a deeper level of understanding of the roles of women within modern terrorist groups.

*“Where are the women?”*⁴⁴

The above observation is one of the oldest questions in feminist international relations. The fact that there is such shock, controversy, and interest in the phenomenon of female terrorists speaks to the gendered constructions of violence, war, and international relations. Even this research paper was sparked by the author’s fascination by the subject. This paper argues that terrorism is not solely the domain of men. The inclusion of gender perspectives on female terrorism can facilitate a broader understanding of women’s participation and roles in terrorist groups.

This research paper draws on a variety of interrogations of terrorism. At the foundation, it argues that terrorism studies best lends itself to a constructivist understanding compared to other traditional international relations theories. From a constructivist perspective, terrorism is a social construction; it is not a ‘given’ in the real world, but rather an interpretation of events and their presumed causes.⁴⁵ The phrase “one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” highlights how terrorism is rooted in how it is being constructed by an individual or state, which helps explain why a universally-agreed upon definition of terrorism has yet to be established. The central notion on which this research paper is based, then, is that terrorism is constituted through discourse. In other words, “we all make terrorism what (we say) it is”.⁴⁶ For example, “Imagined Community”, following Benedict Anderson, refers to how members of disparate

⁴⁴ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 21.

⁴⁵ Rainer Hülse and Alexander Spencer, "The Metaphor of Terror: Terrorism Studies and the Constructivist Turn," *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 6 (2008): 572.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Onuf, "Making Terror/ism," *International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2009): 54.

communities identify themselves as a unified nation.⁴⁷ Others refer to this phenomenon as *fictive kin*, whereby individuals who do not know each other personally develop personal ties based on social identification. Speckhard and Akhmedova assert that a sense of fictive kin is commonly created in terror groups that use Islamist-based ideologies to create a strong sense of “brotherhood” (or in this case, sisterhood).⁴⁸

Further to the constructivist perspective, this paper primarily focuses on applying a gendered analysis in terrorism studies. A feminist international relations perspective emphasizes removing the obstacles to seeing terrorism as a predominantly masculine field. Excluding and ignoring women in terrorism carries the consequence of denying women “their political agency in these acts of violence, and leaves a key area of international relations and conflict unexplored.”⁴⁹ This research paper is inspired by the gender subordination of women in the global political arena and aims to address this discrepancy.

Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg argue that feminist scholarship uses gender as a category of analysis to challenge ideas of agency, interdependence, and criminality.⁵⁰ The images of women as organizing attacks, leading insurgent groups, perpetrating martyrdom, engaging in sexual violence, committing war crimes, hijacking airplanes, and becoming human bombs are incompatible with traditional notions of women as peaceful, pure, maternal, and innocent. The subordination of women in global politics consequently impacts how women and their actions are perceived, which means, according to Gentry and Sjoberg, that their violence

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).

⁴⁸ Anne Speckhard, and Khapta Akhmedova, "The New Chechen Jihad: Militant Wahhabism as a Radical Movement and a Source of Suicide Terrorism in Post-War Chechen Society," *Democracy and Security* 2, no. 1 (2006): 110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Caron E. Gentry and Sjoberg, Laura, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2015), 2.

becomes hidden or unseen. The assumptions that women are incapable of committing violence causes them to be characterized as lacking humanity, sanity, and even femininity. The truth is that women, like men, are capable of committing violent acts. Women, like men, commit political violence for a variety of reasons, including strategy, ideological commitments, political objectives, and for individual and social grievances.⁵¹ However, this is not the prevailing approach to women who engage in violence. Rather, these women are “captured in storied fantasies, which deny the notion that women can make choices to participate in violence and reify gender stereotypes and subordination”.⁵²

The public/private dichotomy lies at the heart of many feminist theories and other critical theories in international relations. Feminist international law scholarship has identified this dichotomy as central to understanding the patriarchal premises behind the concept of the state and the marginalization of women’s rights and experiences within this regard. There exists a universal pattern of identifying women’s activities as broadly private in nature, and thus of lesser value.⁵³ This perspective hinders the understanding of women’s participation in terrorist groups by relegating women to the private sphere, or removing them entirely as a unit of analysis in terrorism studies. This is explored in greater detail in the Chechen case study.

The Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

It appears that women’s equality is in the upswing in global politics, evidenced by Security Council Resolutions, the policies of international economic institutions, as well as the foreign policies of many states. On October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ Fionnuala Ni Aoláin, "Situating Women in Counterterrorism Discourses: Undulating Masculinities and Luminal Femininities," *Boston University Law Review* 93, no. 3 (2013): 1100.

adopted Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace, and security. The adoption of this Resolution marked a turning point in the inclusion of women and a gender perspective in peacebuilding efforts as well as launched the international agenda on women, peace, and security (WPS). Since 2000, the Security Council has approved seven other Resolutions – 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), and 2242 (2015), which have expanded and supplemented the initial Resolution. Of relevance to the arguments in this paper is the latest Resolution, 2242, adopted in October 2015 as part of the *Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, a high-level review process that assessed the WPS Agenda's best practices, implementation gaps and challenges, emerging trends, and priorities for action. An important issue in Resolution 2242 is the reference to extremism and the need to integrate the WPS Agenda into the fight against terrorism. It urges Member States to investigate, from a gender perspective, the factors that lead to the radicalization of women and the impact of counter-terrorism strategies on their human rights. It also calls for women's participation and leadership in the fight against terrorism.⁵⁴

Despite the achievements of the WPS agenda, feminist legal and political scholars urge cautionary restraint on the enthusiasm surrounding the latest resolution and the visibility of the WPS Agenda.⁵⁵ The WPS Agenda provides a foundation for the positions occupied by women in the arena of war and peace. However, critics argue, it is not always entirely clear what 'peace' and 'conflict' really mean, or what kinds of conflicts are covered by the WPS mandate. Conflicts have typically been narrowly defined along the lines of conventional armed conflict, and it is

⁵⁴ Maria Fanlo Torrecilla, Elena Grau Biosca, and Sabina Puig Cartes, "The International Agenda on Women, Peace and Security: A Review of the First 15 Years of Resolution 1325 and Proposals for Action in Catalonia," *Per la Pau* 13 (2016): 3.

⁵⁵ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "The 'war on Terror' and Extremism: Assessing the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," *International Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2016): 275.

only the latest Resolution (2242) that expanded the agenda to include terrorism and counter-terrorism settings. While Resolution 2242 explicitly highlights the role of women in countering violent extremism, scholars contend that terrorism nonetheless remains outside the core purview of the WPS agenda.⁵⁶ Further, feminist critics are cynical of the scope of the Resolutions linked to the WPS agenda, noting the lack of gendered vision premised on principles of equality and autonomy for women. Security Council Resolutions on terrorism and counter-terrorism in general show the continued dominance of a masculine paradigm in arenas central to international security and demonstrate a dearth of gender sensitivity.⁵⁷

It is not enough to label women as victims of terrorist groups. This paper concurs with the *Global Study* on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and argues for greater attention to gender dimensions in both terrorism and counter-terrorism. Using Resolution 2242 as inspiration, this paper integrates gender as a cross-cutting issue in terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. The paper responds to the urge of the Council to conduct gender-sensitive research and examine the role of women as perpetrators of violence and potential partners in countering terrorism.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 278.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 282.

Part Two: A Case Study Approach

Women in Modern Terrorist Groups

As previously discussed, case study research investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Case studies carry the advantage of allowing the researcher to extend ideas and theories to real situations. Part Two of this paper explores female terrorism through a case study approach and thus facilitates the application of a gender lens to this phenomenon. It begins with a brief history of women's involvement in terrorist groups, subsequently providing a justification for the selected case studies. An analysis of female terrorists in Chechnya, the infamously named "*Black Widows*", and in the Islamic State, form the core of the research paper and seeks to answer the question, "*What are the roles of women in modern terrorist groups?*"

Female terrorism is not a phenomenon exclusive to the twenty-first century. Women have historically been involved in terrorist activities carried out by The Shining Path group in Peru, by republican and loyalist insurgent groups in Northern Ireland, the Tamil Tigers of Eelan (Sri Lanka), by the Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey), Hamas (Palestine), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), the Zapatista (Mexico), the Taliban (Afghanistan), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).⁵⁸ Moreover, women have also been known to assume some type of leadership role in the Baader-Meinof gang (Germany), the Red Brigade (Italy), the Japanese Red Army, and the Weather Underground (United States).⁵⁹

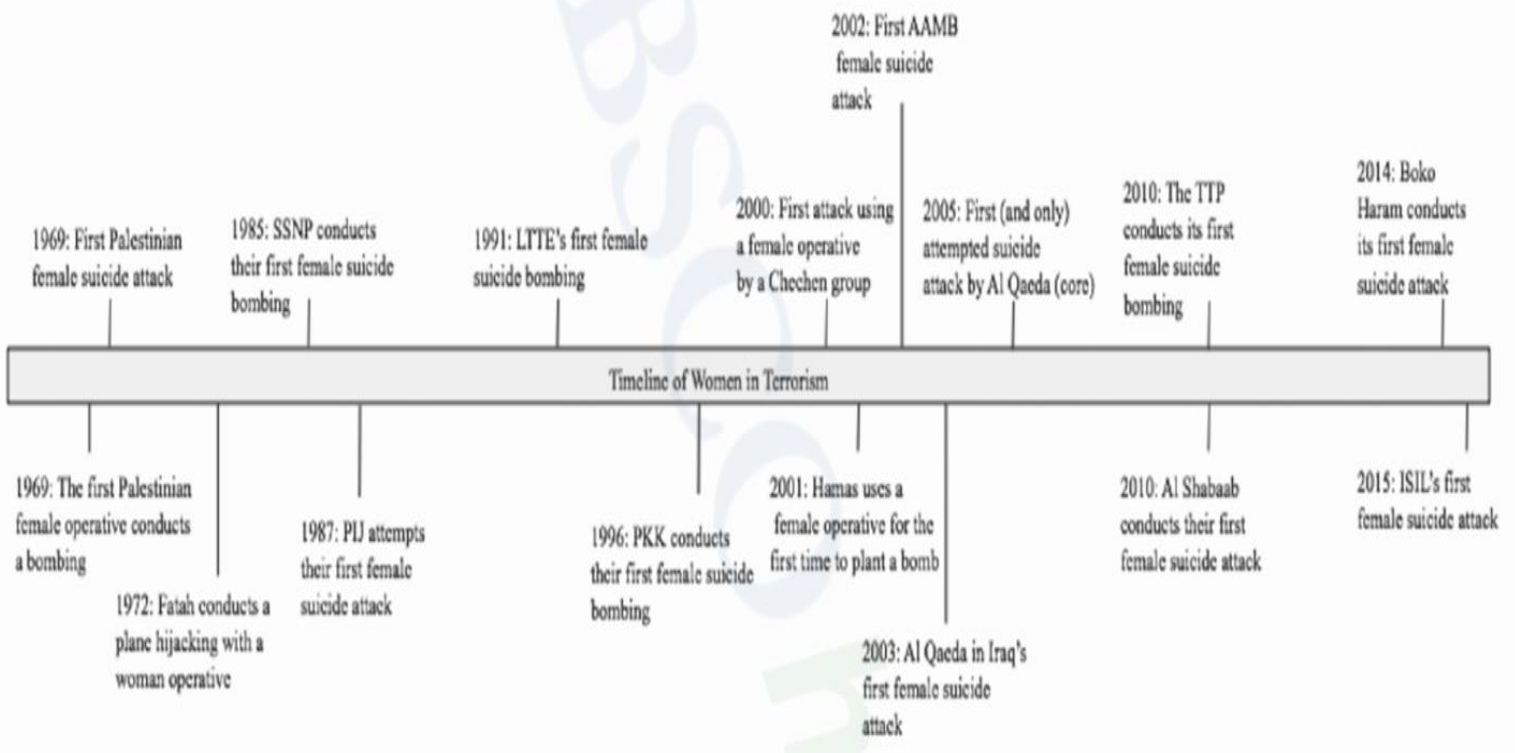
Over the last several decades, there has been increase in the number of women engaged in terrorism across the world. In the modern context, female suicide bombers have increasingly been used in the 1980's, 1990's, and more significantly in the 2000's. Between 1985 and 2010, female suicide bombers committed over 257 attacks on behalf of several terrorist networks,

⁵⁸ Tunde Agara, "Gendering Terrorism: Women, Gender, Terrorism and Suicide Bombers," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5, no.6 (2015): 116.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

which represents approximately a quarter of the total number of attacks committed.⁶⁰ Since 2002, women have represented over fifty percent of successful suicide terror operatives in Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Chechnya.⁶¹ Figures 5 and 6 illustrate a timeline of groups active from 1969 onward who employed suicide terrorism as a tactic and the estimated percentage of female participation in terrorist groups, respectively.⁶²

Figure 5: Timeline of Women in Terrorism

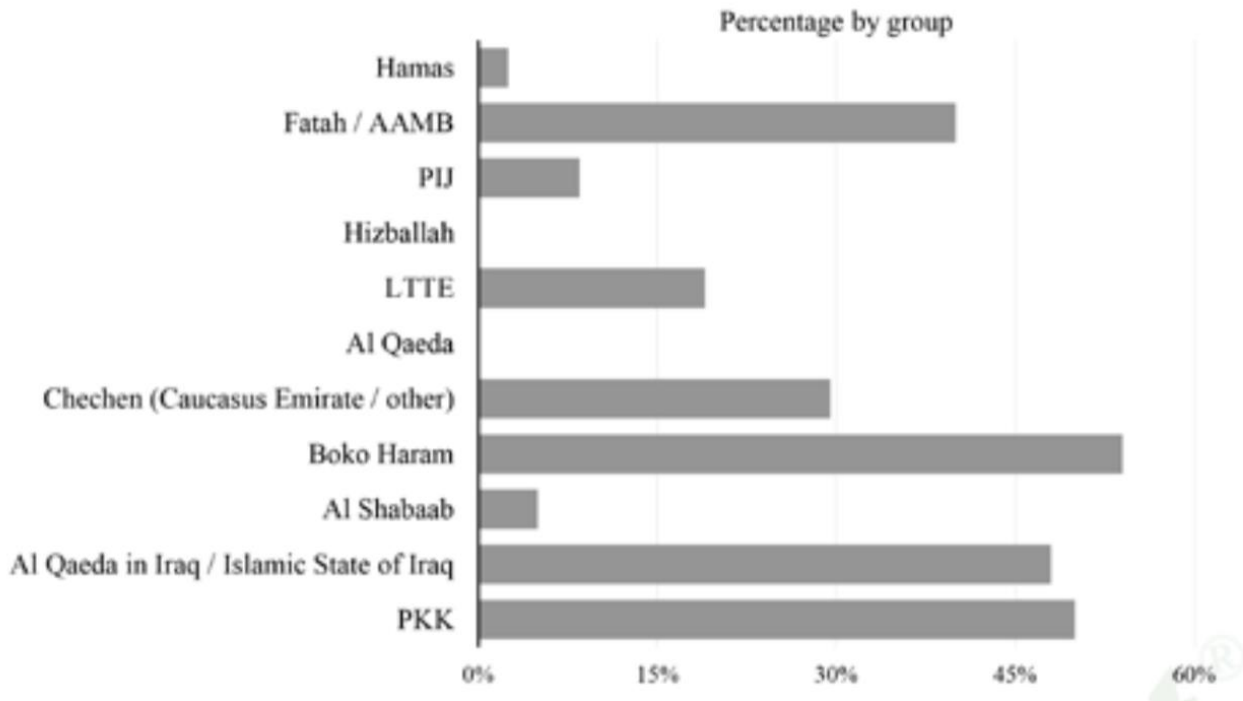


⁶⁰ Mia Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and Terror," *Gender Issues* 28, no. 1 (2011): 1-21.

⁶¹ Mia Bloom, "Death Becomes Her: The Changing Nature of Women's Role in Terror," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2010): 92.

⁶² Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 10, 138.

Figure 6: Estimated Female Participation in Terrorist Groups



Cragin and Daly note that “since the advent of modern terrorism in 1968, women have played a small but expanding role in terrorist networks and their corresponding revolutionary movements.”⁶³ Women hold a variety of roles— as support personnel, logistics personnel, kinetic resources, attackers, kidnappers, hijackers; and as martyrs.⁶⁴ The variety of roles or the change in roles is poorly understood and requires more attention in the literature.⁶⁵ The following case studies will examine the variety of roles that women occupy, which will provide a deeper understanding of women’s roles in terrorism. The cases were selected due to their documented and publicized involvement of women in their operations. In the conflict in Chechnya, women

⁶³ Kim Cragin and Sara A. Daly, *Women as Terrorists: Mothers, Recruiters, and Martyrs* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International/ABC-CLIO, 2009), 103.

⁶⁴ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 2.

⁶⁵ Bloom, “Bombshells,” *Gender Issues*, 6.

were the first female Islamic fighters to engage in militancy, which is believed to have helped pave the way for other Islamic women to engage in *jihad*.⁶⁶ Regarding ISIS, there is a small but growing volume of research on the Islamic State and the roles of women within the group. However, ISIS was not as extensively researched in the literature reviewed for this paper as its rise is more recent than most of the articles. The Islamic State emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, faded for several years after the surge of United States troops to Iraq in 2007, and re-emerged in 2011 to become one of the four deadliest terrorist groups in the world.⁶⁷

Research Limitations

While examining the roles of women in terrorist groups, it is important to be cognizant of the challenges associated with limited data. Academic study in dangerous regions presents obvious challenges, rendering ideal data collection conditions unlikely. Consequently, most terrorism research relies on secondary data, such as published articles and media sources, due to the difficulty of obtaining primary data. The reliance on media reporting of terrorist incidents, which are typically high-profile, high-impact events, is thus a necessary element of terrorism studies. An implication of media reporting is the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and highly biased reporting about women in terrorism. Women are typically represented as ‘deviants, monsters or victims’ by the media. However, as will be presented in the following case studies, women tend to join terrorist groups for much the same, complex reasons as men. Further, many researchers do not produce substantially new data, but rather re-frame old material to support

⁶⁶ Cindy D. Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (2005): 360.

⁶⁷ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2016* <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/02/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2017).

their arguments.⁶⁸ This is understandable given the nature of terrorism research. Lastly, it is important to remember that while female participation in terrorist groups is increasing, it is still a relatively rare phenomenon.

The Black Widows

One week before the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Sochi, Russia in 2014, the threat of the *Black Widows* still haunted Russia and the rest of the world. “In Sochi, authorities are on particular alert for young women such as Ms. Isayeva, Ms. Mamayeva and Ms. Akayeva who either have been reported missing from home by their families or are believed to be “Black Widows” – women who may try to seek revenge for the death of loved ones at the hands of Russian security forces.”⁶⁹ The Chechen insurgency ended in 2009, but significant levels of violence still exist. The infamous *Black Widows* continue not only to threaten, but carry out terrorist activities. In 2013, women were responsible for two of three suicide bombings on public transportation.⁷⁰ Examining the conflict in Chechnya increases the understanding of the modern wave of terrorism and how this wave has incorporated women into its activities.

The Russian-Chechen Conflict

To understand the plight of female Chechen terrorists, it is important to first understand the Russian-Chechen conflict. On November 1, 1991, Jokhar Dudayev, president of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic, declared Chechnya independent from the Soviet Union

⁶⁸ Jacques and Taylor, “Female Terrorism: A Review,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 502.

⁶⁹ Geoff Dyer and Courtney Weaver, “Deadly Threat of ‘black Widows’ Haunts Sochi Olympics,” *Financial Times*, January 31, 2014, (accessed May 19, 2017).

⁷⁰ Caitlin Toto, “Behind the Veil: A Study of Chechen Black Widows’ Web,” *Elements* (2015): 24, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/elements/article/viewFile/8817/789724>.

and the Russian Federation. War began in November 1994 when Russian soldiers were captured with anti-Dudayev Chechen forces in Grozny, the Chechen capital. When the soldiers were not released, the Russians launched extensive airstrikes, followed by an invasion of Russian ground forces on December 11, 1994. Fighting continued until 1996, when both sides agreed to a ceasefire. Conflict resumed in 1999 after a series of bombings in apartment buildings throughout Russia.⁷¹

Rumours of female snipers and suicide bombers began to swirl in the Russian press in 1994. The reports were given credibility by the occasional arrest of Chechen women and their visible involvement in several attacks. Nonetheless, Russian security services paid greater attention to men, but the “mythology of the wily female suicide bomber began to take shape early in the conflict”.⁷² A woman executed the first Chechen suicide bombing in June 2000, when Khava Barayev drove a truck loaded with explosives into a Russian military base.⁷³

Attacks continued throughout 2001 and 2002, but women were not visible as attackers until October 2002, when terrorists seized the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow. The crisis brought renewed international attention to the war between Russia and Chechnya. Forty-one terrorists, including nineteen women, stormed the theatre and took eight hundred people as hostages. After a three-day siege, Russian forces took control of the building using gas, killing most of the

⁷¹ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 84.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷³ Ness, “Women’s Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 360.

terrorists and 115 hostages.⁷⁴ After this attack, women accounted for the majority of suicide attacks in Russia.⁷⁵

It is difficult to accurately estimate female participation in terrorist activities in the Chechen conflict due to the low number of reports of women's involvement, except for media reports about suicide attacks.⁷⁶ It is estimated that there have been eighty-five suicide attacks since 2000 in Russia involving Chechen separatist groups, and twenty-four of them have been perpetrated by women.⁷⁷ Figure 7 illustrates successful terrorist attacks by Chechen women.⁷⁸ Further, it is estimated that female involvement in the Chechen conflict is between 28 percent and 31 percent.⁷⁹ It is clear that female terrorists in Russia have participated extensively in terrorist activities, making them outliers and thus distinguishing the Chechen phenomenon of female terrorists from the norm.

⁷⁴ Andy W. Knight and Tanya Narozhna, "Social Contagion and the Female Face of Terror: New Trends in the Culture of Political Violence," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 12, no. 1 (2005): 153.

⁷⁵ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 86.

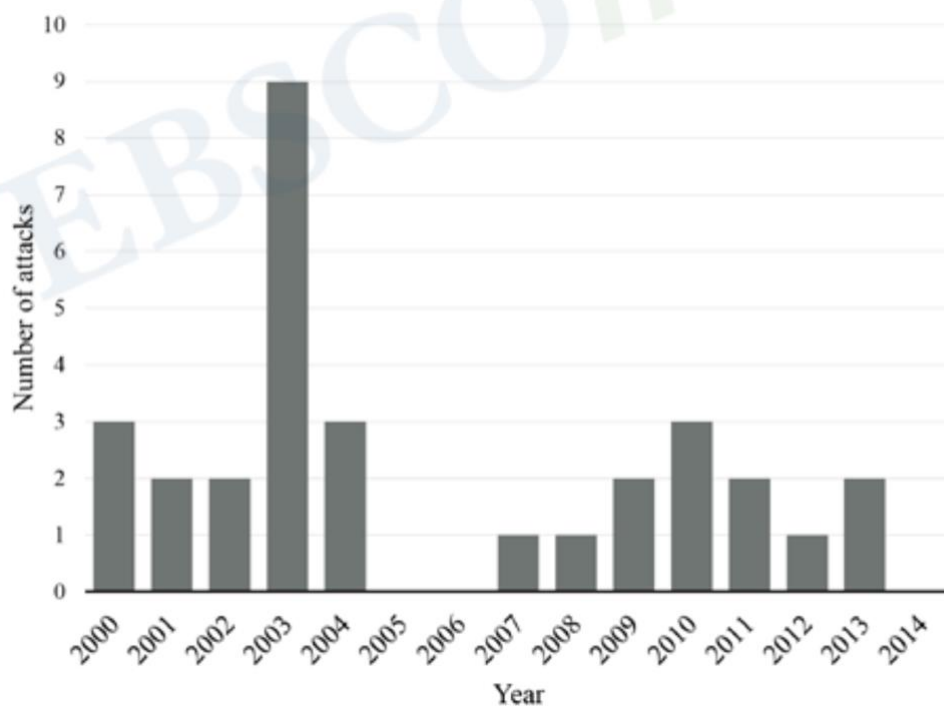
⁷⁶ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 95.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

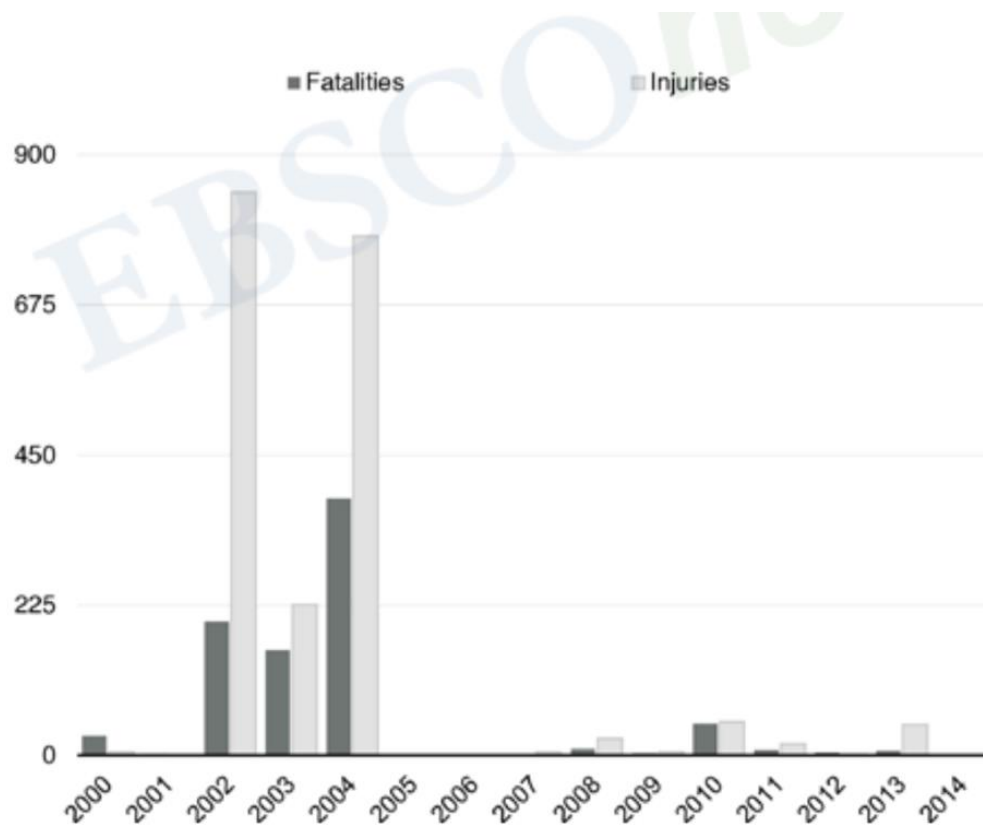
Figure 7: Successful Attacks by Chechen Women



Terrorism scholar Jessica Davis asserts that one of the elements that characterizes Chechen militancy and women's involvement is the high number of casualties in the attacks (Figure 8). Although female-perpetrated attacks in Chechnya are abnormally lethal, the theatre attack in Moscow as well as a 2004 siege at a school in Beslan that killed over 330 people are often discounted in the calculation of fatalities because Russian security forces used techniques such as gas that increased casualties in those attacks. With those two attacks discounted, attacks involving Chechen women have killed over 320 people, with 11 people on average killed per attack.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Ibid., 96.

Figure 8: Injuries & Fatalities in Attacks Perpetrated by Chechen Women



The Role of Women

Women's principal roles within the *Black Widows* are tragically as suicide bombers. Arguably, women who engage in suicide bombing are partaking in a traditionally masculine "life-taking" activity. However, popular interpretations emphasize their feminine qualities and motivations, which reflects the broader representation of women in international relations – as absent, relegated to the domestic and private realm, and lacking agency.⁸¹ Despite the prevalence of women as tactical operatives (specifically suicide bombers) in Russia, there are few women in

⁸¹ West, "Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows'," *Innovations: A Journal of Politics*, 6.

the organizational and leadership structure of Chechen terrorist groups.⁸² Within the Chechen organizational structure, women serve in traditional and subservient roles such as cooks, cleaners, and nurses.⁸³ According to research by Speckhard and Akhmedova, who interviewed family and relatives of Chechen suicide bombers, women who join terrorist groups in Chechnya actually regress in some ways. They wear traditional Arab dress and devote themselves to traditional roles, whereas in Chechen society these gender norms are not adhered to.⁸⁴ It is unclear why women are rarely involved in the leadership and hierarchical structures of terrorist groups. The reasons behind this are obscure at best and highlight an area that requires further research. Mia Bloom argues that “until such a time that women’s lives become as valuable as their deaths, women’s participation in violence will not create more opportunities for women of that society”.⁸⁵

In her research on terrorism, Mia Bloom asserts that a prominent (and disturbing) trend has emerged – women have begun to transition from supportive roles to more active operational roles, like suicide bombers. As mentioned in Part One, between 1985 and 2008, female suicide bombers committed over 230 attacks, representing roughly one quarter of the total number of attacks committed.⁸⁶ The roles of women as suicide bombers are an indispensable and integral component across terrorist networks. There are several factors that contribute to the rise and effectiveness of women as suicide bombers, such as operational advantage, greater publicity and propaganda value, increased recruitment, and competition among terrorist groups in the same

⁸² Ibid., 97.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 72.

⁸⁵ Bloom, "Death Becomes Her," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 96.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 92.

place.⁸⁷ Women arouse less suspicion than men and are less likely to be searched. The element of surprise is stronger when women become suicide terrorists, which results in increased effectiveness than their male counterparts, evidenced by the sheer number of casualties inflicted by Chechen suicide terrorists. In this case, terrorist groups are exploiting gender stereotypes by using women to get past security personnel and avoid detection and boost media attention.

A Gender Lens

After a suicide attack by a female operative, researchers frequently engage in a so-called “psychological autopsy”. They examine where she grew up, where she went to school, and what went wrong that caused her to turn to violence. It is a common assumption that *she must have been depressed, suicidal, crazy - or even, that a man made her do it*. This approach denies women agency and removes their motivations of any political content.⁸⁸

The Dubvroka Theatre hostage crisis in October 2002 marks the moment in which the *Black Widow* depiction took centre stage in the international media. Chechen women gained widespread attention as *Black Widows*, women who lost their husbands, brothers, or other close relatives in the war. The title of *Black Widows* paints women as bereaved, victimized, and without agency. The name was coined by the Russian media and evokes the image of women as victims and perpetuates gendered assumptions about women and violence. This image is occasionally reinforced by Chechen terrorist leaders, who emphasize the victimization of women.⁸⁹ This is supported through research by S.V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramaniyan, one of the few who have examined the relationship between gender inequalities and terrorist groups.

⁸⁷ S.V. Raghavan and V. Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups: Progression or Regression?" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 202.

⁸⁸ Bloom, "Death Becomes Her," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 92.

⁸⁹ Sjoberg, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 87.

Their study shows how gender inequality provides fertile ground for terrorist groups, arguing that terrorist groups readily exploit to their advantage the victimization of women in patriarchal societies.⁹⁰

Women's status as victims humanizes the conflict; if women are involved, there is an unspoken message that the conflict must be serious and the cause may be just.⁹¹ Similarly, in a July 2003 survey, the Public Opinion Foundation of the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion found that 84 percent of Russians believed female suicide bombers were controlled by someone else. Only 3 percent of surveyed respondents believed that women acted independently. Here, women are seen as being acted upon by men and forced into terrorism, rather than rational actors who choose terrorism as a tactic.⁹²

The *Black Widows* are framed as entirely under the control of others; they are described as female pawns in men's games.⁹³ Stories suggest that these women were drugged, raped, or blackmailed into becoming suicide terrorists. The term given to this practice is *zombirovaniye*, an expression which means "turned into zombies".⁹⁴ Further, Russian authorities assert that the presence of female suicide bombers is evidence of Chechen ties to international terrorism, which funds, trains, and manipulates them with religion.⁹⁵ Women are described as out to avenge the humiliations that have been imposed upon their families by the Russian government. The purpose of women as suicide bombers in the Chechen conflict is entirely dependent upon their roles as wives and mothers. Any political motivations are discounted in favour of the personal

⁹⁰ Raghavan and Balasubramaniyan, "Evolving Role of Women in Terror Groups," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 202.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Caron and Gentry, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 130.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ West, "Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows'," *Innovations: A Journal of Politics*, 6.

and private. Even during the theatre crisis, descriptions of the female terrorists echoed depictions of women as nurturers and care-takers who would bring in food and medicine for the hostages. *Black Widows* are characterized as desperate and hopeless survivors of war with no reason to live, so they turn to suicide terrorism to avenge the deaths of their loved ones. This maternalistic characterization denies women agency in their actions and removes them from the broader socio-political context.⁹⁶

In their extensive study of Chechen women, Speckhard and Akhmedova dispute the traditional and stereotypical perspectives of Chechen female terrorists. They find no evidence of female coercion into terrorist activities.

“While some, mainly Russian journalists have written that Chechen women are kidnapped, raped, and/or drugged to encourage them to take part in terror activities, we have found no evidence for this. On the contrary, we find strong evidence of self-recruitment and strong willingness to martyr oneself on behalf of one’s country and independence from Russia, to enact social justice (in their perspective) for wrongs done to them, and to avenge for the loss of loved ones in their families”.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, the stories of Chechen women as involuntarily enslaved into terrorism continues to dominate the narratives. These perspectives depict women as apolitical persons lacking the autonomy and agency to make their own decisions. It reinforces the theoretical pattern of studying men’s actions and experiences to understand terrorism. Terrorism is a political act, but by focusing on personal grievances and revenge as reasons for becoming a suicide bomber, no one questions what women’s political objectives may be. The relegation of men to the political

⁹⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁷ Speckhard and Akhmedova, “The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 70.

sphere and women to the private and apolitical explains why women are often absent in the study of international relations.

Women in the Islamic State

“The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) may herald a new era of women’s activity in political violence”.⁹⁸ The second case study explores the roles of women in the Islamic State and was selected because of the group’s unique ability to effectively capitalize on its network of women. In the modern history of terrorism, never has a terrorist group attracted so many women, especially from the West. In the age of social media, some of the Islamic State’s most vocal supporters are women. Women are crucial to the Islamic State’s strength and capabilities. The study will begin with a brief background of the Islamic State and then explore the myriad of activities and roles of women within the group. A solid understanding of women’s involvement in the Islamic State can produce valuable intelligence in the fight to dismantle ISIS.

ISIS: A Brief Overview

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State (IS), and by its Arabic language acronym *Daesh*, is a terrorist group based in Syria and Iraq. It emerged from al-Qaida in Iraq, moving to Syria during the country’s civil war. In February 2014, al-Qaida formally severed ties with ISIS. The group’s ultimate ambition is to establish an area of Islamic rule and aspires to control the Levant region, which includes Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The group controls a significant amount of territory in both Iraq and Syria and is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Caliph. Per the Global Terrorism Index 2016, ISIS was the deadliest terrorist group in 2015; it killed 6,141 people with

⁹⁸ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 123.

an average of 6.4 deaths per attack. The Islamic State poses the greatest threat to the global community.

The Role of Women

The Islamic State is among the world's worst perpetrators of gender-based violence against women. Its horrid tactics include imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, and the execution of both Muslim and non-Muslim women.⁹⁹ The question is, despite the Islamic State's inhumanity towards women, why do so many flock to its ranks? Incrementally, the women of the Islamic State have attained influential roles in the group despite the cruel treatment of women in its controlled territory.¹⁰⁰ There is no doubt that women are victims of the Islamic State's brutality. As of 2015, roughly 2,000 Yazidi women are believed to be held as sex slaves.¹⁰¹ However, the remainder of this case study will focus on women as perpetrators of violence – those who are attracted towards the misogynist institution and are accepting its call to subservience under the Caliphate.

A significant number of young Muslim women, between 20,000 to 31,500, have joined fighters in the Islamic State. Western women represent a significant number of the women travelling to join the Islamic State; an estimated 4,000 Westerners have travelled to Syria to join the ranks of ISIS, more than 550 of which are believed to be women and girls.¹⁰² A majority is believed to be between the ages of 18 and 25. Although there are no concrete data, approximately seventy women might have come from France, sixty from the United Kingdom,

⁹⁹ Amanda Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism: An Analysis of the Women in Islamic State," *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, no. 3 (2016): 74.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Debangana Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2 (2016): 209.

¹⁰² Ibid.

and even some from other European countries and Canada.¹⁰³ In one relatively high-profile case, three British schoolgirls traveled from the United Kingdom to Syria, via Turkey, to join ISIS after being encouraged by a woman named Aqsa Mahmood, believed to be one of the most active recruiters of young British women, in February 2015. The grainy security footage of the three young women (shown below) has become the face of a troubling new phenomenon.¹⁰⁴ While men tend to become fighters, much less is known about the Western women of the Islamic State.



Security video from Gatwick Airport in London showed Kadiza Sultana, left, Shamima Begum and Amira Abase on Feb. 17, when it is believed they left London for a flight to Turkey, with plans to go on to Syria. Metropolitan Police, via Associated Press

Upon arrival in Islamic State territory, women are reportedly quickly married to one of the group's fighters and have a tightly controlled domestic routine of cooking, cleaning, and

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, "Teenage Girl Leaves for ISIS, and Others Follow," *New York Times*, February 24, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/25/world/from-studious-teenager-to-isis-recruiter.html?_r=0 (accessed May 29, 2017).

child rearing.¹⁰⁵ By encouraging women to marry quickly, it reduces the likelihood of trying to return to their home countries. Once in the group, the ISIL manifesto clearly outlines women's roles; they are expected to become mothers and wives. While the activities and roles of women within ISIS are subject to debate and speculation, certainly the role of wife and mother is expected of most women who travel to join the group. However, in the group's attempts to build and maintain a Caliphate, roles may have opened for women outside of the usual roles of women in modern terrorist groups, which have primarily consisted of suicide bombers and tactical operatives, as seen in the *Black Widows* case.

In addition to women's roles as wives to ISIS soldiers and birthing the next generation of jihad, women advance the Islamic State's global reach through online recruitment and maintaining order within the group's network of women.¹⁰⁶ Women are particularly active on social media; they spread the group's message, act as recruiters, and are often the face and voice of the Islamic State.¹⁰⁷ On social media platforms, women have become propaganda for the group and encourage others to join. Female members tweet about practicing shooting and post photos of their guns.¹⁰⁸ Using women for propaganda purposes has become a critical strategic technique for ISIS. Widespread advertisement has improved the group's capacity to entice new members to join its ranks.

Another role of women in the group is that of enforcer of the Islamic State's rules and regulations. The Al-Khansaa Brigade, an all-female unit of ISIS, are reported to patrol ISIS-controlled territory and enforce the group's interpretation of Islamic dress and deportment.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 123.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security*, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 123.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Interestingly, according to this group, women are supposed to be wives and mothers.¹⁰⁹ The Brigade operates in Raqqa, the group's headquarters in Syria. It is unclear what would happen if fighting ever returned to Raqqa and if these women would take up arms. The ISIL manifesto also lays out another role of women – that of jihadist. According to the manifesto, women can pursue jihad if there is an edict for women to do so and there are not enough men to protect the country from enemy attack.¹¹⁰ Only under exceptional circumstances, the manifesto reads, should women pursue activities outside of the home.¹¹¹

In her research study, Amanda Spencer presents the roles of 72 female operatives in the Islamic State (Figure 9).¹¹² The research by Spencer merely provides a foundation for understanding the roles of women within the Islamic State due to the methodological challenges in studying terrorist groups. However, what can be extracted from this data is that the role of recruiter supersedes the traditional roles of wife and mother. Findings from this study challenge existing stereotypes of women in ISIS and point to further areas of research, such as the role of the Internet in the online radicalization and recruitment of women. Clearly, women in the Islamic State are considered a strategic asset in recruiting new fighters. However, they are hardly ever considered in most aspects of counter-terrorism. Understanding how women are radicalized and recruited online is critical for counter-terrorism policy. Moreover, results from this study show that ten percent of women are patrol officers, six percent are heads of command, and four percent are overseers, demonstrating that some women hold authoritative positions within the group. The roles of women in the Caliphate are varied, complex, and extend beyond the traditional and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

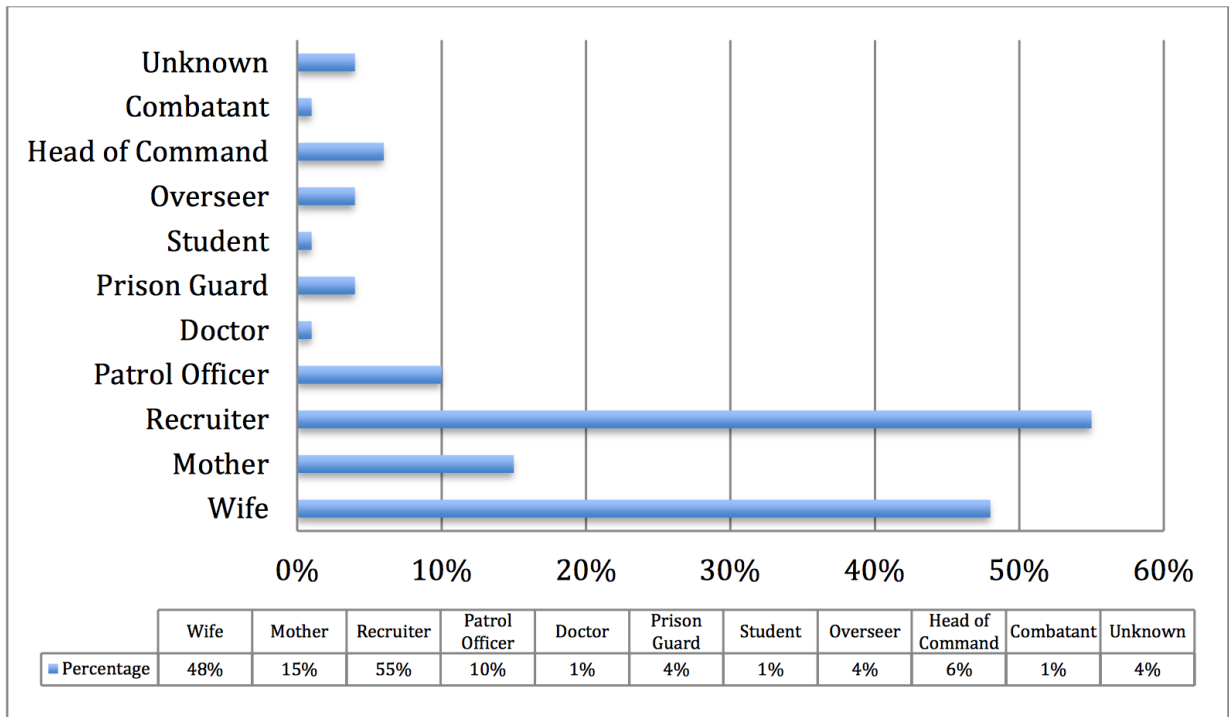
¹¹⁰ Jamal Abdul-Alim, "ISIS 'Manifesto' Spells Out Role for Women", *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/isis-manifesto-spells-out-role-for-women/387049/> (accessed May 28, 2017).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security*, 91.

supportive functions of wives and mothers. More research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon.

Figure 9: Roles of Women in the Islamic State



A Gender Lens

Given the virulent masculinity of ISIS, patriarchy remains as an ingrained form of its structural violence. Rather than being agents, the group constantly oppresses and suppresses women within the frame of the crude diktats of the Islamic State. However, the story of the mere victimization of women reiterates the traditional stereotypes regarding the Middle East. It is puzzling, then, why women voluntarily choose to adhere to the values of such a misogynistic group, especially when foreign fighters have been exposed to liberal values and education. The Islamic State’s treatment of women has cast the group as one of the world’s worst perpetrators of

gender-based violence. Paradoxically, women have become an irreplaceable asset within the group.

Feminist scholars Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry, argue, “Whenever stories of women’s violence in global politics are presented in mainstream media, their authors *explain away* the possibility that women make a conscious choice to kill or injure”.¹¹³ The Western media’s characterization of young “jihadi brides” traveling to join the Islamic State clearly illustrates the inherent biases about women. For example, A Guardian article describes a would-be jihadi bride as naïve and implies she was tricked into traveling to Syria. This characterization of a female foreign fighter emphasizes the idea that this individual has limited agency in her choice to travel and was coerced to join the group. This depiction draws parallels to the *Black Widows* case, whereby the media often reported that the women were raped, drugged, and forced to become suicide bombers.

Various explanations have been presented in attempt to explain why women join the Islamic State, however there is little supporting empirical research. The most compelling analysis to date suggests that women are drawn to groups like the Islamic State for many of the same reasons as men – adventure, inequality, alienation, and the pull of the cause.¹¹⁴ Foreign fighters are lured by the universal appeal of establishing an Islamic State. The pull of the Caliphate allows these young women to simply revolutionize a utopian politics. Second, having been socialized in a Western environment, these women are constantly making a choice between the “modern” values of Western society versus the retention of traditional Islamic principles. Third, many young women become brides of ISIS fighters whose activities are romanticized in the

¹¹³ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, “Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *International Relations* 22, no.1 (2008): 5.

¹¹⁴ Davis, *Women in Modern Terrorism*, 130.

guise of manliness.¹¹⁵ Further, the strong media presence of the Islamic State helps to propagate its values in an easily accessible manner that is attractive to women.

In attempt to map women's roles within ISIS, it is difficult not to fall into a trap of a binary division between *women as agents* or *women as victims*. The women in the Islamic State encompass elements of both. By formally approving of brutalities against women accused of being unbelievers and enforcing strict behavioural norms and roles that women are required to play in ISIS-controlled territory, the Islamic State has spread fear and demonstrated its power to control and use women to achieve its goals.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, female foreign fighters joining ISIS go beyond the shackles of victimization and make their own choice to join the group. However, once in the group, women's agency is restricted and their role is limited to nurturing future militants and satisfying current ones. While women are playing crucial roles in spreading the group's ideology of militant Islam and recruiting other women through online platforms, women are not used in combat. Under strict interpretations of Sharia Law, women are prohibited from fighting. Rather, the primary responsibility of women is to be a good wife. The glorification of women in ISIS on their social media platforms contributes to its propaganda and carries the potential to inspire men and women to carry out attacks or to travel to Iraq and Syria.

This paper argues that women in the Islamic State must be considered as *active* agents of violence, even if they occupy traditionally feminine roles within the group as wives and mothers. Women's roles in the Islamic State, then, can be divided into three categories:

1. Necessary agents of state-building as wives, mothers, and teachers
2. Active recruiters

¹¹⁵ Chatterjee, "Gendering ISIS and Mapping the Role of Women," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 210.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

3. A potential militant role in the future¹¹⁷

As more and more cases emerge of both Western and Arab women joining the ranks of the Islamic State and actively playing a part in their security apparatus, more attention should be given to the increasingly significant role of women within this group. This section highlighted the genuine misunderstandings and misperceptions concerning women's roles and its potential to evolve. Female participation within the group is evolving from the traditional roles laid out in the manifesto to more active operational roles, such as recruiters, and it remains to be seen if they will have a militant role in the future. It is believed that women will be involved in more active roles as ISIS begins to fear for its defence and survival.¹¹⁸ Cindy Ness argues that the number of women attracted to religious terrorist groups suggests that their roles will expand. She believes that since so many women are joining these groups, they will increasingly receive combat assignments. Terrorist groups need personnel, so when women are available, they will be given combat roles as the need arises.¹¹⁹

A recent report by IHS Markit estimates that territory in Iraq and Syria under ISIS control has shrunk more than sixty percent since the height of its power in 2015.¹²⁰ Further, the analysis revealed that the Islamic State is in severe financial trouble, with monthly revenues down \$16

¹¹⁷ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai, "A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism." Global Center on Cooperative Security, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULLL.pdf (accessed June 1, 2017).

¹¹⁸ European Institute of the Mediterranean, *Trends in the Euro-Mediterranean Region*, Joint Policy Study, 2016, <http://www.euromesco.net/images/papers/joint%20policy%20study%203.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2017).

¹¹⁹ Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 361.

¹²⁰ IHS Market, "Islamic State Territory Down 60 Percent and Revenue Down 80 Percent on Caliphate's Third Anniversary, IHS Markit Says," June 29, 2017, <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-territory-down-60-percent-and-revenue-down-80> (accessed July 8, 2017).

million in the second quarter of this year, compared to \$81 million in the same period of 2015.¹²¹ Territorial losses have driven the Islamic State to intensify its campaign of terrorist attacks locally and abroad to compensate. On July 3rd, 2017, Islamic State militants sent female suicide bombers hidden among fleeing civilians to attack Iraqi troops in Mosul, Iraq.¹²² Female suicide bombers is the latest tactic used by the Islamic State as it loses swaths of territory.

Moreover, faced with the loss of its Caliphate, ISIS has become more reliant on local populations to maintain its stronghold. For example, Al Khansaa, the all-female Brigade, has drastically expanded its role. Women perform a variety of activities, including recruiting, intelligence gathering, and overseeing prisoners. The Islamic State depends on the Brigade to lure women, spy on the community, detain individuals that voice unfavourable sentiment about the group, and monitor detention camps where thousands of kidnapped Yazidi Christian and foreign hostages are imprisoned.¹²³ It appears that the need has arisen for women in the Islamic State to transition to more active roles. However, it is unclear if this practice will extend to leadership. This will be discussed in the following section.

Comparative Analysis

First and foremost, both the women in the *Black Widows* and the Islamic State adhere to an extremist Islamist ideology. Through interviews with family members, close associates, and hostages of thirty female Chechen suicide bombers, Speckhard and Akhmedova found that all

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Andrea Rosa, "ISIS women suicide bombers attack soldiers in Mosul," USA Today, July 3, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/07/03/isis-women-suicide-bombers/447560001/> (accessed July 8, 2017).

¹²³ Spencer, "The Hidden Face of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security*, 84.

were religiously indoctrinated into the militant jihadist ideology prior to bombing themselves.¹²⁴ Although other research indicates that there is scant evidence to suggest that Chechen female suicide bombers were *thoroughly* indoctrinated in Radical Islam, the organizers of these attacks tried hard to create such an impression.¹²⁵ Similarly, women in ISIS are pulled towards the Caliphate and help to spread the jihadist ideology. The *Black Widows* helped the North Caucasus-based Islamist insurgency move to the forefront of the global jihad in the early 2000s.

The fundamental difference between Chechen female terrorists and those of the Islamic State are their roles. It is only recently that a need has arisen for ISIS to begin using female suicide bombers, whereas the *Black Widows* are exclusively considered suicide bombers. Like the Islamic State today, Chechnya during the conflict was a patriarchal society. Women's roles during this time were purely domestic and supportive. During the first years of the war, women remained in their traditional roles of homemaker and wife. As vast numbers of Chechen men were killed during the war, the traditional patriarchal structure began to collapse. Faced with the loss of a large proportion of the male population, women assumed a more central role in society and became suicide bombers. According to research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the Chechen case study acts as a possible forecast for the future of female Western migrants to ISIS. Like the Chechens, women in ISIS-controlled territory live in a warzone, have witnessed deaths of loved ones, and have become desensitized to violence aimed at their opponents.¹²⁶ Just as

¹²⁴ Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 437.

¹²⁵ Nabi Abdullaev, "Russia's "Black Widows": Organization Behind Sensation," Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-black-widows-organization-behind-sensation> (accessed July 13, 2017).

¹²⁶ Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf (accessed July 13, 2017).

Chechen female extremists transitioned from supportive roles to violent attackers, there is both a growing need and desire among female members of the Islamic State to engage in combat.

A further, yet obvious, distinction between the two cases is the Islamic State's use of social media to recruit new members. The role of women as recruiters in the Islamic State was made possible because of social media. This has opened new and important roles for women in the group which simply did not exist for Chechen women in the early 2000s. Moreover, the *Black Widows* operated entirely within one country, whereas the Islamic State recruits followers from across the world and controls territory in Iraq and Syria.

As women in both cases move (or *have moved* in the Chechen case) from supportive to active roles, their position in the hierarchical structure of the group has not changed. Speckhard and Akhmedova's study revealed that no Chechen females played significant leadership roles within the terrorist group. While Chechen society is traditionally Muslim in cultural heritage, women during the seven decades of Soviet rule received equal opportunity to higher education and many worked outside their homes. Chechen women were not subjugated to their men in the same way as women in Middle Eastern cultures are believed to be. However, with the introduction of militant Islamist ideology into Chechen society during and after the wars (1994-96 and 1999-2000), Middle Eastern dress and habits of covering were adopted. This is an outward sign of having taken on a new identity, demarcating themselves as true believers, and separating themselves from mainstream Chechen society.¹²⁷ In the case of the Islamic State, as the need arises for women to engage in combat assignments, it is unknown whether this practice will extend to leadership. Cindy Ness believes that women may begin organizing and taking

¹²⁷ Speckhard and Ahkmedova, "The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 439.

leadership roles, or they make take charge out of necessity when male leaders are kidnapped or killed.¹²⁸

Overall, the roles that women play within terrorist groups evolve over time and can also be highly affected by the availability of male forces.¹²⁹ Women in Chechnya became necessary to continue the resistance movement as male counterparts became depleted, just as women in the Islamic State have already begun to engage in combat roles as ISIS adapts to territorial and financial pressure. Terrorist groups evolve depending on their constraints and in parallel with the time they live.

¹²⁸ Ness, "In the Name of the Cause: Women's Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 361.

¹²⁹ Majeed Khader et al., *Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era*. (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016), 179.

Part Three: Counter-Terrorism Policy

The Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism

This research paper's exploration of the different roles women undertake within terrorist groups points to another role for women in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), which has long been considered a male-dominated endeavor. Women can be powerful agents of change and play a critical role in detecting the early signs of radicalization, intervening before women become violent, and delegitimizing violent extremist narratives. The better the understanding of women's roles in terrorist groups, the better the response will be to violent extremism and the capacity to shape viable preventative measures. Part Three examines how a gender analysis can be effectively integrated into CVE policy.

UNSR 2242, adopted in October 2015, highlights the role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism and urges greater consultations with women and women's organizations when developing strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism. This resolution came at a time when the role of women as perpetrator of terrorism was beginning to garner the attention of international policymakers, where the emergence of several questions, such as the different roles that women can undertake in terrorist groups, became of utmost importance. This paper sought to answer this question through a case study approach by incorporating a gender perspective on the issue of terrorism.

As the *Black Widows* case showed, women are typically viewed as passive or coerced victims rather than active perpetrators of violence. As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin argues, "when women come into view they typically do so as the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of terrorist actors, or as the archetypal victims of senseless terrorist acts whose effects on the most

vulnerable (women themselves) underscores the unacceptability of terrorist targeting”.¹³⁰ While this statement has merit, evidenced by the cruel treatment of women both in Chechnya and the Islamic State, painting women with this broad brush can be counter-productive, especially when developing CVE policies.

The absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism poses complex challenges. Firstly, the lack of a definition presents an obstacle for practitioners whose work requires them to engage with parties to conflict that may be designated by some states as terrorists. On the ground, the lack of a definition has led to concerns that the playing field is constantly being redefined to fit short-term political agendas at the cost of local communities. Local communities are hesitant of the uncertainty surrounding the agendas, commitments, and priorities of international actors. Lastly, the lack of definitional clarity impedes cooperation and coordination among United Nations entities and key stakeholders who are wary of the potential negative effects of association with counter-terrorism efforts.¹³¹

The perception that women can only be victims of violence is problematic. The contradiction between assumptions of agency when women partake in prevention roles versus a rejection of agency when women are perpetrators of violence poses both conceptual and practical challenges. Ignoring women’s active participation in terrorism could result in unintended consequences in CVE programs underestimating women’s passion or level of activities in terrorist groups.¹³² These gender exploitative approaches take advantage of rigid gender norms

¹³⁰ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Situating Women in Counterterrorism Discourses: Undulating Masculinities and Luminal Femininities," *Boston University Law Review* 93, no. 3 (2013): 1086.

¹³¹ Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, *The Roles of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism*, Policy Brief, 2013, http://www.globalct.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/NCF_RB_LS_policybrief_1320.pdf (accessed July 9, 2017).

¹³² Chowdhury Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai, "A Man’s World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism," 11.

and power imbalances between men and women. As shown in the case study on the *Black Widows*, women were not considered equally capable of exercising political thought and action. Their violence was viewed as a personal and private matter and devoid of any criminal justice or political factors. From a policy perspective, if women are considered incapable of taking political action, it can lead to missed opportunities to address how women are being radicalized and how to counter it. Another example of an exploitative approach is how the Islamic State depicts women's primary role as *jihadi brides* and future mothers of jihadi children. Reducing women's roles to their reproductive capabilities reinforces the gender norm of women as child bearers with no other identity or agency.¹³³

In contrast to exploitative approaches are accommodating approaches, which acknowledge gender norms and power imbalances and seek to compensate for these inequalities between men and women.¹³⁴ An effective CVE policy must engage women at all levels of society – at the personal and familial level; at the community level; at the national level; and at an international level. Connections must be built across all levels and CVE programs must be sensitive to local contexts. Especially critical is the family level, where it is argued that mothers are the *first line of protection* in the prevention of violent extremism.¹³⁵ It is thus crucial to equip mothers with the skills to recognize early warning signs of radicalization. A female voice, particularly a mother's, can counter the lure of terrorist groups by providing strong counter messages due to women's strong emotional influence on family members. Mothers possess a special capacity to both pre-empt and detect possible radicalization; mothers are the ones who

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Anita Orav, Rosamund Shreeves, Anja Radjenovic and Sofía López, "Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization: A gender perspective," European Parliamentary Research Service, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)581955](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)581955) (accessed June 15, 2017).

can help build resilience in childhood and the ones to notice worrying signs like anger, anxiety, and withdrawal in their children. The current security approach emphasizes the role of national governments and local authorities in counter- terrorism efforts, but mothers' expertise and strategic position should be considered in CVE practices because they are *key actors* in the prevention of terrorism. Policymakers are encouraged to provide more information and support channels to families to help them better understand the vulnerabilities surrounding radicalization.

In addition to empowering women in their homes, CVE programming should seek to empower women in their communities to de-radicalize youth and amplify women's voices in the public sphere. Women undertaking roles in the community encourages other women to engage with terrorism and seek ways to stop it. For example, a report produced by the Swedish National Defence College concluded that women's civil society actions are crucial in preventing radicalization.¹³⁶ The study found that women in both Pakistan and Somalia used their influence within communities to track signs of growing militancy. In Somalia, for example, women's groups were commended for their public condemnation of al-Zawahiri's (current leader of al Qaeda) wife's call to mothers to raise their children to support terrorism in 2012. Similarly, women in Pakistan have played a significant role within communities to de-radicalize youth and engage with religious leaders to prevent extremist ideology from spreading.

Extending beyond accommodating approaches are transformative approaches, which actively strive to change rigid gender norms as a means of accomplishing policy objectives more

¹³⁶ Magnus Ranstorp and Peder Hyllengren, "Prevention of Violent Extremism in Third Countries: Measures to Prevent Individuals Joining Armed Extremist Groups in Conflict Zones: Executive Summary," The Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies (CATS) at the Swedish National Defence College, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:688158/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2017).

effectively.¹³⁷ Examples of transformative approaches are typically found in security sector reform initiatives within police and peace operations. The inclusion of female police officers and soldiers are especially instructive to CVE policy because female officers can often access and interview more of a location population. Increased access to the population expands the ability of peace keepers to gather more comprehensive information that can enhance mission success.¹³⁸

An example from Iraq illustrates a transformative approach to countering terrorism by showing how an increasing number of women in the security sector can improve efforts to stop female suicide bombers. This initiative occurred at a time when American and Iraqi forces recognized a need for female security personnel to combat female suicide bombers in a way that would avoid the strict cultural taboo of women interacting with men who are not family members – in this case, when being searched for explosives.¹³⁹ *The Daughters of Iraq*, a group of female Iraqi volunteers trained to search women for explosive devices became part of a new security plan to curb female suicide bombers. It is believed that over 500 women joined the guard force to help drive out insurgents in some of the country’s most dangerous areas.¹⁴⁰

There is a popular saying among civil society groups in Nigeria, home of Boko Haram, another of the world’s deadliest terrorist groups with female terrorists, that “when you train a woman, you train an entire community”.¹⁴¹ This saying speaks volumes to the level of influence that women possess within families and local communities, and can even be extended to national

¹³⁷ Chowdhury Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai, “A Man’s World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism,” The Global Center on Cooperative Security, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/AMansWorld_FULL.pdf (accessed July 10, 2017), 43.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁰ Alexandra Zavis, “Daughters of Iraq: Women take on a security role,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-daughters4-2008jun04-story.html> (accessed June 10, 2017).

¹⁴¹ Chowdhury Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai, “A Man’s World”.

and international levels. At a national level, women should engage with members of Parliament and other national government officials to push them to engage with the WPS agenda by discussing ways to establish feedback mechanisms at a local level. Lastly, at an international level, women should be encouraged to engage with the United Nations, regional organizations, and individual international actors to help them understand national and local security challenges.¹⁴² The international community must recognize that empowered women are the foundation of resilient and stable communities capable of standing firm against radicalization.

In regard to ISIS, due to the growing trend of violent extremist propaganda targeting women and the subsequent increase in the number of Western women joining the group, there is an urgent need for stronger mechanisms and infrastructure for female-specific prevention and de-radicalization programs. A difficulty surrounding ISIS is how to counter online radicalization and recruitment. The Internet can be better utilized to push back against this phenomenon. For example, there is space for female role models to be actively engaged in online campaigns that undermine extremist values. Women are uniquely qualified to deter other females from joining terrorist groups because they can better understand the emotions and motivations driving other women towards radicalization.

In sum, women are uniquely positioned to be effective *partners* in CVE efforts against intolerance and extremism and to be positive agents of change in their families, communities, and public spaces. For example, women can play a strategic role in building trust and partnerships between communities and the security sector because women can provide guidance about current and past grievances within the community.¹⁴³ As mentioned, including women in the security sector, particularly as police officers, provides a competitive advantage to help

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 27.

reduce violence in local communities. It is thus crucial to give women the training and skills so they can become effective counter-terrorism partners. As women are the first line of defence against recruitment and radicalization, it is important to create, or strengthen, existing platforms to engage with mothers, wives and sisters to teach them the warning signs of potential radicalization and equip them with the necessary skills to intervene and protect their families. Further, women are skilled at intelligence collection because they are often not seen as threatening authority figures and are thus more approachable to sources with information to share.¹⁴⁴

The WPS agenda is an overlooked and underutilized tool. UNSCR 1325 and its subsequent resolutions *mandates* the participation of women and gender perspectives in policies and programs related to international peace and security. This research paper develops a critical awareness of women's roles both within modern terrorist groups and in countering terrorism. It seeks to become part of the larger conversation on women, peace, and security to help CVE policymakers combat the negative consequences of stereotyping women's roles in modern terrorist groups and counter-terrorism practices.

Conclusion

The Future of Women in Terrorism

One of the most significant advantages of female terrorists is their potential to be denied, ignored, and diminished, and thus they are almost always unanticipated, underestimated, and

¹⁴⁴ James Howcroft, "Utilizing Society's Forgotten Half: The Essential Role of Women in Counter Terrorism," Program on Terrorism and Security Studies at the George C. Marshall Center, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/utilizing-society's-forgotten-half-the-essential-role-of-women-in-counter-terrorism> (accessed July 10, 2017).

highly effective.¹⁴⁵ As the Chechen case study highlighted, suicide bombers' operational success is greater than the world's average by more than double the number killed.¹⁴⁶ The tactic of using female suicide bombers attracts attention and instills widespread fear because "it's the women we remember."¹⁴⁷

Overall, the cases of the *Black Widows* and the women of the Islamic State show that due to their operational effectiveness and desire to participate, the international community can expect to witness an increase of women in terrorist groups in the future. Figure 10 displays all suicide attacks reported to be carried out by women between 1982 and 2015.¹⁴⁸ The future of female participation in terrorism will not only be at the tactical level, as a human bomb, but may increase to the strategic level. Groups like the Islamic State are taking advantage of the proliferation of social media and information technology to attract recruits, thus contributing to an increase in female terrorists. In fact, in a suggestion for progressing research on the role of the Internet in violent extremism and terrorism, Maura Conway asserts that gender should be considered a factor in violent online extremism.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Cunningham, "Countering Female Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 122.

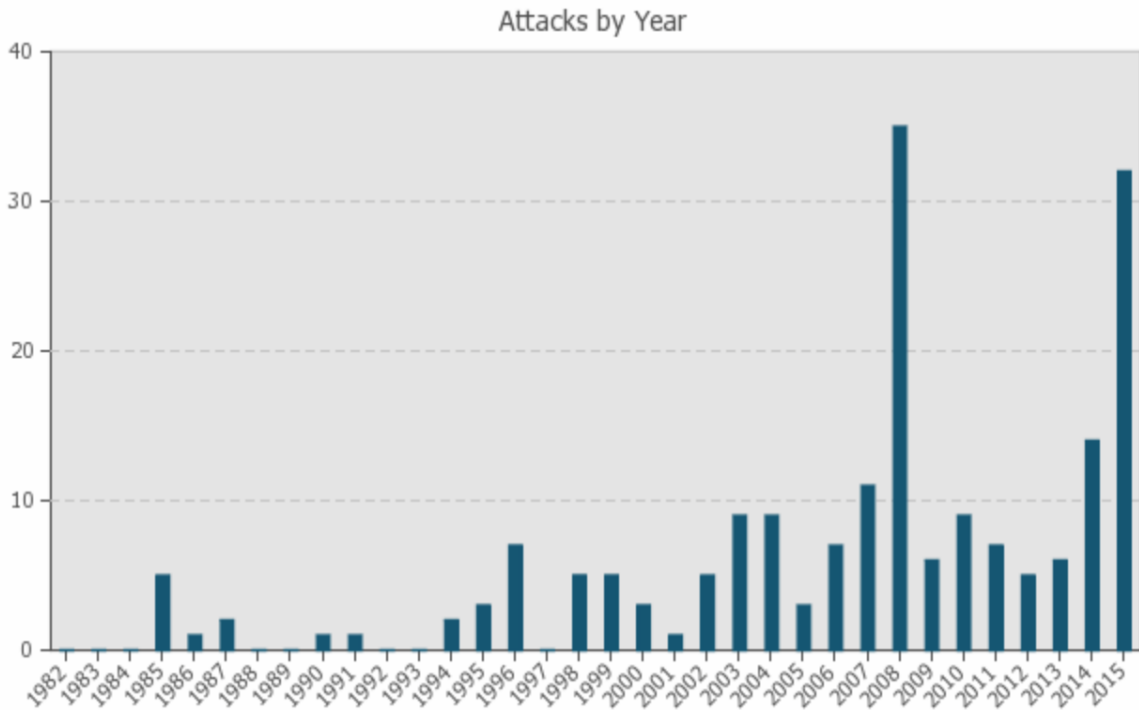
¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁴⁸ Felicia Woron, "Gender and Violence: Boko Haram's Coercion of Female Suicide Bombers," UChicago's Undergraduate Political Review, <http://uchicagogate.com/2016/04/10/coercing-suicide-bombers-boko-harams-use-of-women-for-terrorism/> (accessed June 17, 2017).

¹⁴⁹ Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2016): 89.

Figure 10: Female Suicide Attacks between 1982 and 2015



Further research should also examine other modern terrorist groups with increasing female involvement, such as Boko Haram and al Shabaab. Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram, which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, has evolved its tactics to include women in its operations. For example, in February 2016, three young women, between the ages of seventeen and twenty, entered a refugee camp in northeastern Nigeria and detonated explosive devices, killing themselves and at least fifty-eight others.¹⁵⁰ The girls were allegedly sent by Boko Haram. However, in contrast to the *Black Widows*, it appears that Boko Haram’s tactic of female suicide bombers is based on coercion rather than voluntary martyrdom. Its tactic of choice is kidnapping women; the most shocking case is the kidnapping of over two hundred schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria in 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Woron, “Gender and Violence.”

Final Remarks

This research paper addressed a theme that is generally ignored in the political science and international relations literature – the subject of female-perpetrated terrorism. Most importantly, this paper demonstrates that violence is not solely the domain of men; women in modern terrorist groups are not an aberration, they are a common feature. Through the study of these women, scholars can move towards a greater understanding of terrorism by considering the influence of gender on the theoretical and methodological approaches of the field and how these approaches can influence outcomes.

Part One of this research paper introduced the phenomenon of women in terrorism, and included a discussion on the international issue of defining terrorism as well presented a theoretical framework on women, gender, and terrorism. Part Two utilized a case study approach to assess women's participation in the *Black Widows* and in the Islamic State to highlight many of the false assumptions of women's roles in violence. Women's participation in the Chechen insurgency against Russia illustrates the salience of narratives about *Black Widows* that rests in gendered assumptions about women's intents and capabilities. The "facts" about women involved in Chechen terrorism are much more nuanced than the stories that media reports would have readers believe.¹⁵¹ The case of the women in the Islamic State highlights the difficulties of a binary division of *women as agents* and *women as victims*. It argues that women are *active* agents of violence, even if they occupy traditionally feminine roles within the group as wives and mothers. Part Three explored some of the policy implications of a gendered approach to counter-terrorism and how women can play an *active* role in their homes and communities to curb terrorist activity. To fight terrorism, it is crucial to move beyond simplistic assumptions about

¹⁵¹ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*, 229.

gender and terrorism. By examining the issue of gender in terrorism through women's involvement in modern terrorist groups, this research paper makes a valuable contribution to the field of international relations. What began as a fascination with the subject has grown into a strong resolve to end the gender subordination of women in the global political arena and give women respect, dignity, and voice.

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