PEOPLE, NOT PAWNS: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN VIOLENT EXTREMISM ACROSS MENA

OVERVIEW

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), recent media reports have highlighted an apparent rise in women's active participation in violent extremist organizations. This includes their deployment in combat operations, and roles as suicide bombers, propagandists, recruiters, and mobilizers. Despite the novelty and sensationalism with which the media has treated the topic in recent years, women have participated in violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the MENA region and beyond for decades. To date, however, women's roles have been largely overlooked in both research and policy responses. Although attention to date has focused on Western women traveling to Syria and Iraq to join or fight with Daesh, women from the MENA region have also taken up the cause in large numbers, albeit more quietly.

While it is impossible to estimate the exact level of women's involvement in many VEOs, two things are clear: most, if not all, VEOs have female members who were recruited to engage in a wide range of roles; second, the frequency[1] and visibility[2] of female members within these groups are on the rise. For example, among the VEOs currently active in the MENA region, Daesh appears to have attracted the largest number of female members. Although figures are disputed, it appears that as many as 3,000 of its 20,000 foreign fighters[3] are women.

To date, the extensive research on radicalization and recruitment has devoted scant attention to understanding women's participation. As a result, strategies and programs that intend to counter violent extremism have naturally been oriented toward male recruits. This has led to a dearth of responses that adequately address the drivers and recruitment tactics related to female participation. To fill these gaps and strengthen the development responses to violent extremism, this report seeks to provide insights on three major questions[4]:

1. **Drivers:** What are main push and pull factors for women's participation in VEOs?

2. **Recruitment:** How are VEOs tapping into women's motivations to gain their support?

3. **Responses:** How can development assistance be most effective in addressing the primary drivers that motivate women to support or join VEOs?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a combination of secondary and primary research methods. An extensive review of relevant literature, including academic sources, policy research, and media reports provided the initial landscape of existing evidence and knowledge gaps. In addition, interviews were conducted with 27 individuals, including practitioners, local experts, and researchers working on VE and CVE. Lastly, social media content was analyzed from 74 twitter accounts of male and female Daesh members and supporters, to shed light on the key messages designed to encourage female participation in Daesh.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The drivers of women's participation in VE are similar to men's, with some gender-specific differences

When it comes to motivation, recruitment, and ideological commitments, male and female members of VEOs in MENA have more in common than not. Common push factors[5] identified for both groups include: dissatisfaction with status quo political and economic conditions, desire to escape social or economic pressures experienced within one's community, personal experience of abuse or humiliation by state security forces or foreign forces, or the death or abuse of family members at the hands of these forces. The most relevant pull factors[6] include: religious ideology, ethno-religious and nationalist goals and aspirations, the rejection of "Western" political and economic systems, the perceived justness of the VE group's goals, and selective incentives provided by VEOs (e.g., stability, security, financial rewards, opportunities for advancement).

However, some push and pull factors are gender- and sex-specific. Interviews suggested that the lure of violence motivates male recruits more than female recruits, who find motivation in adventure and a perceived romanticism around participation in VEOs.[7] Gender subordination or exclusion also pushes many young women to join[8], especially those who are driven by a desire for social and political agency.[9] Like previous studies, this research found little evidence that poverty or lack of economic opportunity are major push factors for either men or women joining VEOs in the MENA region.[10] Economic motivators were even less common among female members of VEOs.[11]

DRIVERS OF FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN VEOs IN MENA

PUSH FACTORS
(situational; predispose people to support a VEO)

PULL FACTORS
(Draw people to a VEO; typically group-specific)

- Dissatisfaction with regime or political process
- Seeking security amidst instability
- Experience of abuse or humiliation by state security forces
- Death or abuse of family members
- Gender subordination/ exclusion from mainstream politics

- Support of the VE group ideology (eg. religious, nationalist goals, etc.)
- Selective incentives (security, services, financial gain)
- Romanticism of "state-building" project (in case of Deash)
- Groups' rejection of "Western" political and economic experiments (for Islamist groups)

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT–SPECIFIC FACTORS:

Access to public space • Freedom of movement
• Access to information (particularly European sources for Magrebi women)
• Previous political engagement / awareness

2. VEOs are actively recruiting women for a variety of reasons using a wide array of tactics

We find that across the MENA region, VEOs recruit women at different rates and for different reasons. The recruitment of women is a change in policy for most VEOs in the MENA region, driven mostly by a decline in male recruits, and tactical and strategic advantages of using women (e.g., they are less likely to be searched or targeted by authorities). To recruit women, MENA VEOs use family and friend networks, capitalize on gender-specific push and pull factors, recruit in person, and recruit online with targeted messaging.

Though all of these tools are available to VEOs attempting to recruit women, most face some challenges in accessing potential female recruits. Among the chief impediments are formal and informal restrictions on women's movement and access to technology. In addition, women who are more settled and comfortable in their religious identities appear less likely to join VEOs than women who are recent converts or have some experience of religious awakening.[12] Importantly, the severity of these impediments varies across countries in the MENA region, as does their potential to serve as 'protective factors' that could be strengthened as part of CVE strategies.

3. The lack of a gendered analysis of drivers of VE has left gaps in current CVE strategies

Despite growing awareness of women as perpetrators of violence, only limited attention has been paid to women's diverse roles in either supporting or countering VEOs.[13] The status quo of seeing women only as facilitators or supporters of VEOs ignores their role as participants. This runs the risk of instrumentalizing women—i.e. viewing them as tools though which to address the problem of male radicalization—and ignoring the more direct roles women often play in VE.[14] This prevailing view has left a marked gap in CVE programming, which has focused mostly on male participation, without a commensurate reflection on and response to female-specific drivers and recruitment strategies.

Within the current landscape of CVE strategies, multiple opportunities exist where a gendered understanding of drivers can better accommodate and target women. For example, given gender subordination as a key driver, empowering women may diminish their support for VEOs by increasing their sense of agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognize and leverage the diversity of roles women play in VE

The number of women joining VEOs in the MENA region is small, both in absolute terms and relative to men joining. However, beyond acting as perpetrators women can play vital roles as supporters, facilitators, or preventers of VE. CVE responses could be strengthened if agencies directed resources more effectively towards activities that allow women to be alternative voices to VEOs. This could include supporting women's roles in religious education and counter-narrative construction, and by expanding their influence within family structures.

2. Understand the gender and sex-specific push and pull factors for MENA VEOs

Identifying gender-specific nuances in push and pull factors is a prerequisite to effectively addressing them. This does not imply making generalized assumptions about men and women based on common gender stereotypes, but rather recognizing that gender norms for men and women manifest differently in various social, political, and economic contexts. As such, a nuanced and context-specific understanding of gender is needed to accurately diagnose the push and pull factors that drive both men and women to participate in VE across settings in MENA. Recognizing and responding to these nuances is fundamental for CVE programming to reduce VEO's ability to leverage gender roles to recruit effectively.

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Julia Billings
USAID
jbillings@usaid.gov

3. Gender-mainstream all CVE programming

Agencies can no longer afford to take a gender-blind approach to CVE programming. All CVE efforts, not only those directed at women, should be based on a thorough understanding of the gender-related factors that influence the recruitment of both men and women. This requires adopting a gendered perspective during VE assessments, and incorporating the insights gained from these assessments into program responses that meaningfully engage *women.* A strategy to make counter-messaging efforts more effective for *women,* for example, should have counter-messaging designed specifically for women.[15] VOEs have been highly effective at engaging females as recruiters[16] and information disseminators.[17] CVE efforts should seize opportunities to leverage women's voices in combatting recruiting as well.

ENDNOTES

1   Interview with David Alpher.

2   Interview with Melanie Smith and Erin Saltman.

3   See Sharma (2014); Interview with David Malet.

4   This research brief is a summary of the full study: USAID, (2015, forthcoming), Women and Violent Extremism in the MENA Region.

5   Push factors are those that make people dissatisfied with their previous situations and/or experiences in life and predispose them to seeking membership in VEOs.

6   Pull factors focus on characteristics of VEOs (or the appeal of their cause) that increase a group's attractiveness to potential recruits and supporters.

7   Interviews with Katherine Brown, Valerie Moghadam, Nelly Lahoud

8   Interviews with Melanie Smith and Erin Saltman; Maya Yamont; Jen Heeg; Farhana Qazi.

9   Interviews with Gowrinathan, Oudraat, Barsa, Haddaoui, and Lahoud.

10 Interviews with David Alpher, David Malet.

11 This finding is consistent with a wealth of recent literature on domestic conflict that suggests that state weakness is an important underlying condition for violence but that economic factors do not generally motivate individuals to support VEOs (e.g., Berman et al. 2011).

12 Masi (2014). The 'convert factor' seemed higher for Western women according to our interviewees, including Brown and Smith and Saltman.

13 Interview with Nimmi Gowrinathan; Michelle Barsa.

14 This risk of instrumentalization can be two-sided. The assumption that women are more peaceful and therefore the natural allies of preventing and/or countering violent extremism might underestimate the extent to which women are either members or passive supporters of VEOs. The assumption that women are responsible for or able to prevent men's joining VEOs places too high a burden on women who may be allies in the cause of preventing our countering violent extremism until too much responsibility/vilification is placed on them.

15 ICAN (2014); OSCE (2014).

16 Easton (2015); Frayer (2015); Zvadski (2014).

17 Ibid. This is the case even though they do not frequently produce war narratives - see, e.g., Stiehm (1982); Huston (1982); Wibben (2010); Cohn (2012).