

# THE CARTER CENTER



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*The Women in Daesh:*

*Deconstructing Complex Gender Dynamics in Daesh Recruitment Propaganda*

*May 2017*

### **Executive Summary**

Since its inception, Daesh has been successfully recruiting women across national and ideological lines to assume key positions in advancing the organization's objectives. According to recent estimates, out of 31,000 fighters within Daesh territories, almost one-fifth, roughly 6,200, are women.<sup>1</sup> Yet, to date, research and policy focus on women's involvement in Daesh has been scant. Several media accounts that have covered female participation tend to be alarmingly reductionist in their description of the roles women play in Daesh.<sup>2</sup> These reports primarily categorize women as either passive victims, "Jihadi brides," or subsidiary supporters of male guardians with negligible influence.<sup>3</sup> This approach not only ignores the multiplicity of roles played by women to expand Daesh's ideological and operational agenda, but also oversimplifies the motivations behind their decisions to join Daesh. Just like their male counterparts, women are complex human beings with conflicting aspirations, ideological leanings, and life struggles that inform the choices they make. Viewing female recruits simply as a monolithic entity, defined solely by their association

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<sup>1</sup> Sofia Patel, *The Sultanate of Women: Exploring female roles in perpetrating and preventing violent extremism*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2017. <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/the-sultanate-of-women-exploring-female-roles-in-perpetrating-and-preventing-violent-extremism>

<sup>2</sup> See for example: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/10/london-girls-lost-isis-what-became-jihadi-brides>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-british-brides-kadiza-sultana-girls-women-syria-married-death-killed-aqsa-mahmood-islamic-state-a7187751.html>; [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-american-women-of-isis\\_us\\_571e16abe4b0d912d5ff0f1b](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-american-women-of-isis_us_571e16abe4b0d912d5ff0f1b)

<sup>3</sup> Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015).

with male relatives, offers little to understand how they are indoctrinated and recruited, the extent to which they are involved in the organization, and what can be done to prevent their radicalization.

This report presents an in-depth analysis of Daesh's complex tactics for recruiting women and the multiple roles played by women in its mission. The report also offers ways to engage female activists and leaders as active partners in defeating Daesh on ideological and practical grounds. Finally, it examines the effects of aggressive security approaches on women and girls. The findings of this report are based on a thorough investigation of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, Daesh's primary print magazines for non-Arabic speakers, examination of over 450 videos, and field interviews with families of those who have joined Daesh.

### **The Need for a Gender-Conscious Approach**

Traditionally, terrorism has been considered a male domain.<sup>4</sup> Women, on the other hand, are believed to have roles that are inherently less important and, by extension, undeserving of equal consideration in efforts to counter this phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> For many, it is difficult to comprehend how a terrorist organization like Daesh, which is fundamentally misogynistic and patriarchal, can appeal to so many women from varied national and cultural backgrounds. The reluctance to view women as independent and voluntary perpetrators of terrorism leads to simplistic explanations based on traditional gender stereotypes. This perception clearly manifests itself in the recurring portrayal of female Daesh members as one or more of the following: a) dormant victims who lack agency and are in desperate need of saving; b) individuals who have lost their inherent femininity by developing masculine tendencies for violence and aggression; and c) irrational actors whose motivation to participate is driven by romantic and sexual urges as opposed to political and rational calculations<sup>6</sup>. Such characterizations run the risk of treating women merely as an extension of male terrorists while neglecting their function as full, active participants. Any insightful reflection on the motivations for female participation in violent extremism must first challenge the relationship between women and terrorism.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that men are not the only demographic who engage with the variety of appeals deployed by Daesh. Women are equal consumers of such propaganda and react to it in similar ways as men. In addition to the general narratives directed at all audiences, Daesh disseminates gender-focused narratives for both women and men. These narratives are laden with cultural references and religious appeals that enhance their resonance. Women are offered an alternative vision of freedom and empowerment and a perceived chance to become part of a community where they can practice their faith unapologetically and feel a sense of belonging and sisterhood. In parallel, traditional gender roles are invoked to shame men who do not participate in violence. This strategy of associating manhood with violence plays to male insecurities. A gender-sensitive approach is vital to effectively deconstruct Daesh's gendered recruitment discourse.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Jacques and Paul J. Taylor, *Female Terrorism: A Review*, Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence, 19 March 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Just as it is important to acknowledge women's role as independent perpetrators of terrorism, it is necessary to recognize their pivotal role in creating the foundations for sustainable and inclusive approaches to peace and security. Any meaningful approach to preventing violent extremism must engage women activists and community leaders as frontline decision-makers. Given their social capital, fluency in cultural vocabulary, and extensive local knowledge, women are an important asset in shaping the discourse. They have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh.

### **Catalysts for Radicalization and the Process of Recruitment**

Women are not a homogenous group. They must be recognized as complex characters who, like men, are the product of their respective social, cultural, and political environments. How women process and respond to recruitment narratives is determined as much by their individual circumstances as by the resonating power of the messages themselves. Women's reasons for participation in Daesh are multidimensional, as is the case with male fighters. Cognizant of this, Daesh expertly customizes its propaganda to offer a political and social vision that directly addresses the pressing needs of its intended audience. While the push and pull factors that Daesh utilizes to recruit women are similar to the ones that encourage male participation, Daesh further taps into specific gender-related elements that increase the relevance and appeal of its messages for the female audience. While recruitment generally takes place online through various social media platforms, The Carter Center's field research reveals that offline relational networks are also crucial. In many cases, for instance, women migrating to Daesh are the sisters, daughters, and wives of male fighters.

For local and regional recruitment, Daesh capitalizes on people's already heightened disillusionment with their national governments. Just like men, women living in Middle East and North African countries confront a range of everyday challenges: lack of employment, poor governance, limited access to basic social services, rampant corruption and injustices, and political oppression and insecurity. Such conditions predispose them to Daesh's idealistic representations of a well-equipped "state" that offers a higher standard of living and promises amenities that specifically cater to the needs of women. The unofficial manifesto on women, authored and published by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, an all-female police brigade of Daesh, reinforced the organization's special commitment to the concerns of women and children. Alluding to rising poverty and wealth inequality, the manifesto states, "women felt the effects of poverty more than men. It meant that they were not able to sustain themselves as easily as they should have been able to. This miserable situation [is] obliterated by the Zakat chamber [of Daesh], which [is] installed so women could take their rightful livelihood from it, which God guaranteed her and her children. Hence, all due respect and capability is given back to women and harm does not come to them."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, condemning the corrupt institutions that are prejudiced against women, the manifesto read: "[W]omen [in Daesh] now go to courts and openly talk of their issues. They find that they are listened to and their issues are dealt with, without a need for bargaining or bribery."<sup>8</sup> Daesh shows, through the voices of its female members, that it understands the structural challenges that

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<sup>7</sup> *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade*, Translation and Analysis by Charlie Winter of The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015, <http://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/women-of-the-islamic-state-a-manifesto-on-women-by-the-al-khanssaa-brigade-2/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

lead to disproportionate effects of poverty and injustice on women and is proactively engaged in instituting relevant programs that defend them from potential harm and loss of dignity.

The Carter Center’s field interviews further reveal how Daesh attempts to establish itself as the legitimate champion and protector of women.

An example is the story of a mother in Ceuta, Spain (on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar), whose son and daughter were recruited and migrated to Daesh territory in 2014-15<sup>9</sup>. The son was recruited first by a group of boys he met in a vocational program. He contacted his family only when he arrived in Turkey on his way to Syria.<sup>10</sup> As he was effectively disowned by his family, Aisha, his sister, was not allowed to talk about him. But she refused to give up on her brother and would spend late nights in her room, on her phone, plying social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram for news of him. Aisha made contact with a boy who knew her brother and was also planning to go to Syria. They struck up a friendship, a love affair, and then a marriage—all online over social media. One interviewee reported that the young man sent Aisha a suicide belt as a wedding gift. They only met when Aisha arrived in Syria. She got pregnant and had a son, the first Spanish national to be born in Daesh territory. After her young husband died, she remained in contact with her mother, sending her pictures of her baby. The mother pleaded with Aisha to return to Spain, but she refused, replying instead, “You should make hijra here!” Aisha told her mother that she had independence and purpose in her life—Daesh provided her with a house, a stipend, and a way to be involved with the building of something of world-historical importance. Aisha felt empowered by her involvement in Daesh’s so-called caliphate and had taken to advising other female migrants in Syria. Aisha’s mother was heartbroken by the loss and was hounded by the Spanish police for information on her daughter and grandson.

This tragic story provides insight into how Daesh’s multilayered recruitment propaganda harms the everyday lives of communities.



(The Circulation of Zakat in Fallujah province. Source: [Manifesto on Women](#))

While security and prosperity are crucial factors in inspiring some women to migrate to Daesh, the opportunity to contribute in a struggle for a higher cause can be appealing to others. Many female recruits, from both Western and Muslim-majority countries, sympathize with and respond to the emotional appeals central to Daesh’s narrative of the humiliation of the global *Ummah* (Muslim community). This narrative depicts Muslims as the victims of the West’s ongoing aggression and tyranny, and cites historical grievances such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, end of the Ottoman rule etc. to validate these claims. The recruitment literature and videos present disturbing visuals

<sup>9</sup> TCC research staff visited North Africa in October and December of 2016 and interviewed 24 women for this study, including mothers and sisters of alleged Daesh recruits.

<sup>10</sup> He made it to Syria and joined Daesh, but was killed shortly thereafter.

and descriptions of atrocities that evoke feelings of anger, disgust, and vengeance, and further perpetuate the longstanding belief that Western “*kuffar*” (infidels) are at war against Islam. As one Daesh *mujahidah* (female fighter) reportedly posted on Twitter: “Two camps in the world, either with the camp of *iman* (belief) or camp of *kufr* (disbelief) no in between.”<sup>11</sup> Encountering such imagery invigorates an activist zeal within many women who feel that it is their moral duty to leave for the “*khilafah*” (caliphate) and participate, through any available avenues, in the global resistance against Western imperialism.

Feelings of estrangement and alienation from one’s national and cultural heritage are another push factor for many women. This is especially true for young girls growing up in Western countries who may struggle to reconcile their religious and national identities. With the rise of Islamophobia in the West and fear of religiosity in sections of Muslim-majority countries, women and girls are facing increasing discrimination based on the color of their skin and/or their choice of attire, such as the hijab. This contributes to social isolation and frustration with one’s current society, making some individuals more vulnerable to propaganda that describes Daesh as a Muslim community of shared acceptance and “sisterhood.” Daesh understands these frustrations and systematically exploits them to increase recruitment. The previously referenced manifesto on women, for example, repeatedly invokes the notion of sisterhood and shared community by claiming “you [Muslim sisters] are of us, and we of you.”<sup>12</sup> The idea of a community that shares one’s values, respects one’s religious choice, and welcomes one regardless of national-cultural background appeals to many women.

In addition, Daesh offers an alternative vision for female liberation and empowerment. Portraying Western feminism as an exclusionary model of emancipation for elite white women at the expense of minority women groups, Daesh promises female agency inspired by “Islamic” ideals. It stresses that the roles of Muslim men and women are “complementary and cooperative rather than competitive.”<sup>13</sup> Given their gender-based expertise, women and men are independent agents within their own spheres and are responsible for fulfilling their respective, divinely assigned duties. For instance, women, as wives and mothers, are equal in their status as *jihadis* as men who are engaged in frontline militancy: “My Muslim sister, indeed you are a *mujahidah* [a female fighter], and if the weapon of men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of women is good behavior and knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> This decorative conception of gender equality seems to strike a chord with many women around the world who are frustrated and feel marginalized by Western ideals of female empowerment. These ideals are seen as a pretext for expanding Western political and economic hegemony and, in some cases, for actual war on Muslim countries, e.g., the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith. *Till Martyrdom Do Us Part’ Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2015).

<sup>12</sup> *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade*, Translation and Analysis by Charlie Winter of The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Rafia Zakaria, *Women and Islamic Militancy*, Dissent Magazine, Winter 2015.  
<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-women-choose-isis-islamic-militancy>

<sup>14</sup> Dabiq Issue 7, *From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, pg. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Rafia Zakaria, *Women and Islamic Militancy*, Dissent Magazine, Winter 2015.

Moreover, Daesh appeals to women's desires for agency in state-building, adventure and a sense of community. These narratives pretend to support self-empowerment of Muslim women through education and religious scholarship. Women are told, "free yourself from ignorance and learn the matters of your religion" so that you can become a *mujahidah* by entering "fierce battles between truth and falsehood."<sup>16</sup> Freedom, learning and "fierce battles" make a life in Daesh territory sound liberating and exhilarating, and numerous messages are sent that women's efforts will be supported and their contributions valued. The specific phrases Daesh employs for these propaganda messages, such as "you [women of Daesh] are the hope of the *Ummah*" and "the *Ummah* will not rise without your help," celebrate women's capacities for action, strength and influence and combine to create sophisticated and complex appeals.<sup>17</sup> Women may also believe they will enjoy greater agency in a Daesh society than their own because their domestic roles will be valued, appreciated and even celebrated as a critical part of a greater religious state-building project. Women are encouraged to "be brave and be strong" and even to be advisors for the men in their lives. Women in traditional Muslim communities, as well as Muslim women who are stigmatized in Western societies, do not often hear their input promoted and validated. In contrast, this rhetoric suggests a great level of respect for women's input and involvement in Daesh's society, even if it might be primarily from within their own families. While the lived reality of women in Daesh could not be further from these descriptions, the rhetorical prowess of such narratives can be potent, especially for women living in environments that suffer from discrimination, Islamophobia or substandard social policies.

Finally, all of these narratives are articulated through carefully crafted religious language and metaphors. Appeals are made to women's religious obligation in advancing the divine goal of creating an Islamic caliphate. Daesh makes references to historical female figures in the development of Islam. Women are encouraged to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors and to migrate from *Darul Kufr* (land of the unbelievers) to "the land where Islam and its people are honored."<sup>18</sup>

### **Roles of Women in Daesh**

The women in Daesh perform a multitude of strategically important functions. Although the virtual absence<sup>19</sup> of women's images and visuals from most Daesh propaganda may lead some to conclude that the women of Daesh are voiceless, the Carter Center's extensive field research and a detailed review of Daesh's recruitment literature highlight the significance of women in the organization's overall agenda. The following is a brief snapshot of the diversity of roles women play in Daesh:

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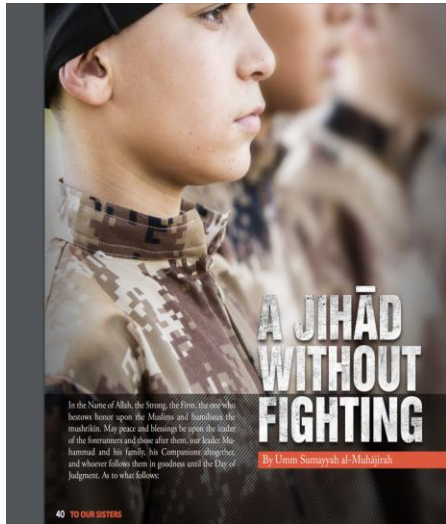
<sup>16</sup> Dabiq Issue 7, *From Hypocrisy to Apostasy*, pg. 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Women of the Islamic State: A Manifesto by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade*, Translation and Analysis by Charlie Winter of the Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> TCC's analysis reveals that women, as central characters, feature in less than one percent of almost 450 propaganda videos.

*Guardians of the Khilafah and its Ideology:* One of Daesh’s major objectives is to create an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism that can survive any potential political-territorial loss. The idea is to instill its virulent ideology in the hearts and minds of its young generation, affectionately known as the “lion cubs of the caliphate,” who are considered to



(Message, To Our Sisters: A Jihad Without Fighting, for the mothers of the cubs of the “Caliphate.” Source: Dabiq Issue 11)

be its future flag bearers. For this to materialize, Daesh has entrusted the responsibility of raising its sons and daughters to the “mothers of the lion cubs,” who are “the guardians of the faith and protectors of the land that will emerge from [them].” As an intermediary between Daesh and its nascent army, women possess substantial, although monitored, influence. The 11<sup>th</sup> issue of *Dabiq* conveys the critical importance of motherhood in the following words: “O sister in religion, indeed, I see the Ummah of ours as a body made of many parts, but the part that works most towards and is most effective in raising a Muslim generation is the part of the nurturing mother.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, the presence of women in Daesh’s territory not only provides the opportunity for procreation and sustainability, but also projects an image of a well-developed, fully functioning, safe society.

*Operational Responsibilities:* Women contribute additional services as members of female police brigades, fundraisers<sup>21</sup>

for the “state,” as well as active recruiters. The primary example of a female recruiter is Hayat Boumeddiene, the wife of Amedy Coulibaly, a man who carried out a shooting attack on a south Paris supermarket in coordination with the Charlie Hebdo massacre. Boumeddiene arrived in Daesh territory in early 2015 and was interviewed for Issue 7 of *Dabiq* on the subject of how to be a good Muslim woman and wife, especially for men who are committed to Daesh’s violent ideology. She then began to pen her own columns. She is referred to as Umm Basir al-Muhajirah in the magazine, and is one of the only contributors to receive a constant byline identifying her with her articles. This choice to consistently identify her emphasizes her gender and status as a person who has traveled to Daesh territory from abroad—identities that lend her more credibility to speak to an international audience of women. With columns under the section title of “To Our Sisters,” and in Issues 9 and 10, “From Our Sisters,” she has enhanced Daesh’s image as a place where any woman who believes in the ideology can find community, support and a voice. Women supporting Daesh continue to have a strong and extensive online presence, and many women specialize in the recruitment, ideologically and logistically, of international women and girls.<sup>22</sup> Women have become a vital part of Daesh’s propaganda machine within and beyond *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. They are positioned to reach, connect with and powerfully influence an audience of women in ways that men are simply unable to match.

<sup>20</sup> Dabiq Issue 11, *From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions*, pg. 44

<sup>21</sup> Rumiyah Issue 1, *O Women, Give Charity*, p.18

<sup>22</sup> Frida Ghitis, “In Bitter Irony, Jihadi Women Serve as Useful Propaganda.” *World Politics Review*. 15 January 2015. Linea, Ava. “HAYAT Germany: A Programmatic Approach” in *Countering Daesh Propaganda: Action-Oriented Research for Practical Policy Outcomes* (Feb. 2016), 81-83.

Weimann, Gabriel. “The Emerging Role of Social Media in the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters” in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, edited by Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (2016): 77-96.

*Participants in Violence:* As Daesh has been losing fighters and territory on a large scale recently



(Members of Al-Khanssaa Brigade. Source: [Middle East Institute](#))

and is therefore faced with the task of reorganizing its forces, women's position has shifted to include more critical roles. Two new camps specifically for training women in combat have apparently opened near Raqqa in the past year, and women militants and suicide bombers were reportedly deployed by Daesh in Libya in February 2016.<sup>23</sup> Further, women who do not travel to Daesh territory are being inspired increasingly to carry out terror attacks in their own countries. Multiple

women were arrested in France in September 2016 for planning to carry out attacks in support of Daesh, surprising many who still conceptualize the jihadist fighter singularly as a troubled young man.<sup>24</sup> To undermine the success of Daesh as an organization, the recruitment of women must be countered along with the recruitment of men.

### **Effects of Security Approach on Women and Girls**

The absence of coherent analysis of the motivations and roles of women may lead to counterterrorism efforts based on an aggressive security approach that ends up impacting women and girls in a damaging way. Such an approach may include limiting educational opportunities for young girls or the imposition of social and financial burdens on mothers and wives. This is particularly problematic as women often act as community gatekeepers and can represent a significant resource in preventing violent extremism.

Often, male fighters leave their wives at home without informing them of their intent to fight in Syria or Iraq. These women are left in a triple bind. The social stigma and political surveillance of the state make participation in social and economic life extremely difficult. If a husband dies abroad, as most do, obtaining a death certificate to allow inheritance and remarriage is almost impossible. If a divorce is sought based on the husband's absence, prevailing legal systems make it difficult for the woman to inherit, possibly requiring her to forfeit home and property. Regardless, the property of a foreign fighter is liable to be confiscated by the state. As one interlocutor expressed, the situation becomes untenable for the remaining family. Many end up relying for support on Salafi networks, and participation in such networks may increase social alienation. Faced with ostracism and financial pressures, some feel all but forced to leave for Syria themselves; others try to support themselves and their families through begging or worse. Interviewees indicate that stories like these are widely shared in communities plagued by poor local-state relations, increasing resentment and isolation from the state. These circumstances amount to a particular type of gendered violence by the state against women, ultimately increasing the susceptibility of individuals and groups to Daesh recruitment.

<sup>23</sup> Stoter, Brenda. "As IS loses power, will group tap women jihadis to fight?" *Al Monitor*. 16 November 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Rubin, Alissa J. and Aurelien Breeden. "Women's Emergence as Terrorists in France Points to a Shift in ISIS Gender Roles." *The New York Times*. 1 October 2016.



Media reports of women migrating to Daesh territory, combined with aggressive security approaches, have led to increased scrutiny of young women. For young women and girls detained on terrorism charges, the consequences are severe and extend well beyond legal repercussions. The media was granted access and shared images of minors arrested on charges related to terrorism before trial. Their identities were not protected. In cultures where female modesty is prized, such public exposure, even if the charges are dropped, can severely limit marriage prospects and educational opportunities. Countries in North Africa that have seen a high flow of foreign fighters to Syria have also seen police raids on all-female Daesh cells. Many interviewees expressed concerns over these raids and reported concern for the girls' physical safety in prisons with notoriously harsh conditions. One interviewee, a conservative Salafi activist who works with the families of those arrested on terrorism charges, reported that the abuse of women in prisons is common.

The consequences for the mothers of children accused of involvement with extremist organizations are different, but equally severe. Carter Center staff interviewed Umm Maryam less than a week after her 15-year-old daughter was arrested for allegedly being a member of an all-female Daesh cell planning an imminent attack. Umm Maryam and her family lived in an impoverished neighborhood outside the capital; Umm Maryam, a maid, was the family's only breadwinner. Their home was raided by national police forces, heavily armed and with the media in tow, around 5:30 one morning. Umm Maryam reported that, during the raid, police circled the neighborhood knocking on doors, ensuring the maximum number of witnesses to the raid. Maryam, the daughter, was charged with being a member of the cell; evidence collected at the scene included her cell phone, a few common religious texts, and common household chemicals that were alleged to be used in bomb-making. In the case of Umm Maryam, she not only lost her job after the arrest, but also expressed worry about her family's future, and that of her daughter: Would she be able to finish school? The family was assigned a lawyer and received financial support after being approached by a network of Salafi organizations that work with detainees. No government-sponsored social services, counseling, or legal care was offered. As of the writing of this report, the family's contact with their daughter remains extremely limited and official charges against the girl have not been filed. Regardless of Maryam's alleged guilt, the family has been effectively destroyed.

## **Conclusion**

Daesh has been innovative in its recruitment of young women into its ranks. Carter Center interviews support the analysis of Daesh propaganda: Women are presented with the possibility of a supposedly righteous life in Daesh territory, agency, and sometimes financial or social benefits not available in their home communities. The aggressive security approach of counterterrorism programs tends to have gendered aspects that place heavy burdens on women and drive them to radicalization. Any approach that ignores either of these factors behind women's participation in terrorist organizations and rejects women's vital role as key partners in preventing violent extremism is inherently superficial and counterproductive.

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