Traditional to Tactical: The Evolution of Female Terrorists in the PIRA and ISIS

by

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Introduction

Terrorism has typically been analyzed as a male-dominated field, with female terrorists being historically understudied and often not considered a threat at all. High-profile attacks that attract media attention are generally executed by male members of terrorist organizations, reinforcing the public perception that the phenomenon of female terrorism is rare, even insignificant. It is often assumed that women are generally non-violent, and even when involved in terrorist activity, are limited to traditional roles that merely support their violent male counterparts. However, in recent years, women have increasingly assumed nontraditional roles within terrorist organizations by directly participating in acts of violence.[1] As award-winning journalist Patricia Pearson argues, the belief that women are non-violent is "one of the most abiding myths of our time."[2]

This perception of inherent non-violence can be seen in popular culture, for instance, in the media celebrity and subsequent presidential pardon given to Patty Hearst, an American heiress who claimed to have participated in armed robberies with the Symbionese Liberation Army terrorist group in 1974 only as a result of "brainwashing" by her captors after a kidnapping. It can perhaps also be seen in John Le Carre's 1983 spy novel *The Little Drummer Girl* – subsequently made into a movie starring Diane Keaton, and more recently re-adapted into a television series with Florence Pugh – in

which the heroine is recruited into a double-agent espionage plot to infiltrate Palestinian terrorist organization but later suffers what is essentially a mental breakdown caused by the strains of having been involved in such violence. For many years, when real-life female terrorists appeared – such as in the case of Vera Zasulich, a Russian revolutionary who shot and wounded the governor of tsarist St. Petersburg in 1878 – they were treated as fascinating anomalies. (Zasulich, in fact, was acquitted by a sympathetic jury and subsequently fled Russia for Switzerland.)

While there has been an increase in studies on female terrorism, the evolving role of women in terrorist activities remains largely under-examined by scholars and often mischaracterized in strategies implemented by the national security sector. The threat female terrorists pose is largely overshadowed by two prevailing narratives: that women will not act outside their natural aversion to violence, or that violent acts perpetrated by women are a result of coercion, are emotionally driven, or are simply irrational. For example, while the U.S. Congress' bipartisan *Women and Countering Violent Extremism Act* of 2019 acknowledges women as potential perpetrators of terrorist acts and their "varied roles in all aspects of violent extremism,"[3] the bill follows policy suggestions that fail to fully recognize the possibility of these actions as rational choices made by female perpetrators. Instead, they are painted even there as victims who act as a result of coercion, referred to as under "subjugation" or having a "lack of agency."[4]

Based upon an analysis of female members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA, a.k.a. "Provos") and the Al-Khansaa Brigade of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, a.k.a. *Daesh*[5]), this essay argues that women in terrorist organizations are capable of the same levels of violence as their male counterparts. Examples from these two organizations also show that women who participate in violence are capable of doing so as rational actors rather than as coerced or manipulated victims of violent males. Consequent to recognizing the potential for violence in their female members, both the PIRA and ISIS expanded women's roles beyond traditional boundaries to alleviate organizational strain. This essay demonstrates that acknowledging the transformation in the structure and operations

of those terrorist organizations, particularly regarding their female members, allows for a more accurate analysis of these groups. Yet, this evolution is often overlooked or mischaracterized, potentially hindering counterterrorism efforts.

The two organizations chosen for this essay are from different geographical locations and possess distinct ideologies, cultures, and historical contexts. However, both demonstrate a notable increase over time in female involvement in violent activities. This essay begins by examining long-prevalent narratives surrounding female terrorists and their traditional roles within terrorist organizations – specifically, the view that women who do engage in violent acts are either coerced into participating or are merely pawns of a patriarchal system. I will argue that these prevailing narratives surrounding female terrorists are misplaced, and that they represent a misunderstanding that could lead national security leaders to overlook threats.

I will then discuss the capacity of female terrorists to participate in violence by evaluating the reshaping of perceptions and redefining of roles in both the PIRA and ISIS. Those organizations deployed their female members to the tactical and operational levels, which eventually resulted in their direct participation in violence. These developments make clear that women are indeed capable of participating in violence to the same extent as their male counterparts.

The third section of this essay addresses why those terrorist organizations stopped confining female members to traditional roles, allowing them to participate in violence directly. The ongoing abuse of female members within ISIS, as well as the special punishments suffered by female members of the PIRA, suggests that the expansion of roles was presumably *not* due to male terrorist leaders' respect for women's abilities, but rather a response to organizational strain that threatened the group's survival and necessitated drawing more upon female members. By utilizing their female members as resources, both the PIRA and ISIS deviated from the traditional gender perception that women are inherently non-violent or participants in violence by virtue of coercion, all while effectively reducing the organizational strain they experienced.

Lastly, the final section transitions from analyzing the motivations by the PIRA and ISIS behind increasing female participation in violence, to exploring the motivations of female terrorists in comparison to their male counterparts. On this evidence, I argue that the violent actions perpetrated by female terrorists are not a result of coercion – or rather, at least, no more so than for male terrorists – but are rather a cognitive choice decided by a rational actor, for which female terrorists should bear responsibility and suffer appropriate consequences.

Neglecting the Female Terrorist

Despite what is now longstanding interest among scholars and national security officials in understanding the motivations and methods of terrorists, much of the research on how terrorist organizations recruit and operate has still been concentrated on males. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, for example, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) focused on males aged 16 to 45 in an effort to profile terrorists.[6] The International Peace Institute also endorsed a focus on male actors, stating, "violent extremist and terrorist groups exploit male sentiments of emasculation and loss of power and appeal to ideas of manhood in their recruitment efforts."[7]

This focus on male terrorists is warranted. After all, it was male terrorists that proved responsible for attacks that received significant media coverage, such as the Al-Qaeda hijackings on 9/11 and the recent attacks by Hamas insurgents in Israel. Yet such examples have also led to a popular assumption that females are absent from the violence enacted by terrorist groups, or that any participation by a female member should be attributed to coercion by a male member. However, entirely excluding women's participation in and capacity for violence from analysis of terrorist organizations' structure and operations dangerously overlooks their actual degree of involvement and may lead to misguided counterterrorism efforts.

Women are historically perceived as serving in roles that are traditional in nature due to their inherently non-violent nature.[8] ISIS

encouraged women to serve primarily as wives or mothers, and the original Irish Republican Army (IRA) promoted values such as purity, caregiving, and motherhood.[9] Female recruitment and membership in these groups thus primarily revolved around providing for and supporting male members, at least initially.

Yet those organizations progressively implemented women outside these traditional roles to obtain their political or ideological objectives.[10] Even so, women who increasingly participate in violent acts are labeled as displaying "irregular" behavior, with blame often assigned to male influences rather than the female perpetrators themselves.[11] The narrative that female terrorists are victims drawn into a patriarchal game, incapable of choice or reasoning, is commonly pushed.[12] For example, scholar Clara Beyler asserts that female suicide bombers are often portrayed as being in love with their handlers and viewed as "symbols of utter despair," and hence subsequently portrayed as victims.[13]

Placing the blame on male influences, however, denies the possibility that women may initiate terrorist acts of their own free will and conduct independent decision-making processes in the same ways as male terrorists do. The perception that "women are somehow less responsible than men for their role in terrorist activity" is misplaced and underestimates the capacity of female terrorists.[14]

Consequently, counterterrorism efforts that ignore this female agency may be rendered ineffective and incomplete.[15] Currently, even the few counterterrorism strategies that focus on females do so from the perspective of guarding them against coercion inflicted by their male counterparts. The U.S. State Department's 2018 *Strategy to Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism,* for example, aims to reintegrate and rehabilitate female perpetrators, yet fails to assign them any responsibility for their actions.[16] While this policy is an effective measure for women who have suffered abuse under terrorist organizations, it treats female terrorists as similar victims. Currently, the United States possesses no such policy regarding the reintegration or rehabilitation of male terrorists. As terrorist organizations like the PIRA and ISIS showed an increase in female

participation in violence, responsibility was rarely assigned to female perpetrators, suggesting they were not accountable for their actions.

Recognizing the Capacity for Violence in Female Terrorists

Historically, female members of terrorist organizations that follow Islamic extremism have been hidden in the background of society, much less featured in propaganda.[17] A predecessor of ISIS and outgrowth of the Afghan guerrilla war against Soviet occupation, the Taliban, banned women from public gatherings and prohibited filming or photographing them. However, women began being prominently featured in ISIS propaganda, often photographed on the battlefield adorning a hijab and brandishing an automatic weapon.[18] The example of ISIS illustrates how terrorist organizations can reshape perceptions about and redefine traditional roles of their female members established by their predecessors. While many women in such organizations still operate within traditionally defined roles, they are no longer strictly confined to them and are increasingly becoming involved in tactical operations.

The transition of female members of the PIRA occupying traditional roles to directly engaging in violence manifested primarily in bombing operations. The majority of women convicted in Northern Ireland, Britain, and abroad for PIRA activity faced bombing-related charges.[19] One of the most devastating attacks carried out by the PIRA was the bombing of the Old Bailey Courthouse in London in 1973, resulting in over 200 injuries.[20] This operation was masterminded and executed by two female PIRA members, Dolours Price and Marian Price.[21] The Price sisters were subject to immediate fame, not necessarily primarily for the devastation they wrought – for although many people were wounded in the explosion, only one victim died (and it was from a heart attack) – but rather for the fact that it was women who had planned and executed a tactical bombing operation. Another female member of the PIRA who participated in car bombings, in addition to arms-buying missions across Europe, was Maria McGuire.[22] In a later interview, McGuire described her own violent tendencies in the killing of British soldiers, stating she believed "the more that were killed, the better."[23]

The responsibilities of the members of Al-Khansaa, an all-female brigade in ISIS, also demonstrated terrorist women diverging from traditional roles. Despite ISIS' prohibition upon women gaining an education, members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade were made up primarily of educated females from Western nations who had been recruited by ISIS and converted to Islam, including many from the United Kingdom and France.[24] These recruits received additional education in social media marketing, firearms and explosive training, and Islamic law.[25] Equipped with AK-47 assault rifles, brigade members engaged in intelligence gathering and recruitment operations, as well as serving as law enforcement for female ISIS members so as to avoid having male members engage with women who were not their wives of family members.[26]

Members who violated ISIS' strict interpretation of Islamic *Sharia* law, for example, were beaten and subjected to torture by Al-Khansaa. The standard punishment brigade members inflicted on women wearing high heels or headscarves with designs – both of which offended ISIS sensibilities – was 40 lashes. New mothers found breastfeeding in public (also an offense) were subjected to the "biter," a bear-trap torture device that clamped onto the breasts.[27] One community member stated, "I was much more afraid of [the ISIS] women ….The women would beat you for the smallest thing."[28]

Al-Khansaa members not only engaged in brutal acts of physical violence towards other women, but also facilitated sexual violence as well. Reports suggest that ISIS implemented controversial *fatwas* – legal rulings in Islamic law – which subjected females to significant sexual abuses.[29] These *fatwas* were enforced by the Al-Khansaa Brigade, including one in which women served through "temporary marriages" as sexual servants to male Jihadi fighters to encourage their increased performance on the battlefield.[30] By this ruling, women would be "married" to a given ISIS fighter for a week, or even a few hours, allowing them to engage in sexual activities with him without violating the belief that sexual relations should not occur outside of marriage. (Additionally, the brigade published a document in 2015 titled *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study*,[31] which

urged girls as young as nine years old to marry while still "young and active."[32])

The capacity for violence demonstrated by members of the Al-Khansaa Brigade ultimately resulted in a change to the strict gender separation within ISIS, as women's involvement in combat roles increased, including those of fighters and suicide bombers. The first reported instance of ISIS deploying female suicide bombers in battle occurred in Libya in 2016.[33] The Battle of Mosul, in Iraq, marked a peak in female suicide bombings, with 38 detonations targeting civilians and U.S. forces.[34] This evolution of female roles in ISIS represents a significant shift in the organization's ideology of Islamic extremism, as women began to assume roles traditionally held by men in conflict.[35]

The violence inflicted by female PIRA members, the Al-Khansaa Brigade, and later ISIS female suicide bombers illustrates how female terrorists are capable of inflicting violence comparable to their male counterparts. The assumed non-violent nature of female terrorists is effectively disproven in the examples discussed above and should result in a reevaluation of the threat these organizations posed. Without exposing the fallacy of the narrative that women are inherently non-violent, the threats presented by female terrorists may remain misunderstood and underestimated.

Organizational Strain Responsible for Reframing Female Roles

The important role played in PIRA and ISIS by female terrorists, however, does not necessarily suggest that either organization treated their female members as equals or valued them as highly as male members. Members of the Al-Khansaa brigade reported joining the ranks as they perceived life in ISIS as empowering to women, promoting their independence, and facilitating access to high-level organizational positions.[36] However, this perception of women is not reflected in the treatment female members of the PIRA and ISIS received within their respective organizations. Rather than terrorist organizations revering their female members, the redefinition of roles resulted from organizational strain. Simply put, female members were

deployed to fill resource gaps only when those terrorist organizations faced a threat to their existence.

The PIRA deployed this strategy after it suffered resource constraints resulting from its split from the IRA. Similarly, after growing and expanding its territorial reach significantly in 2006-13, ISIS expanded the roles of female members by creating the Al-Khansaa Brigade only in 2014, after the formation of a Western-led coalition against the organization. While females were permitted to operate outside their traditional confines during these times, however, it does not indicate that they were considered equals to their male counterparts.

Despite being granted participation in the tactical and operational levels of their organization, in fact, female terrorists seem frequently to have been specially punished for acting outside their traditional roles and expected behavior. In the PIRA, female members who fraternized with British soldiers had their heads shaved, then were tied to a lamppost and tarred and feathered.[37] While men were occasionally tarred and feathered as well, only women had their heads shaved, a shame-based punishment symbolic of the removal of their womanhood and femininity.[38] Female members of ISIS were also subjected to numerous forms of brutal punishment, such as the previously mentioned "biter," for violating the organization's strict interpretation of *Sharia* law. The continuous mistreatment experienced by women in these terrorist organizations showcases that rather than awakening to the capabilities of its female members, the reframing of female roles in terrorist organizations is spurred by organizational strain.

The PIRA expanded female participation almost immediately. At its inception, the organization faced strain resulting from separating from its founding organization. Founded in 1919, the IRA aimed to establish Ireland as an independent republic free of British rule. Despite numerous organizational changes throughout the 20th century, this remained the organization's primary objective.[39] However, in line with its long history of inter-organizational conflict, the IRA split into two separate factions in 1969: the Officials and the

Provisionals. Both organizations shared the original IRA's primary principles, but they differed in their tactics. Officials saw themselves as representing the original IRA and were known for advocating independence through peaceful protests and the official channels of government. The Provisionals believed peaceful methods to be ineffective for change and resorted to violence and extremism to propel their agenda.[40]

The division of the IRA effectively split resources and weakened both factions, spurring the Provisionals to establish female auxiliary groups in order to meet operational needs.[41] The closest women had previously come to directly participating in violence was simply by accompanying male IRA members on missions – effectively as cover for male fighters, as women were unlikely to be suspected of terrorist activities and male-female couples seemed less suspicious.[42] However, members of the PIRA began to challenge the traditional roles typically assigned to women in the IRA, allowing them to participate in various combat support roles.

Women began receiving the same military training as male members and were assigned roles deeply embedded on the tactical and operational levels.[43] These roles included smuggling weapons and explosives, gathering intelligence, and – in the example of the Price sisters – planning and executing entire operations.[44] By incorporating female members into conducting attacks, primarily bombings, the PIRA effectively filled organizational gaps and came to be considered "one of the most inventive and adaptive of all the violent non-state actors who operated in the latter part of the twentieth century."[45]

On the other side of the world, nearly a century after the founding of the IRA, former members of Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, and terrorist groups from Afghanistan and Libya pledged their loyalty to a newly established terrorist organization, ISIS.[46] ISIS was a self-declared Islamic caliphate that at its peak stretched from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq.[47] Under ISIS rule, *Sharia* law was narrowly interpreted and brutally enforced, with little regard for the sanctity of life.[48] Taking advantage of a power vacuum created by the United

States' withdrawal from Iraq, ISIS achieved significant territorial gains – at one point occupying some 40 percent of Syria and Iraq, including the major Iraqi city of Mosul – and established itself as a formidable force, a feat which did not remain unnoticed by the West.[49] In 2014, a U.S.-led coalition formed and began inflicting key losses on ISIS, and by late 2017 the caliphate had lost 95 percent of its territory. Facing this coalition, ISIS' survival was threatened, and members began to deradicalize after becoming disillusioned with the organization and its self-proclaimed caliphate.[50]

The same year the anti-ISIS coalition was formed – after which ISIS began to suffer mass desertions and territorial loss – the Al-Khansaa Brigade was formed, expanding the roles of female members.[51] The evolution of female roles thus strayed from historically fundamentalist Islamic principles, as well as the methods of previous Islamic-based terrorist organizations. By establishing a female police force and subsequently placing women in frontline positions to execute Holy War suicide missions, women were no longer solely confined to being homemakers and wives.[52]

The establishment of the Al-Khansaa Brigade and the utilization of female suicide bombers helped meet the organizational pressures facing ISIS as it delegated those women some duties previously assigned to male members. Additionally, global media coverage of ISIS also increased dramatically, as brigade members were looked on with morbid fascination.[53] ISIS was thus effectively granted a broader platform for propaganda and potential recruiting, as, according to Bruce Hoffman,

> …[o]nly by spreading the terror and outrage to a much larger audience can the terrorists gain the maximum potential leverage that they need to effect fundamental political change.[54]

Consequently, ISIS intensified its recruiting efforts towards females to take advantage of this increased media coverage. Female members, in fact, were deliberately assigned roles at the organization's forefront, subject to public display and media attention. As a result,

women became leading contributors to ISIS' strength and capabilities through their increased role and visibility.

By deploying their female members and expanding their participation in violence, both the PIRA and ISIS were able to combat the threats their respective organizations faced. However, the continuous mistreatment of female members shows that the PIRA and ISIS did not grant women increased roles because they were revered; rather, this change occurred only when the survival of the organization was threatened.

Female Terrorist Motivations to Participate in Violence

Participation by female terrorists in violence has thus increased, as illustrated by the preceding analysis of the PIRA and ISIS. However, do such female terrorists exercise their own free will and independent choice when participating in violent acts outside traditionally female roles? Or does the traditional narrative of male members coercing females into such acts hold true?

Before addressing this question, it is essential to recognize that the wide variety of terrorist organizations in existence derive from a diverse array of motivations held by the individuals involved in terrorist acts. This diversity is highlighted in the research of Walter Laqueur, for instance, who states that "[m]any terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country …. Terrorism has changed over time and so have the terrorists, their motives, and the causes of terrorism."[55] Therefore, I do not aim here to identify a single, overarching motivation for all terrorists, regardless of gender. I argue instead only that the motivations of female members in the PIRA and ISIS seem to have closely parallelled those of male members, thus contradicting traditional narratives of female terrorist subservience to male terrorist agency. In fact, female participation in violence is not a result of coercion or manipulation but rather rational choices for which these terrorists should be held accountable.

Currently, two prevailing narratives shape the perspectives of many scholars and the national security sector regarding female terrorists. The first narrative suggests that women are inherently non-violent, a claim disproven in the preceding sections. The second narrative builds on this assumption, arguing that if women do partake in violent behavior – such as members of the PIRA and the Al-Khansaa Brigade – it is a result of coercion or manipulation rather than a conscious choice. In such a view, "women are assumed [to be] victims, irrational actors, or emotionally driven."[56] By evaluating the stated motivations of members of the PIRA and ISIS, this section argues that female participation in terrorist violence is not coerced but rather a choice made for reasons that parallel the motivations of male members.

The motivations for female members of the PIRA and ISIS to participate in terrorist activities, in fact, share a common theme. Despite the mistreatment women experienced within their respective organizations, female members of both organizations seem to have regarded this as much less important than the perceived threat they faced from their group's antagonists in the governments they opposed.

Both organizations fought for an independent state and emphasized narratives of abuse and disillusionment at the hands of prevailing state authorities. Members of ISIS, for instance, were committed to the ideology of an Islamic caliphate, believing Western influence and corrupt regional governments to be restricting the practice of true Islam.[57] The primary motivation of the Al-Khansaa Brigade, most of which were recruited from outside Iraq and Syria, was to preserve Islamic culture and religion from what was perceived to be an increasingly intrusive Western world.[58] The manifesto published by Al-Khansaa members claimed that the "Western model" for women had failed, and had in fact inserted corrupted ideas into the feminine mind.[59] They feared that under Western influence, Muslim women would become sex objects, their roles as mothers and nurturers eliminated, and that greed created by capitalism would render the family and religion irrelevant.[60] By joining ISIS, female members thus saw a chance to contribute to building an alternative state and

subsequently to defeat the "decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which has no respect for women."[61]

For their part, the PIRA advocated for a free Irish state in response to what they said was the brutality and oppression of British occupation. Female members of the PIRA stated that experiencing state-sanctioned violence and heavy-handed tactics by security services led them to join terrorist activities.[62] Mairéad Farrell, for example – a PIRA member who had been deeply embedded in tactical operations – later discussed having been radicalized by the presence of British soldiers in Belfast. Additionally, Farrell recalled the mistreatment of Catholic populations interned in Northern Ireland.[63]

Conditions of treatment for women in the Armagh prison were also a grievance, for that institution reportedly conducted strip searches and assaulted women, and those who had newborns had their babies taken from their arms and were subject to grotesque living conditions.[64] Some women who were not directly subjected to this abuse but witnessed it were also motivated to join the PIRA. (Rose Dugdale, for example, stated she had joined after witnessing the state-sanctioned persecution, inequality, and brutality suffered under the British system.)[65] Another female member stated,

> I grew up in the conflict and war was all around. I gained a political awareness when I was twelve or thirteen and I started asking questions about who is responsible for all of this.[66]

These women joined the PIRA hoping to achieve independence for the group with which they identified, political participation for themselves, and vindication for other women mistreated in such ways, utilizing violence to fight back against perceived persecution.[67]

The motivation to participate in violence among female members of the PIRA and ISIS thus parallels the very similar motivations possessed by male members. Notably, the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee states that drivers of female radicalization – specifically disempowerment,

resentment, and marginalization – do not differ from those of men.[68] And indeed, these three themes are prominent motivators for both male and female members of the PIRA and ISIS.

Interviews of PIRA members during the 1960s, for instance, revealed that most members joined out of a sense of "hopelessness, despair and betrayal by the system."[69] Interviews of 220 ISIS returners, defectors, and prisoners conducted by Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenber similarly revealed that male interviewees who were recruited outside of Iraq and Syria had been motivated by "a desire to bolster their Islamic identities, which are often under attack by Islamophobic sectors of society." Female interviewees also wished to bolster their "Islamic identity," for they were said to "suffer the most from Islamophobic attacks in the West, as their identities are so clearly marked due to their Islamic dress."[70]

The motivations expressed by male and female terrorists of the PIRA and ISIS are thus mirror images. Therefore, it would be incorrect to state that women who participate in violence can only have been coerced into doing so. That is not to say that female terrorists who exhibit violent behaviors are *never* coerced, of course, as terrorism itself is diverse, and so are the motivations within. However, the examples displayed by the PIRA and ISIS, along with their stated motivations, disprove the traditional narrative that female terrorists are not capable of violence without their participation being the result of coercion or other manipulation.

Conclusion

By analyzing the PIRA and Al-Khansaa Brigade of ISIS, this essay has shown that female members of terrorist organizations are indeed capable of willingly exhibiting the same level of violence as their male counterparts. Female terrorists who choose to participate in violent acts are, no less than men, rational actors, and they often display motivations and reasoning very similar to those of male members. Terrorist organizations such as the PIRA and ISIS, moreover, recognize the ability and willingness of female members to

engage in violence and have utilized this to their advantage, especially in times of organizational strain.

While men are more present in combat roles within terrorist organizations than women, terrorist organizations are increasingly utilizing their female members to achieve their ideological goals. For the PIRA and ISIS, integrating female members into tactical operations proved successful and also allowed those organizations a strong platform to recruit and convey their message. There is no reason to expect that terrorist organizations will not continue to integrate female members into their violent operations, while their victims – and the security services who fight terrorism – would be wise to recognize and combat this trend.

Despite the geographical, cultural, and historical differences separating the PIRA and ISIS, both organizations exhibited similar behaviors surrounding the deployment of their female members. For too long, however, many scholars and professionals in the national security sector have assumed that female terrorists are victims rather than perpetrators[71] and that their actions are emotionally driven or coerced, and that they should therefore be held less responsible than their male counterparts. It is time, however, to acknowledge two key realities. First, female terrorists are moving away from their traditional roles and are actively (and increasingly) participating in violence as rational actors. Second, this trend is evident across terrorist groups in very different contexts, including those in cultures that traditionally assign women to sharply subservient roles.

Female terrorists may present a disproportionate threat as long as the dangers they present continue to be underestimated, with such false assumptions increasing their effectiveness by making their violence seem surprising or anomalous. As terrorist organizations adapt their organizational structure and challenge their historical approach, scholars and the national security sector should follow suit and recognize the evolution of these groups. The threat of female terrorists must be incorporated into analysis and integrated into counterterrorism strategies. Additionally, female terrorists should be held to the same account that males are. Prosecution of these

individuals should mirror that of male members, for they display the same decision-making process and intent.

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Rachel Butler *is a doctoral student in the Department of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University. She holds master's degrees in history and strategic studies, with research interests focused on ethical warfare, energy security, and non-proliferation and disarmament. The views expressed herein are entirely her own, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.*

Notes

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4 Ibid., sec 2.

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