Western DAESH[1] Women: Ideology, Profile and Motivation

Las mujeres occidentales del DAESH: ideología, perfil y motivación

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ABSTRACT: The DAESH has been particularly successful in recruiting Western women. There are differences in their profile and motivation with their male counterparts. The DAESH offered an alternative to Western secularist feminism, substituting salvation for emancipation (empowerment without gender equality). DAESH´s Western women played different roles. They were wives of *jihadists,* mothers and educators of the next generation, recruiters and fundraisers for the organisation and workers in the segregated institutions of the Caliphate. They were also involved in violent actions when the time came, depending on the needs of the organisation. The analysis on DAESH Western women is often influenced by prejudices, stereotypes, and gender biases. Counterterrorism efforts need for the integration of the gender perspectives and needs for more women to detect radicalization as well as in prevention, de-radicalisation, and reintegration processes.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Western, Women, Extremism, Terrorism, DAESH, ISIL, ISIS.

RESUMEN: El DAESH ha sido especialmente exitoso a la hora de reclutar mujeres occidentales. Hay diferencias en el perfil y la motivación de esas mujeres con respecto a sus correligionarios masculinos. El DAESH ha ofrecido una alternativa al feminismo secularista occidental, sustituyendo salvación por emancipación (empoderamiento sin igualdad de género). Las mujeres occidentales del DAESH han desempeñado diferentes labores. Ellas has sido esposas de los *yihadistas,* madres y educadoras de la siguiente generación, reclutadoras y recaudadoras de fondos para la organización y trabajadoras en las instituciones segregadas por géneros del Califato. También participaron en acciones violentas cuando llegó el momento, dependiendo de las necesidades de la organización. El análisis de las mujeres occidentales del DAESH se ve a menudo influido por prejuicios y estereotipos de género. La lucha contra el terrorismo necesita la inclusión de perspectivas de género y un mayor número de mujeres para detectar los procesos de radicalización, así como en los programas de prevención, desradicalización y reintegración.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Género, Occidentales, Mujeres, Extremismo, Terrorismo, DAESH, ISIS, ISIL.

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[1] The acronym DAESH is one of the possible transliterations of the Arabic acronym *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham* (*Al-Sham* being an Arabic name that designates a region that extends from southern Turkey, through Syria, to Egypt), to refer to the self-declared Islamic State (*IS).* This acronym is replacing terms such as "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) or "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). In September 2014, the French government announced that it would also begin to use this Arabic acronym. The acronym DAESH is also the one used by the US executive and many other political leaders. The term "Islamic State" is particularly discouraged by some authors because it "blurs the boundaries between Islam, Muslims and Islamists" (Black 2014).

"In Afghanistan, I watched women pass through checkpoints without being searched, even though the day before a woman perpetrated a suicide attack, because the prevailing culture worldwide views the women as mothers and nurtures and does not see women as actors of violence. The role of women as recruiters and perpetrators is almost completely ignored or significantly downplayed. This attitude blinds us to the reality that women are actors and have agency".

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INTRODUCTION

The DAESH has been the most violent and economically solvent terrorist group in history. By the end of 2015, 30 groups had declared their formal affiliation with DAESH, and 12 others had expressed their support for the terrorist organisation (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015).

Part of DAESH's strategy was to attract foreign combatants who provide them with not only new soldiers but also with the manpower and technical skills the organisation needed (Antunez, 2016). The range of nations of origin was impressive: fourteen European countries; from Chechnya, China, North Africa and the Balkans; from countries in the Middle East and from continents as far away as North America and Oceania (ICSR, 2013b)[3].

At the end of 2015, the number of combatants going to Syria and Iraq had reached between 27,000 and 31,000 from at least 86 countries. In the case of Western Europeans, it had risen from 2,500 in June 2014 to over 5,000 by December 2015 (The Soufan Group, 2015)[4].

DAESH was also particularly successful in recruiting female members. In July 2018, it was estimated that of the 52,808 foreigners who had joined the Caliphate, 6,577 were women from various countries (Cook & Vale, 2019). Some sources suggest that women constituted 20 per cent of the European citizens who joined DAESH. However, the data are inconclusive, a significant number of countries simply do not account for, or distinguish, women who joint or support political violence, and estimates range from 550 to 2 500 (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

In the West, DAESH has been perceived as a totally patriarchal organisation in which the role of women was insignificant and irrelevant. Gender is asocial construct, not a biological one. Society has created gendered structures of masculinity and femininity. These structures aligned masculinity and men with violence, aggression, assertiveness,

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[2] Opening remarks during the Workshop: "Women in Terrorism and Counterterrorism", hold in Ankara, Tuekey, from 27 to 28 May 2019, by the NATO Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE DAT).

[3] According to the ICSR, Western Europeans accounted for 18 percent of the foreign fighters in Syria, most of them from France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. In terms of population size, the countries most affected were Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Austria (ICSR, 2013b). In June 2014, the Soufan Group issued a report stating that the number of such fighters, from 81 countries, had now reached 12,000 (Barret, 2014). Another report in January 2015 stated that the number of foreign fighters exceeded 20,000, with almost a fifth of them coming from Western European countries (Neumann, 2015).

[4] Of these, 3,700 came from just four countries: France (1,700), the United Kingdom (760), Germany (760) and Belgium (470).

rationality, logic, while women and femininity are associated with passivity, submission, emotions, and frailty. Social structures are also affected by "intersectional" factors such as religion, amongst many others. Muslim women are perceived by many in the West as overly submissive, passive, passive and victimized by Muslim men.

However, DAESH was able to attract many Western women, who have assumed an important role in the structure of the Caliphate. These women have often been stereotyped as inherently peaceful and submissive and have been wrongly assumed, under the influence of prejudices that continued to present them as members of the 'weaker sex', to join the group only under duress, or for romantic and other 'irrational' reasons (Mietz, 2016). They played different roles in the organization from supporters, facilitators, recruiters, propagandists, ideologues, and perpetrators. Despite of this, their assumed role was predominantly confined to "victimhood" and "motherhood". This resulted in turning a blind eye to the agential power of women both in terrorism and counterterrorism and gender aspects of terrorism has been still the less addressed dimension.

Radicalization process differ for each person, although there common underlying ideological, psychological, and community-based factors contributing to one´s susceptibility to terrorist propaganda. Although these women's reasons for joining the organisation and migrating to Syria and Iraq are quite like those of their male co-religionists, there are some particularities, as is also the case with their profile. The types of messages the organisation uses to attract and recruit them, as well as the roles they play within the organisation, are also distinct. It is difficult to establish the exact number of Western women who went to Syria and Iraq to join DAESH and other terrorist groups. Some sources suggest that women may represent 10-15% of those from Western countries who joined DAESH (Cook & Vale, 2019). Similarly, it is complex to establish an accurate profile of these women and to provide a precise picture of their motivations, which range from the personal, political and religious and, as with men, are deeply influenced by social dynamics and life experiences (De Leede, 2018).

DAESH's primary goal was to attract Muslims from around the world to the areas it occupied in Syria and Iraq, where the group focused most of its efforts and resources to consolidate and expand its territory. To achieve this goal, the organization also needed many women to carry out a number of missions that were fundamental to the creation and subsequent consolidation of the Caliphate. However, numerous studies and journalistic articles have ignored or even caricatured the complexity of this phenomenon, without properly analysing complex socio-cultural dynamics and abusing clichés, stereotypes and prejudices about the role of women in armed conflicts, in radicalisation processes and in terrorism. These texts have largely limited themselves to presenting women as simple victims of rape, sexual slaves or as "girlfriends" of the male combatants who are members of the organisation (Bond et al., 2019).

Women have had a long history of participating in terrorist activity and their role in terrorism is not a tactical, strategic, or organizational innovation. Women participation in political violence is well documented since the beginning of the Twentieth century. This participation extends from the earliest modern terrorist group, from the nineteenth century Russian revolutionary terrorism (Knight, 1979) to the suicide bombings carried out by the Chechen Black Widows and the Tamil Tiger's Birds of Paradise (Weinberg & Eubank, 2011). During 1960s and 1970s wave of revolutionary terrorism, women involvement was particularly important in groups such as the Japanese Red Army, unique founded and led by a woman, Fusako Shigenobu, and the German Red Army Faction, unique and temporarily driven only by women (Witker, 2015). The names of Leila Khaled, icon of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Bloom, 2009), Norma

Arrostito, co-founder of the Argentinian Montoneros, and Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensselin, Red Army Faction leaders are well known for the experts on terrorism.

Despite of the role played by women in terrorism throughout history, women´s involvement in DAESH has tended to be described or explained in terms of gendered idealizations or essentializations, leading to overly simplistic generalizations on why a woman would participate in religious motivated violence.

The DAESH sought to consolidate and expand its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and to this end called on Muslims everywhere in the world, both men and women, to travel to the occupied territories in the Middle East, while attempting to continue the terrorist attacks on Western soil. This article seeks to explore the ideology behind the DAESH campaign and its propaganda narrative, both of which are essential factors in its recruitment and subsequent recruitment efforts. An analysis will also be made of the motivations and profiles of young people of European origin who have been attracted to this terrorist group, with emphasis on members of the female gender. Presenting the women of the DAESH exclusively as victims who must be "saved" or as monsters who renounce their status as women hinders a complex and in-depth analysis, such as that carried out with their male co-religionists. The study and knowledge of these factors is vital when designing a multidimensional strategy to reduce the recruitment capacity of the DAESH, which is an indispensable requirement to achieve its total defeat. Recognising women´s deliberate choice to become a terrorist is an important starting point for overwhelming the gender stereotyping and it is vital for a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder approach to addressing terrorism. Political measures that do not take the role of women seriously will be doomed to failure and will contribute to feeding the vicious circles of violence and prevent the achievement of lasting and sustainable peace. This article does not intend to be a deep and comprehensive academic study of those complex matters mentioned before but only to offer some guidance for practitioner and policy makers.

DAESH'S IDEOLOGY AND WOMEN'S ROLE

This part of the article studies those elements of DAESH ideology and narrative centred on the position and duties of women in the Muslim society. It also analyses what the group offer to its female recruits and their position in the social structure of the Caliphate.

Ideology is a determining factor in any terrorist organisation and plays a fundamental role in the recruitment and motivation of its members and supporters. DAESH propaganda uses terminology and theological concepts that appear in various periods of Islamic history and are familiar to many Muslims around the world, such as *jihad*. In an Islamic context, the term *jihad* can refer to almost any effort to make personal and social life conform with God´s guidance , such as struggle against one's evil inclinations, proselytising, or efforts toward the moral betterment of the *ummah* or Muslim community. However, terrorist groups almost entirely associate *jihad* with violence and war. They have based and justified their violent strategy on an extremist and biased interpretation of the concept of this Muslim religious duty (Esposito, 2002). They have manipulated and misrepresented the concept of *jihad* to achieve the support of broad sectors of the Muslim population and the legitimacy and justification for their actions. In a context of violence and confrontation, the connotations of a "just or holy war" against alleged oppression and persecution are a factor in analysing the attitude and narrative of these terrorist groups and their effect on the population they hope to gain support from

and the potential recruits they seek to bring into the organisation (Antunez & Tellidis, 2013).

DAESH aimed to create a global Muslim awareness and sensitivity that can be exploited in accordance with its objectives. The creation of this common identity, which the group seeks to influence and manipulate with its political and ideological message, aims to increase the support of the Muslim population for its activities, locally, regionally, and globally.

Throughout history it has been common for terrorist groups to use a narrative of victimhood to manipulate deep frustrations in the population, especially during political and economic crises. In this way they have also managed to attract a section of the population that was seeking to emphasise its identity and strengthen its own self-esteem (Mazzar, 2014).

Ideology is also fundamental in shaping the perceptions of society, building a narrative that approaches and adapts to the circumstances and problems of each area, whether in Europe or the Middle East. From this perspective, the aim is to expand the scope of the movement on a global scale, while maintaining and exploiting the specific characteristics and needs of each area of operation. This ability to make the global compatible with the local has been one of the keys to DAESH's success (Cardash, Cilluffo & Marret, 2013).

The ideology of DAESH can be defined as a radical interpretation of Salafism (Antunez, 2017; Kepel, 2006). According to this interpretation, a society governed by the principles of the *Sharia on* the model of the early Muslim communities must be re-established through *jihad* in its most violent conception, which includes the use of violence and terror, against Muslims and non-Muslims, to achieve these goals. Terrorist groups have also abused of *takfir, which is* a concept denoting excommunication, as one Muslim group declaring another Muslims, or any individual, as a non-believer or *kafir* and justifying violence against them (Kepel, 2006).

Salafism is now perceived by large numbers of Muslims around the world, both among migrant communities in Western countries and in Middle Eastern and North African societies, as a way of reforming and revitalizing Islam in our day. It is attractive to many because of its aura of authenticity and its literalness, with abundant references to sacred Islamic texts, i.e. the Quran and the *Sunna* or tradition of the prophet. It also offers a puritanical and emotional alternative to other religious interpretations. In Western countries many young Muslims face an identity crisis, as they do not identify with the society in which they were born or grew up, nor with their parents or grandparents. For them, Salafism, which emphasises the universality of Islam, is a way of differentiating themselves from both societies and adopting a new alternative identity. In Muslim countries, on the other hand, Salafism is appropriating the traditional role of secular parties and movements in defending the politically and socially disadvantaged from the system (Antunez & Tellidis, 2013). DAESH has been highly successful in exploiting both situations for recruitment purposes, offering these young people a chance for success and revenge.

Although Salafism was initially and traditionally an apolitical movement (Oliodort, 2014), DAESH has succeeded in making Salafism an ideology relevant to the political, social, and economic situations of today's world. It has openly discarded Western political terminology, using instead Islamic concepts and terms adapted, according to the needs and objectives of the group, to support the establishment of a Salafist inspired political system. DAESH has intended to create and consolidate a theologically authentic state and not a merely political one (Oliodort, 2014). This movement, which brings together the

traditional principles of Salafism by introducing political concepts specific to Islam, will be referred to as neo-Salafism for the rest of this article.

According to DAESH's narrative, Muslims have been dominated by the West because they have abandoned "true Islam". This and other groups claim that all human beings who live outside the message and will of God, including most Muslims throughout the world, are in a state of *jahiliyah* or darkness and ignorance, similar to that which existed before the revelation of the divine message to the Prophet Muhammad. The DAESH considers that the *Sharia*, according to a totally literal and puritanical interpretation, should be the basis of all legislation and Muslims should return to the original teachings and early models of Islam. Western military, economic, political, social, and cultural influences are considered unholy and must be eradicated. To achieve this goal, the creation, consolidation, and expansion of the Caliphate is essential. The restoration and triumph of that Caliphate and the re-establishment of Muslim hegemony would be an irrefutable proof of God's support for his true followers and of the supremacy of Islam over other religions (Rogers, 2014).

DAESH´s message often contains religious and historical concepts and allusions that sound strange and old-fashioned to the ears of non-Westerners, but which refer to traditions and texts of the original Islam (Wood, 2015). DAESH defends that the conflict in the Middle East is part of an apocalyptic sectarian war, for which the group and its Caliphate are the only solution (Oliodort, 2016).

The idea of the re-establishment of an Islamic state dates to the abolition of the Caliphate in Istanbul after World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, which was a real collective trauma for Muslims throughout the Islamic world. This idea is fundamental in understanding the power of attraction of the Caliphate proclaimed by the DAESH for those Muslims who consider that they cannot practice and be faithful to the precepts of their faith in any country that is not fully directed by the precepts of the *Sharia*. After the declaration and establishment of the Caliphate by the DAESH, these Muslims had the possibility of leaving all these secular societies and emigrating, following the example of the *Hijra* or migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina (Azinovic & Jusic, 2015).

Although many may believe that DAESH is sinister and even repulsive to Western women, a surprising number of them, including a considerable number of converts, were attracted by its message, identified themselves as *Muhajeerat* and left their countries to make that *Hijra* or migration to the Caliphate (Peresin, 2015).

For those on the margins of society, whether for social, economic, political, cultural or religious reasons, the DAESH offered an authentic and genuine Islamic state, full of opportunities for those who accepted its authority and where they could live fully according to the precepts of the Islamic faith. It is not surprising that DAESH´s propaganda continuously published photographs and news of a "purely" Islamic society, which offered those who joined its ranks physical and spiritual rewards: material incentives and ideological and religious ones (Oliodort, 2015).

DAESH offered the vision of an alternative society to Western secularist feminism, based on the *Sharia.* According to DAESH narrative, it is impossible to live according to the precepts of the Muslim faith in Western societies, focusing on Muslim women who feel marginalised in those societies because of their beliefs. It also offered them a utopian place in which they could fulfil all their social obligations, while adhering to a strict interpretation of religion. In this way, DAESH offered an alternative to the emancipation of Western women, providing its own social and religious vision, which included the

ultimate benefit of divine salvation. However, by substituting salvation for emancipation, DAESH rejected the concept of Western equality and established restrictive patriarchal norms that curtailed and controlled women's social activities (Khelghat-Doost, 2017). Female radicalization in terms of the DAESH, was perceived to be driven by factors related to grooming and/or exploitation, the lure of marriage and the desire to achieve social status through association with a male jihadist. Nevertheless, many of those women declare their basic motivation as emancipation from Western views about women role in society and escape from their original social sphere to reach personal and religious fulfilment.

The DAESH essentially glorified the sedentary and domestic lifestyle of women who adhere to the basic duties of home care and motherhood, totally condemning the Western values of women's liberation and emancipation which, according to the group, make it impossible for them to fulfil their divine duties. There is no doubt that the organisation primarily conceives women as a reproductive machine or as an object of pleasure for the man who carries out the military part of the *jihad*, covering his sexual needs and making him maintain high morale. However, women have also performed other functions that are necessary and important for the functioning of the Caliphate (Chatterjee, 2016).

DAESH established courts, created a religious police force, founded social institutions and provided essential services with the aim of establishing a "social contract": a system based on mutual obligations guaranteeing the protection and basic rights of citizens in return for their support of the Caliphate in the form of taxes and donations or social or military service. In this way, the DAESH was trying to convince Muslims around the world that it was establishing an Islamic state that emulated the model of a 7th-century Caliphate, deeply inspired by medieval Muslim social, military, legal, economic, political and religious jurisprudence (Revkin, 2016).

Although the DAESH was not the first terrorist group to create a proto state, it was the most successful in incorporating women into the state apparatus. To do so, DAESH established a parallel system of gender-segregated institutions. This meant that within each institution there was a section managed by women to address issues relevant to women, covering areas such as education, health, administration, police, finance, and the provision of any other public service. Women working in these sections had minimal contact with their male counterparts, so they strictly adhered to the precept of gender segregation. In this way the organisation made its strict and conservative vision of the social and religious role of women compatible with the needs of the new state. This pragmatic approach also allowed and facilitated the incorporation of a high number of women who saw a way to reconcile their faith with their labour concerns (Khelghat-Doost, 2017). Although DAESH's propaganda to attract Western women heavily focused on the possibility of becoming wives of a *Jihadist* and mothers of the next generation of fighters, it also offered them the possibility of other professional roles.

In addition to those already mentioned, a particularly relevant role should be stressed: recruitment (Peresin, 2015). DAESH used hundreds of women to take care of the social networks and public relations of the organisation, whose main role was recruitment and fundraising (Roubanis, 2020). Those women were also responsible for organising virtual meetings between young Westerners and the combatants they would later join in Syria or Iraq (Hoeg, 2019). Through the social networks they also provided a wide range of motivational and practical advice to the future *Muhajeerat,* to make their journey easier, to instruct them on how to communicate with their families from the Middle East, as well as to teach them how to become 'good wives of the *Jihad'* (Peresin, 2015).

The difficulty of identifying and monitoring these women and their profiles on social networks was an advantage for the continuity of their activities. Their networks steadily recovered from closures and blockages and almost immediately reappeared under other aliases or identifications (Torres, 2015).

In addition, in October 2017, in view of the numerous military setbacks it was suffering and the loss of male combatants, the DAESH called for women also to take part in military actions in the framework of the *jihad as* a last resort, either to protect their collective honour or as a way of shaming and haranguing men who refused to fight (Vale, 2019).

It is therefore important not to underestimate the role played by women in consolidating the Caliphate and its functioning, ensuring the birth, growth and education of the next generation of Jihadists, encouraging the men in their family unit to fight and, if necessary, taking up arms themselves or carrying out terrorist actions, either because of the lack of male combatants or because the tactical or political and strategic situation required it (Kneip, 2016).

Furthermore, a terrorist action carried out by a woman would have a great impact on Muslim men around the world who had not decided to join the cause and who would see their "honour and manhood" compromised (Roubanis, 2020). This possibility has been widely developed and defended by DAESH propaganda (Europol, 2018).

DAESH's military defeats, the loss of territory and the confinement of its members, mainly women, in refugee camps in Syria and Iraq, have increased exponentially the role of women in the organisation (Cook & Vale, 2019).

THE MOTIVATION OF DAESH WESTERN WOMEN

The exceptional success of DAESH in attracting foreign fighters makes us to pay special attention to the motivation of these young men and women who decided to join its ranks. Researchers find frequent reference at the community level, socioeconomic disadvantage, a perceived lack of belonging, and a failed integration are important factors in radicalization. Personal decriminalization and perceived injustice in state level makes radicalized individual as "active" in violent extremism.

The most important reasons were initially two: the atrocious images of the conflict in Syria, mainly those committed by government forces; and the perception of passivity and lack of support from both the West and the Arab countries. A sense of belonging to a global Muslim community or *ummah,* defined by a common religious identity, was generated or reaffirmed in many young Muslims around the world and some of them felt obliged to defend their coreligionists in Syria (Chinyong, 2014).

Some Western women who joined DAESH affirm they decided to move to Syria as part of a humanitarian movement to lessen the suffering of the Syrian population. This identification with the suffering of those Muslims was often coupled with rejection and anger at the foreign policy of their countries towards the Muslim world, becoming an element in a subsequent process of religious radicalisation (Peresin, 2015). It should not be forgotten that many of these women were almost adolescents who had been born during the misnamed "war on terrorism", which generated a certain stigmatisation of Muslims in some Western countries. This factor also influenced the way in which they perceived DAESH and its intention to create a perfect Muslim society where they could fully live their religion (Hoeg, 2019).

Some of these individual men and women who moved to Syria and Iraq only adopted a radical religious ideology and doctrine after arriving to the area of operations and meeting neo-Salafist elements and organisations operating there (ICSR, 2013a). In the initial phase of the conflict DAESH recruitment process should be seen in the context of Syria's humanitarian crisis (Chinyong, 2014). This factor must be taken into account when preventing radicalisation processes in the context of future violent conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Some DAESH Western Muslim women also expressed their view that the *Umma* was under attack and needed to be defended: they were trying to protect their religion from the war they felt the West was waging against Islam as a whole (Peresin, 2015).

A December 2015 report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) stated that each individual's specific motivations for moving to Syria and Iraq varied, ranging from altruism and solidarity to much more prosaic, individual and even greedy reasons. Some were trying to improve their social and economic situation, others moved for identity reasons, and others were really defending radical religious positions. Others were motivated by a mixture of these three reasons. Many travelled to Syria to support and protect Muslims in need. However, humanitarian reasons lost their motivation to attract foreign fighters to the ranks of radical groups in Syria since the proclamation of the Caliphate. At that time, many recruits travelled with the desire to live in a "true Islamic society", to help to build that a "pure Islamic state" and be part of a "religious renaissance". Others simply sought adventure and looked for extreme experiences. Others pursued to impress their families and friends by becoming heroes or martyrs. In some cases, they were "tormented souls", with mental problems and depressive or suicidal tendencies, who wanted to die in a "glorious" way. In other cases, they were simply attracted by the possibility of being able to act with impunity using maximum violence, denoting criminal, or psychopathic inclinations. Many others were attracted by the prospect of comradeship and ties between "comrades and brothers in arms". The motives were mixed and there was no single reason to encourage the fighters to join DAESH and other radical groups (Schmid & Tinnes, 2015).

Some young people were simply "bored" and unmotivated. They could not find any real meaning in their lives. For them, the possibility of being part of a movement that claimed to change the world was quite attractive. This new utopia also offered many women a supposed escape route and the feeling that by joining DAESH they would be empowered, have an exciting life and do something important that would give meaning to their existence (Mazarr, 2014). The group developed a concept in which empowerment does not mean gender equality, reinterpreting the role of women in society without questioning the patriarchal system, the superiority of men and gender segregation (Roubanis, 2020).

A report by the Soufan Group suggested that the motivation of young people moving to Middle East was more personal than political. Most of DAESH's propaganda sought to attract to the Caliphate those seeking a new future rather than those seeking revenge for past acts; the latter being more useful for carrying out terrorist acts in their home or adopted countries. The search for a cause to which to dedicate one's life, belonging to a group, adventure, and camaraderie, seemed to be the most outstanding motivations. Only a small proportion of them went to the Middle East for training to become terrorists in their home countries (The Soufan Group, 2015).

In the past it was considered that most so called *jihadists* were attracted almost exclusively by a promise of religious reward, such as entry into paradise. Today, however,

it is considered that, although for many DAESH fighters purely religious motivations were necessary, they do not appear to be sufficient to explain the decision to join a group that preaches and practices the indiscriminate use of violence (Stern & Bergen, 2015).

Although not sufficient to fully explain the decision to join the Caliphate, the religious factor appears more often among Western women as a motivation than in the case of their male co-religionists. Some women perceived the Caliphate as an opportunity to actively participate in a state-building process and contribute to the creation of a new society, different from the "decadent and morally corrupt Western society, which does not respect women" and which imposes restrictions on them in fulfilling the precepts of their religion (Peresin, 2015). These women do not talk about joining a terrorist group, but about contributing to the creation of a new state, ideologically pure, where they can live "honourably" and "religiously" under a strict interpretation of the *Sharia* (Peresin, 2015). Measures restricting the wearing of the *niqab*, the *chador*, the *hijab* and other Muslim women's clothing in public spaces adopted by some countries, have been argued by some Muslim women as evidence of their inability to fully live their religion in the West.

The DAESH attracted not only those who pursued a religious utopia. The group found many of its recruits among those seeking adventure, social promotion, and a sense of belonging and community (Kurth Cronin, 2015).

The possibility of creating a family also served as an attraction for many young Muslims. The prospect of marrying and having children with a 'real man, a fighter, someone willing to sacrifice for the cause' also attracted many Western women, who were also promised full housing facilities and expenses, as well as financial incentives for each child brought into the world. This romantic and familiar prospect, together with economic stability, added to other motivations, moved many women to join the Caliphate (Peresin, 2015).

A March 2015 report by the Lebanese organisation Quantum Communications (Quantum, 2015) provided additional information about the motivations of the combatants who were moving to Syria and Iraq. A majority of them, according to the report, were looking for identity and an improvement in their social situation, motivated by the desire for material goods or recognition on the one hand, or by a sense of belonging to a transnational identity on the other (Revkin & Mhidi, 2016). In the case of the women who joined the Caliphate, they were also offered the possibility of Islamic "sisterhood" among women who wanted to live their lives fully according to the principles of their vision of the *Sharia* (Kneip, 2016).

These motivations also vary according to the geographical area. In the case of combatants from Western countries, the second motivation was the search for adventure. The first and most important was identity (Tucker, 2015). Young people radicalised in the West were looking for an identity, a meaning to their lives, a sense of belonging, and respect from those around them. The starting point for these young people to convert to Salafist ideas is not the process of radicalisation itself, but the social disconnection of these young people, a feeling of disaffection and resentment toward the society in which they have grown up. It is for this reason that they have rejected the culture, ideas and norms of Western countries and are seeking an alternative vision of the world (Malik, 2015). Identity issues have been recognised as central to the processes of radicalisation. The underlying reasons are always indignation, defiance, a feeling of persecution and a refusal to obey the norms (Maher, 2015).

Some descendants of Muslim immigrants have experienced problems integrating into Western societies. In some host countries a class of low-wage workers is being created,

many of whom are Muslims and feel little or no identification with their host societies (Adida, Laitin & Valfort, 2016). Feelings of alienation and inequality, racism and lack of religious freedom, xenophobia, or negative attitudes towards the Muslim population in the West have been widely used by DAESH recruiters to attract young people of these societies (Peresin, 2015). In these countries many descendants of Muslim immigrants suffer an identity crisis and do not feel identified with either Western societies or their parents or grandparents' countries of origin. For them, adopting an ideology that promotes a global religious consciousness is a way of differentiating themselves from both societies and achieving a new identity (Mazarr, 2014).

DAESH recruiters have also exploited the personal identity struggle of some women, which is triggered by liberalism and modernity in multicultural Western societies. Many of these women, often merely teenagers, find themselves caught between the traditional and liberal values imposed by their families and their close social circle, on the one hand, and by the rest of the society on the other. DAESH's ideology offers them a third way: a sense of belonging to a global cause, as well as stability and acceptance by the group. Something they previously lacked (Peresin, 2015).

Not surprisingly, many of the fighters recruited by DAESH in the West were converts or Muslims who discovered their religion rather late (Mazarr, 2014). In both cases it was disenchantment with all their previous life experiences that led them to accept a moral code inspired by a radical interpretation of the Muslim faith (Malik, 2015). What united the two groups was not Islam itself, but a feeling of generational revolution. Oliver Roy defines this threat not as a radicalisation of Islam but as an "Islamisation of radicalism". According to Roy, almost all the French Jihadists belonged to one of these two categories: either they were second-generation Frenchmen (born or raised in France) or of French origin who had converted to Islam. Roy claims that there is no revolution of Islam or Muslims, but rather a problem that affects two specific classes of young people. The cause of this revolution is the lack of transmission of a religion that is integrated into the system. These second-generation French people do not identify with the Islam of their parents, rarely have a history of prior religiousness, and have usually lived on the fringes of the Muslim community. They tend to be 'westernised' and share the culture of the young people of their generation (including alcohol and drug use and flirting with girls in bars and discos). Many of them have spent some time in prison and then suddenly (re)convert, choosing neo-Salafist Islam, 'an Islam that rejects Western culture' and encompass norms that allow them to rebuild their inner 'self'. Neo-Salafism has become a means of rejecting Western culture, as well as that of their parents. Young converts of Western origin also adhere to a puritanical form of religion, an Islam of cultural and generational rupture (Roy, 2016). The author of this article considers that, although Roy´s identity and countercultural elements in the process of radicalization are important, ideological and religious factors can not be underestimated.

Europe's proximity to the conflict in Syria, the ease of travelling through different transit countries without the need for visas, and the relative low cost of travel made it particularly attractive to DAESH recruits, who could travel by plane or even by car, either by their own means or with the support of some religious or humanitarian organisations (Byman & Shapiro, 2014). Women who travelled to the area were even less suspicious to intelligence and security agencies that did not consider them a direct threat. Most of them moved in groups, in the company of other young people who harboured the same feelings and motivations (Schidmid & Tinnes, 2015).

Traveling to Syria and Iraq became an easy target and social networks also enormously helped. DAESH and other radical groups offered advice on how to contact elements close

to the organisation that could help facilitate this journey (Byman and Shapiro, 2014). Internet forums connected potential recruits with groups operating on the ground to provide them with safe access to the area of operations. There is also evidence that some combatants in Syria and Iraq used social networks to contact and encourage family and friends to join the cause (Maher, 2013). Women played a key role in these propaganda and recruitment efforts (Kneip, 2016).

The reach and influence of DAESH's recruitment campaign was multiplied by a legion of social media specialists operating on the web twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The effect of this work was enhanced by a wide circle of volunteers and supporters, both men and women, who spread their messages and communications, trying to reach the maximum number of potential recruits (Callimachi, 2015). DAESH was particularly successful in recruiting through social networks, using mainly Twiter and Facebook in its recruitment processes (Banco, 2014). It is possible to say that DAESH acquired an extraordinary knowledge on how to organize a propaganda campaign through social networks, in order to achieve and maintain the necessary support for its cause, obtaining funding and new recruits (Feakin & Wilkinson, 2015).

Syria was the first conflict where many Western combatants broadcasted their actions in real time and where social networks played a key role as a source of information and inspiration. Social networks became a fundamental aspect of what was happening on the ground. A large number of combatants received information about the conflict not through the official channels of the groups in which they were embedded, but through sympathetic operators with no direct affiliation to the groups, who offered moral and intellectual support to terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. Although these individuals were primarily located in the West and had never set foot in the Middle East, they had significant influence on how the conflict was perceived by those directly involved in it. The International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR) also reported on the existence of new spiritual authorities to whom combatants turned for guidance and inspiration through the social networks (ICSR, 2013a). Although there is no evidence to suggest that these religious leaders were directly involved in facilitating the flow of combatants into Syria or Iraq, or that they coordinated their activities with terrorist groups, their statements encouraged, justified and provided religious legitimacy to the struggle in the Middle East, playing an important role in the radicalization of some individuals (Carter, Maher & Neumann, 2014).

THE PROFILE OF DAESH WESTERN WOMEN

Although there is no profile that encompasses all the Westerner male combatants who went to Syria and Iraq, there are some organisations that have found some common characteristics common to a large number of them (Maher, 2013). It is also difficult to define which young Westerners women are at risk of being radicalised, based on their age, place of origin, ethnicity, family relations or religious background (Peresin, 2015).

Most Western citizens who joined DAESH were young, unmarried people between the ages of 16 and 29 (The Soufan Group, 2015). For women, the age range was between 16 and 24 (Peresin, 2015). Women were a minority within the group, although their numbers were much higher than in previous conflicts (Bakker, Paulassen & Entermann, 2013): around 17% (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). When compared with men, greater number of married women has been identified among those who moved to Syria and Iraq. Some sources indicate that even half of them were either travelling with their husbands or planning to join them in DAESH-controlled territory (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

Most recruits in Europe were first-, second- or third-generation migrants, or from a mixed marriage with at least one parent being Muslim (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). Women were mostly second- and third-generation migrants (Peresin, 2015). A significant number of converts have been confirmed in the ranks of DAESH Western recruits (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). This number was even higher among women, reaching a third of the total (Peresin, 2015), compared to men who represented only a quarter (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

Most of the recruits come from working class families, but cases of combatants coming from middle class families have been detected too (Adida, Laitin & Valfort, 2016). The levels of education vary according to the countries of origin, being in the United Kingdom higher than in Germany, and in Germany higher than in France, for example (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). Women who joined DAESH were generally better educated, had a better prospect of enjoying a fulfilling life in the West and came from well-established, integrated, moderate and non-religious families (Peresin, 2015), showing the importance of religious fulfilment and the need of living under religious precepts in the process of women radicalization.

Some of the recruits were children of refugees from previous conflicts; for example, in the case of Austria, from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chechnya (Bakker, Paulassen & Entermann, 2013). A minimum number of them had been involved as jihadists in previous conflicts (Bakker, Paulassen & Entermann, 2013). However, most of the combatants had not received military training in their respective countries before leaving for Syria and Iraq (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016).

The social marginalisation of some migrant communities seems to have played an important role in the radicalisation processes. A high number of the young people of European origin who joined the ranks of DAESH had criminal records in their countries of origin and some of them had served some time in prison (Buchanan & Park, 2016). In some processes of radicalisation, previous mental problems have also been detected (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). Some had also been addicted to illegal substances before joining the group and many had grown up in broken homes. For them, DAESH offered an attractive alternative of belonging, purpose in life, adventure, and respect. By joining the group, they could access a new identity that was not linked to their past, but to their potential contribution to the future of the organisation (The Soufan Group, 2015). In this way DAESH offered the marginalised a new purpose and a new direction in their lives (Watts, 2016). To achieve this goal, DAESH created an important and complex network of relationships between siblings, schoolmates, members of juvenile delinquency groups, fellow inmates with mentors a few years older than most recruits (Klausen & Johnson, 2016).

Unlike their male counterparts, most of the women who joined DAESH had no prior criminal record or legal problems, so their profile went virtually unnoticed by intelligence and security agencies (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

Regarding the duration of the radicalisation processes, it has been noted that they were short, in some cases lasting no more than a few weeks and were difficult to detect (The Soufan Group, 2015). In the case of the women, the process of radicalisation, although it happened at the same speed and took place both virtually and with direct contact with the recruiter, went even further unnoticed by their social environment, which believed that women were more difficult to be attracted by extremist groups (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016).

When confronting the narrative of DAESH and other similar groups, it must be borne in mind that we are not only dealing with a terrorist ideology, but also with a successful

subculture. Music, gestures, greetings, and clothing are as important to terrorist recruitment as theological treatises or political arguments. In short, we could say that DAESH offered its acolytes a rich cultural universe in which they can immerse themselves. This is a key source of its power of attraction. Furthermore, DAESH offers the possibility of combining a kind of *"cool-jihad"* with counter-cultural activism. Many of the Westerners who joined the ranks of terrorist groups have a previous history of counter-cultural activities (Hegghammer, 2015). The attractiveness of *"cool-jihad"* and counter-cultural activism are highly likely multipliers of religious and political factors.

Young DAESH supporters, both men and women, have been influenced by the glamour of images of a war they considered just, including those of torture and execution of those who opposed the Caliphate, presented as enemies of Islam. Fascinated by the cult of death and by concepts such as paradise and life after death, they spoke of a "five-star *jihad*" and were influenced by the testimonies of jihadists who presented the risk, fun and excitement of the struggle in Syria and Iraq, as opposed to the "boredom" and meaninglessness of their lives in their countries of origin or adoption. "*jihadist* subculture" attracted more young people to the ranks of the Caliphate, combining the real world of war and the virtual world of the internet and video games (Peresin, 2015).

Between 90 and 100% of DAESH recruits came from urban areas or peripheral suburbs. Many of them originated from the same neighbourhoods. This indicates the existence of extremist networks operating in those areas, with clusters of friends radicalising as a group and deciding to travel together to Syria and Iraq. DAESH elements also recruited members of their closest circle through social networks once deployed in the area of operations (Van Ginkel & Entenmann, 2016). The appearance of these "nurseries" of radicalism which led to terrorism was the result of the very nature of recruitment: an emotional act, often involving a family member or close friend in the process of radicalisation (The Soufan Group, 2015). In the case of the women who joined DAESH there is no evidence of family support or even knowledge of the radicalisation process. On the contrary, there are several examples of families who tried hard to return their loved one and openly criticised the terrorist group's radical and violent interpretation of religion (Peresin, 2015).

In those places where someone has been recruited it is highly likely that the recruitment will continue. It is in marginal areas where there are groups of young people who are strongly connected through family or friendship ties, often without any hope or purpose in their lives, or any sense of belonging outside their immediate circle, where a major impact of terrorist recruitment has been detected. Such recruitment spreads from group to group through personal ties. In countries with a large influx of recruits into Syria and Iraq, DAESH recruitment has been more focused on certain neighbourhoods where friends and family have played a key role (The Soufan Group, 2015). Young people are radicalised into a small group of friends who meet in a particular place, whether in the neighbourhood, a gymnasium, a bar or cafe, or in prison. There they recreate a "family", a brotherhood (Roy, 2016).

The power of social networks and Internet is undeniable when it comes to radicalising and preparing the ground for subsequent recruitment. However, once incubators for radicalisation have been created in various urban areas in the West, their role becomes less important than direct human contact. Then groups of friends or neighbours convince potential recruits to make the journey, individually or separately, to join DAESH (The Soufan Group, 2015). In this environment the justification for the use of violence is largely due to group dynamics: the group provides meaning to the lives of its members,

becoming extremely cohesive in situations of real or perceived threat and isolation (Kershaw, 2010).

Another factor to consider is the threat by men and women returning from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq. These veterans can be extremely useful in recruiting, inspiring, training, and leading new DAESH elements in Europe (Cardash, Cilluffo & Marret, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The first failure to detect the processes of female radicalisation is caused by the stereotypes that present women in general as peaceful and anti-violence individuals and Muslim women as submissive individuals without any social role. However, women have previously played an active role in political and religious (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016). One of the first steps to be taken is the recognition that women, including Muslim women, can pose as dangerous a threat as those posed by men. In addition to their work as wives of fighters, mothers and educators of the next generation, recruiters and fundraisers for the organisation and workers in the segregated institutions of the Caliphate, they can also be involved in violent actions when the time comes, depending on the needs of the organisation.

Early warning systems for the radicalisation of women fail because of the absence of previous judicial problems and criminal records and a better socio-economic and educational situation than their male counterparts (Gaub & Lisiecka, 2016), showing the importance of religious fulfilment in the process of women radicalization. The process of radicalisation, which took place in a much more discreet way, went mostly unnoticed even in the closest circles, which do not perceive any signs of this development.

The profile of the women, like that of the men who travelled to Syria and Iraq, is difficult to establish, although there are some common patterns that can be identified. Security forces, families and educational and social institutions should consider these characteristics to detect processes of radicalisation as early as possible.

Western women's motivations for joining DAESH can be grouped into three main groups: the fulfilment of an ideological and religious duty; the search for belonging to a group; and the desire to give meaning to their existence. These motivations go beyond a pure sense of religious duty, and incorporate a desire for women's empowerment and emancipation, based on the concept that women's membership of the group, in addition to the divine reward, will bring them greater respect from their husbands and families and from society as a whole. According to DAESH narrative, empowerment does not mean gender equality, reinterpreting the role of women in society without questioning the patriarchal system, the superiority of men and gender segregation.

Many young DAESH recruits decided to move to Syria and Iraq with a desire to take control of their lives in search of identity and belonging and respect as a Muslim woman. Young people have historically been prone to radicalisation, trying to escape the rules of the society in which they live, trying to overcome the limits, in the process of searching for their identity.

As in the case of men, different motivations appear among young women who joined the Caliphate and even the importance of these motivations varies over time. It is therefore difficult to establish the determining factor in motivating them to leave their lives, their friends and their families behind. Because of this, it is necessary to establish strategies

that counteract DAESH's propaganda. This counterpropaganda must cover a wide spectrum of topics to reach the greatest number of people. It is important to include more women in the development of these counter-narratives, as well as in discussions about the processes of radicalization, which are currently almost totally male focused. It would be remarkably interesting to include disenchanted women members of the organisation in these debates. Similarly, more Muslim women should be included in the various social, educational, judicial, police and prison institutions that help to detect radicalisation, as well as in the processes of de-radicalisation and reintegration.

In summary, it is possible to say that the authorities must increase their efforts to understand the reasons that push Western women to join *jihadist* movements and to monitor and counteract the propaganda that such groups use to attract and recruit them afterwards, especially through the internet and social networks. It is essential to include religious leaders and the families of these young women in their efforts and to engage in productive dialogue with them. It is crucial to include in any strategy against extremism and radicalization a gender perspective that is vital in opposing the recruitment strategies of terrorist organizations. Political leaders, legislators, police forces, judicial personnel, members of civil society and religious leaders at local, national and regional levels must be aware of the problem and consequences of the radicalisation of Western women, and the danger they pose as members of terrorist organisations, moving away from simplifications, prejudices and stereotypes.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any other agency, organization, employer, or company.

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