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The Internet: Avenue for Women Jihadi “Participation”

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Analysts of online extremist websites have noticed a recurrent trend of jihadist attempts to engage women in the cyberworld. There also appears to be more women supporters utilising the virtual domain to express their activism.

Trend in Female Support for Extremism

A KEY DEVELOPMENT in the Islamist extremist movement online is the increasing effort to actively engage women. Currently the approach stresses traditional roles provided by women: guides on how to become good Muslim women, wives and mothers, conforming to the Islamist ideal that a Muslim woman should prioritise and devote her life to nurturing her family and supporting her husband. Upon scrutiny, such guides at times include an appeal to support husbands or sons waging armed violence and to produce a new generation of fighters. In addition, there are the videos of mothers of “martyrs” displaying their pride and sacrifices, usually coming from war-torn areas in the Middle East.

The growing attention is accompanied by an increasing though indirect politicisation of women through the cyber domain. Numerous sites have included videos of women speaking on contemporary issues such as calling out to Muslims to defend the wearing of the *niqab* in Europe, as well as images of women participating in demonstrations. This appears to be providing the foundation for the shifting debate on the permissibility of direct female participation in armed *jihad*.

There seems to be high level support within Al Qaeda for a more active role for women. A December 2009 message by Ayman Al Zawahiri’s wife, Umaymah Hasan Ahmad, lend authoritative voice to the numerous articles urging women to support those they regard as *mujahideen*. American Colleen Renee LaRose, also known as ‘Jihad Jane’ used the Internet to offer herself as a martyr in a plot to kill a Swedish cartoonist with an Al Qaeda bounty. Belgian Malika El Aroud, known online as Oum Obeyda, one of the most prominent Internet jihadist in Europe, used the cyberworld to implore both

male and female participation in armed jihad. This is more than just a “Western phenomenon”. Websites also increasingly post pictures of women, usually in Arab countries, holding weapons or cartoons of ‘*mujahedahs*’ or female fighters, suggesting a perverse form of women’s liberation.

While still small in number, women in Southeast Asia are not escaping the attention of the jihadist. A key regional site, *Arrahmah.com* and its influential forum has seen a noticeable increase in female ‘participation’ (participation here at the very least referring to females supporting the cause of the extremists). One current celebrity cause is the trial of Putri Munawaroh, the wife of terrorist suspect Adib Susilo who was killed in one of the raids carried out by Indonesia’s Detachment 88 in late 2009.

A group, ‘Support Freedom 4 Putri Munawaroh’, consisting of both men and women can be found on Facebook. They solicit donations, which they claim, support Putri Munawaroh’s family visits and keep her morale strong. To date the impact has been limited. As of 8 May 2010 the group claimed to have collected Rp. 1,447,585 (USD 159), from its pool of 523 male and female supporters. Numerous female ‘fans’ expressed their support to Munawaroh that she remain patient until her release. Lastly, there are also a small number of blogs that are said to be run by females, creating a safe haven for women to participate in the movement.

Implications of Rising Trend

There are two key implications for this Internet trend. First, the real world traditionally restricts opportunities for women to participate. The cyberworld bypasses the physical prohibitions. Hence, the extremist Islamist potentially gains wider support for and perhaps participation in the cause of armed *jihad*. The sites are still largely couched in offering traditional roles for women -- as mother and as the ‘first school’ of her children. This starkly illustrates the generational commitment to the struggle, and the efforts to thoroughly groom the next generation. There is cause for worry that such ideologies will begin to be instilled while the children are still young, from within the family. Policymakers need to be aware of such trends, and so do those who work closely with families -- such as those in social service. This will enable them to pick up tell-tale signs.

Secondly, the jihadists are learning that women can play a wider and perhaps active role. While still stressing the important role women play in transmitting the ideology and maintaining the morale of the fighters, they also recognise that women can support and even take part in actual combat. Policymakers need to be aware of the changing nature of the threat and work with a range of partners. This is to develop and detect early warning signs that radicalisation is occurring among women.

One particular effort can be seen with the female research team initiative at the Prince Naif Chair for Intellectual Security Studies at the King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. It is tasked to research on “signs of intellectual extremism in women” and is made up of a group of highly qualified women in various fields, such as the social sciences, to help identify and address concerns in this area.

Avoiding an ‘alarmist’ Response

However, it is essential not to overplay the ‘threat’: there is still no evidence that there will be an increase in the number of female terrorists following the increasing trend online. Nonetheless, there is the need to be aware that the female audience is now being increasingly targeted. Given the restrictions that Muslim women traditionally face in some patriarchal and highly conservative societies, the appeal may be very strong, not just for ideological reasons but to gain a sense of empowerment and virtual emancipation.

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