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Women-Terrorism Nexus in Pakistan

By Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

Women's involvement in Islamist terrorist groups, such as AQIS and IS is not unprecedented in the Pakistani context. These women are deployed in various specialised capacities, necessitating a need to move from androcentric to gender neutral counter-terrorism policies.

Commentary

ON 14 APRIL 2017, a young woman, arrested during a raid by the security forces in Lahore, admitted to planning an attack on a church on Easter as a suicide bomber. Noreen Leghari, a student at the Liaquat Medical University in Sindh, had disappeared from her house in Hyderabad in February.

Official reports claim that she had travelled to Syria to join the so-called Islamic State (IS), and had returned to target the Christian community in Lahore, with her husband who was killed during the raid. The question arises whether this case is an anomaly or indicative of a broader phenomenon.

Three Dimensional Roles in the Pakistani Context

Since 2015, Pakistan has witnessed increasing involvement of women in transnational jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and IS. Some of the visible instances of women's radicalisation and active roles in terrorism-related activities: the formation of AQIS' Shaheen Women's wing that is reportedly training more than 500 female suicide bombers; the Al Zikra academy network of upper middle-class women in Karachi carrying out fundraising and matchmaking activities for IS; and the case of three women who left for Syria with their 12 children in 2015.

The involvement of women in terrorist organisations in Pakistan is not unprecedented. Pakistan's policymakers and security agencies have adopted an androcentric approach when looking at terrorist groups; they have negated or underestimated the crucial roles women have played in the past, within the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or Pakistan Taliban and now AQIS and IS.

There is no doubt that these groups are limiting women's roles, banning education and relegating them primarily to the domestic sphere. However, regardless of these structural gender inequalities embedded within their conception of an 'Islamic' society, these groups envision the participation of women under critical and specialised roles that can be categorised as 'women's jihad':

First, women have acted as 'facilitators and fundraisers', which was evident when women sold off their jewellery to support the Taliban in Swat Valley. Second, women are the nucleus of the domestic sphere in the case of Pakistan's patriarchal society. Terrorist organisations envision women as 'domestic radicalisers', indoctrinating their children and networks of women with their violent and extremist ideology. In 2014, students from Jamia-e-Hafsa, the women's wing of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad pledged allegiance to IS in a video.

Such networks of women engage in exchanging extremist religious knowledge, and are expected to groom their children as the future jihadists. Third, women have also provided support as 'suicide bombers' for TTP, with the first such case reported in 2007 in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). In another mass-casualty attack in 2010, a female suicide bomber from the TTP detonated explosives at a World Food Programme distribution centre in FATA, killing 45 and injuring 80 others.

Women's Participation as Political Move

The recruitment of women that took place under TTP is now mirrored by AQIS and IS. Although little is known about the recruitment patterns of AQIS for women, several incidences of IS recruiting middle and upper-middle class-educated women have emerged. Beyond Noreen Leghari's case, women have been recruited by IS from urban centres, such as Sialkot, Lahore and Karachi.

It seems rather paradoxical that educated and urban women would willingly join an Islamist terrorist group that unabashedly denies them the same rights as the men and largely restricts their mobility. Hence, gendered or personal explanations are often deployed to explain women's participation in these groups. As such, the woman is believed to be following her husband, father or brother or perceived as seeking revenge for their killing by the opposition group or the state.

However, in September 2016, Bushra Cheema deserted her husband and left for Syria to join IS with their four children. In a voice message sent to her husband, she stated: "I love God and His religion... If you can't join us then at least pray your wife and children die in jihad."

According to researchers, women are recruited by IS based on identity politics, with

marginalised and oppressed Muslim women forming the membership base. In this sense, the radicalisation process of women who have abandoned their families and male relatives, such as Bushra Cheema and Noreen Leghari, negates the madrassa-terrorism nexus.

They showcase an identity crisis stemming from resentment towards the state in the form of political and economic grievances. Women's radicalisation processes reflect the same considerations as men, with the solution entrenched within AQIS and IS' political ideology of creating a Sunni-dominated 'Islamic' state making the members (men and women) stakeholders working within the realm of their own specialised roles.

Redefine CT and CVE: Gender Neutral Approaches

The women-terrorism nexus within Pakistan remains a reality that should no longer be ignored by state and security officials. Although it is not likely the majority in the ranks of these traditionally patriarchal and misogynist groups will comprise women, their active recruitment signals a threat to the state. This necessitates a replacement of the age-old androcentric approach to counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE), with a more gender-neutral perspective.

Noreen Leghari's plan to act as a suicide bomber and AQIS' training of over 500 women as suicide bombers indicate that female suicide bombers are becoming a serious security concern. The tactical utility of women as suicide bombers is linked to their ability to easily access security check-posts while concealing suicide jackets underneath their clothing or burqas. This problem correlates with the low induction of females within the Pakistani police and military.

A report by the National Police Bureau of Pakistan in 2011 indicated that only 0.89 percent of the police force comprised women. This number is negligible considering that an estimated 48-50% of the total population manage to skip security check-points, as men are unable to conduct physical checks. Thus, increased recruitment of women would allow the security establishment to better respond to and counter threats emanating from women jihadis.

The Pakistani society is collectivist and based on a strong family structure, which makes it permissible for women to partake in family-based radicalisation of their children. Women's empowerment could hold the key to preventing the growing traction of extremist narratives.

Sara Mahmood is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
