



Mind the Gap: Exploring the Interplay between Gender, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism

Leila Ullrich, DPhil Criminology Candidate

Background:

On 13 October 2015, the UN Security Council called upon its member states to integrate a gender perspective into their terrorism prevention strategies. This was timely as the interplay between gender and terrorism is becoming difficult to ignore. A French intelligence report recently warned of an increasing 'feminization of the French terrorist contingent': the percentage of women leaving for Syria and Iraq had increased from 10% in 2013 to 35% at the end of 2015. Yet, while women have become more visible in the media portrayal and literature on terrorism, 'add women and stir' is not enough. Integrating a 'gender perspective' means to grasp how ideas of 'femininity', 'masculinity' and other gender constructs shape radicalization, terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Such gender dynamics have received scant attention both in counter-terrorism strategies and in the literature. Terrorism is still treated as 'men's business'. If women are perceived in terrorism, it is as manipulated or ignorant women driven into terrorism by personal troubles ('black widows') or the wish to marry a jihadist fighter. If women are addressed by counter-terrorism policies, it is through their traditional roles as mothers and wives. What effect do such counter-terrorist strategies have on women? How can we move beyond the 'neglect' of gender in counter-terrorism without further stigmatizing and securitizing women?

The literature has begun to address some of these questions. Yet, it has focused squarely on the question of why women from European countries join terrorist organizations especially ISIS. This ignores not only women from other jurisdictions but also the role of other gender constructs such as masculinity. It further neglects the diversity of gender dynamics within and between different terrorist organizations as well as their interaction with the gender constructions that underpin counter-terrorism policies. This project will fill this gap by addressing the following question: What is the role of gender in terrorism and counter-terrorism since 9/11? This question will be dissected into three sub-questions: first, how do terrorist and counter-terrorist institutions conceptualize women and with what effect on them? Do their gender images and policies mirror each other or diverge? Second, how do women make sense of their political agency and role vis-à-vis both terrorist and counter-terrorist institutions? And lastly, what role do other gender constructs such as notions of masculinity play in violent radicalization, terrorism and counter-terrorism?

The Project:

These questions will be explored through a comparative, diachronic case study of the UK, Kenya and Lebanon. The UK, Kenya and Lebanon share similarities both in how their 'terrorism problem' is defined ('Islamic terrorism') and gendered. All three countries locate the problem of terrorism in particular religious communities and neglect or stereotype gender in counter-terrorism. Yet, there are



also important differences. Al Shabaab in Kenya has much stronger links among Kenya's marginalized Somali community than ISIS has among Muslims in the UK. Hezbollah in Lebanon is emblematic of the contested nature of the terrorist label. While the United States lists it as a 'terrorist' organization, the EU distinguishes between its political and its military arm, blacklisting only the latter. Others claim that Hezbollah has transformed itself into a moderate, mainstream political party representing the interests of Lebanon's Shiites.

In this way, the project aims to make four contributions to existing scholarship. First, it draws on insights from criminology, socio-legal studies, international relations and gender studies to produce a multidisciplinary study of the interplay between gender, terrorism and counter-terrorism. Second, it moves the literature beyond its focus on 'women and terrorism' through a comprehensive gender analysis that explores constructions of femininity, masculinity and other gender constructs in radicalization, terrorism and counter-terrorism. Third, the project problematizes the prevailing division between 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism' in the literature by exploring how each feeds off the other's gender assumptions and how women make sense of and negotiate their agency at their intersection. Fourth, it aims to produce a unique comparative, cross-cultural study that sheds light on understudied cases (e.g. Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Hezbollah in Lebanon) in diverse institutional and political contexts.

For further information, contact: Leila.ullrich@crim.ox.ac.uk