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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: CASE STUDY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Abstract

In 2014, the unstable political environment in the Middle East provided the opportunity for an extremist jihadist group to establish its own state on the territory of Iraq and Syria - the so-called Islamic State with its society based on the ideology of Islamic extremism. This ideology also clearly defined gender roles for men and women. This paper examines the phenomenon of women's roles in religious extremism with the aim to analyse gender roles within Islamic extremism by using a case study of the Islamic State and its society and its roles. The analyse of the case study is based on and informed by the definitions of Islamic and religious extremism. The paper concludes that in the early days of the Islamic State, women only had the supportive roles of wives and mothers to raise the next generation of fighters, but in the final phase of the Islamic State, women could take active roles in its defence and become fighters or suicide bombers.

Keywords: religious extremism, Islamic extremism, the Islamic State, roles of women, gender roles

INTRODUCTION

Although there doesn't exist a coherent, unified definition of extremism, academics agree on the existence of several types of extremism according to its main ideological element. One of these types of extremism is religious extremism, which is connected to the

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theological ideas and movements in their radical form. Every religion in the world can have an offshoot that has radicalized and become an extremist fraction that is not afraid to use violence to achieve its goal. This also applies to Islam. The increase in power and influence of the jihadist groups and movements, which by their core ideologies belong to the religious extremism, in the last decades suggests that this phenomenon will remain in the international political environment within its society, and it will pose an increasing threat not only to the stability of the regions but also to the stability of the entire world. This is mainly because in the past Islamic extremist groups used to threaten the territory of individual states within its borders, but nowadays their influence and the scope of their activities are moving beyond the national scene. Therefore, these transnational jihadist movements are becoming an international problem, which threatens global security with their radical ideas and with elaborate networks of supporters and bases around the world (Bin Haji Halimi; Bin Sudiman; 2021). An example of Islamic extremism with international overlap is the establishment of the Islamic state in 2014 on the territory of Syria and Iraq by the jihadi extremist group.

In this paper, the phenomenon of religious extremism will be examined in-depth and in detail with application to the case study of the Islamic State. Subsequently, the case of the Islamic State will be analysed regarding its acts and ideology in terms of gender aspects and the analysis of the roles of women in the Islamic state as the case of religious extremism.

THEORETICAL SECTION

Religious extremism

With an increase in religious extremism in the 21st century, religion is started to be perceived as a threat to global security and as a cause of the subsequent violence and terrorism. One prominent definition of extremism, which is perceived extremism as a motivation for terrorism, claims that extremism comprises ideological beliefs about an obligation to bring back the political system to a form suggested by religious norms through violence (Jetten, Luis, Wibisono; 2019). Because of this perception of extremism, extremist groups or movements are often defined as those who fight for their political program and ideology against the traditional political system, which is favoured by the rest of the political environment. Religious extremism uses religion and its ideology to promote interests that lead to the establishment or maintenance of a

theocratic regime, or to a marked intolerance of persons of other faiths (or atheist), or to an extreme restriction of the rights and suppression of the human dignity of members of one's own religion (Mareš, 2014).

The religious extremist movements or groups aspiring to gain political power aim to force the implementation of their religious ideological approach to the society within the state via laws and violence. To achieve this goal, they are willing to use violence against the entity, which they are perceived as an enemy and use the terrorist strategies. The religious extremist movements or groups are perceiving other religions or other social, and ethnic groups as their enemy, due to their differences, because they don't share the same beliefs and thus do not share the same values. Also, the religious extremist movements or groups are hostile to others because they believe in a conspiracy that they want to weaken the faith in their religion (Jetten, Luis, Wibisono; 2019). In these groups/movements, religion serves as a key, connecting and unifying element of the entire social grouping. The extremist groups share and legitimize their religious values and norms in their society. In the context of social relationships, such group norms may vary in the extent to which they tolerate difference and dissent within the religious group (Jetten, Luis, Wibisono; 2019).

Islamic extremism

Like every religion, Islam has its radical currents, which aren't afraid to use violence as a means to achieve their goals and political agendas. One of the main characteristics of contemporary Islamist extremist groups/movement is that it seeks and promotes the idea of restoring and rebuilding the Caliphate or the Muslim Empire, which existed in various variations from 700 until 1924 when the last Ottoman Caliphate was abolished in Turkey and this period, Islam was associated with a hierarchical, sometimes expansionist, imperial state and a specific system of religious, legal, and cultural practices, which is called Sharia law (Jetten, Luis, Wibisono; 2019). Most of the extremist movements support the idea of the state, where all Muslim nations would be live, and therefore radical political ideology, which aims is to establish the Islamic empire, where the Islamic values and norms would be incorporated into the laws and constitutions.

These extremist movements perceived as one of the main means to rebuild the Islamic State is the use of armed jihad, which means the use of violence to achieve this goal. Specifically, the literal meaning of Jihad according to Islam is "struggle" or "effort" and in those terms, it means

more than just Holy war (*BBC*, 2009). There are three types of Jihads as a type of struggle according to Quran. The first is a believer's internal struggle to live out the Muslim faith as well as possible; the second is concerning the struggle to build a good Muslim society and the last one is dedicated to the holy war, whose main goal is to wage the struggle to defend Islam, with force and use of violence if necessary (*BBC,* 2009). But at this time, jihad is most often associated with the meaning of waging holy war to fight for Islam, for its propagation, and thus the spread of Islamic values and norms around the world. The extremist groups are claiming that this means, with the help of which an Islamic state will be rebuilt, is the only legitimate system of government based on Sharia law (Bin Haji Halimi; Bin Sudiman; 2021). According to Sharia law, waging military jihad is justifiable for several reasons. Nowadays, the extremist jihadist group rationalized their violent action and use of violence (e.g. terrorist attacks), because of the Western military operations in the Middle East and invasions of Muslim countries. By that justification, they could apply jihad because according to their point of view they are defending Islam, its faith, and its believers.

By using jihad, these extremist movements automatically create the group of "other", the non-Muslims, who are perceived as the enemies and the main threats to the Islamic faith. The extremist movements and their ideology subsequently transform this Muslim's hate and fear into violence and violent actions, which are permissible in these cases. This has the consequence of drawing distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims and reinforcing the "us versus them" paradigm (Bin Haji Halimi; Bin Sudiman; 2021).

THE CASE STUDY: THE ISLAMIC STATE

One of the main successes of the religious Islamic extremist movements is the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Islamic State was never recognised as a state in the international political environment and existed as a form of quasi-state. The group, that was behind the establishment of the Islamic State, was emerged from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a local offshoot of al Qaeda founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004 (Wilson Center, 2019). In the same year, the group has been designated as a terrorist organisation by the international community. By 2007, when U.S. troops were in Iraqi territory, the group's activities were kept to a minimum, but since 2011 it has become more active as the security environment in the Middle Eastern region has continued to deteriorate leading to open violent conflicts.

In 2013, the extremist, transnational Sunni group took advantage of tense political situations and launched its fights in Iraq and its government while engaging in fighting in the Syrian Civil War against both the rebels and the government of Bashar Assad. In June 2014, after making significant territorial gains in Iraq, the group proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) led by the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). At its largest, the Islamic State occupied 75% of Syrian territory and 40% of Iraqi territory. One of the main aims of the ISIL is to maintain and extend its power over the territories, which were in the past under the rule of Muslim caliphs, and create the Islamic state, where they would rule according to their strict, verbatim form of the Sharia law.

The success of the extremist religious group aroused international fear of the spread of a radical and extremist interpretation of Islam with the increasing threat of international terrorist attacks and the possibility of radicalization of citizens of other states. So, in 2014, the alliance of Western countries with the leadership of the US started to actively fight by launching a military operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and subsequently in Syria territory. More than 8,000 airstrikes were carried out against strategic Islamic State targets in 2015 under the allies' "Operation Inherent Resolve" military campaign (Wilson Center, 2019). Due to this active military as well as political participation of allies by December 2017, ISIS forfeited 95% of the territory it had occupied in previous years, including Mosul and Ragga. In the same year, Iraq and Syria declared victory over the Islamic State. But small extremist groups belonging to the defeated and collapsed Islamic State were actively operating on their territory until 2019.

In 2015, ISIS spread its influence, international reach, and social network by the establishment of branches of ISIS in foreign countries all around the world. These branches had the main aim to cause fear and panic among the so-called enemies of the Islamic State by the terrorist attacks in the Western countries. Through the radicalization process, the Islamic State recruited more and more members and supporters who left to fight for the Islamic State directly on its territory and to join the newly formed social community of the caliphate. In other words, this ISIS information campaign to support the idea of the Islamic State still attracts a large number of foreigners to Iraq and Syria—including thousands of Westerners—to take part in the group's campaign of violence to help the caliphate grow and defend their faith, which possessed (and still possess in some ways) a threat to the security of the global political system (Counter-Terrorism Guide).

Gender aspects – the roles of women in the Islamic state

In this security environment, the extremist jihadist group the Islamic State progressively implements women to take an active part in the states activity to obtain their ideological or political goals (Spencer, 2016). According to the point of view of the society, which is full of stereotypes about gender roles, the people have tendencies to objectify women as victims of the tools of the patriarch authority, mainly in the term of actively participating in the extremist movements and the perpetration of violence. But in the case of the Islamic state, this point of view is starting to fade, because of the significant role of women in the fight for Islam and the Islamic State. This stereotype about woman's role in the extremist movement is the result of the idea of the dichotomy of the public and private spheres, where the public sphere includes political and militant activities, traditionally considered suitable for men and unsuitable for women and in comparison, women are relegated to private activities, which include managing the household and peripheral social activities that are largely linked to the household (Khelghat-Doost, 2016). But the increasing number of women, who are participating in violent activities, these stereotypes need to be redefined. The push factors for women and for men to join ISIS are similar in many ways. The main motivations of women to participate in ISIS activities are feeling of isolation in the West, the perception that Muslims are attacked and fulfilling the perceived religious duty of helping build the Caliphate, ideals of belonging and romanticisation of life under the ISIS (Eggert, 2015).

One of the most significant roles of women in ISIS is their role as mothers, which have the power to influence and raise the future generation of kids of the extremist jihadi movement. This is also one of the reasons why the Islamic State is actively trying to recruit women - they are a means of increasing the population of the Islamic state. Another reason is that the active participation in the ISIS activity of women arouses the interest of the media. This aspect gives ISIS the attention and gives a space to use the women's role as propaganda to recruit more new members.

The roles of women in jihadist organizations can be categorized into two main types – supportive and active roles. The supportive role means that women take part in logistical and recruitment activities (e.g., delivering messages, intelligence gathering, acting as decoys), on the other hand, the active role means that women participate in executing violent operations (e.g., terrorist attacks, shootings) and are trained in the use of weapons and the making of explosives (Khelghat-Doost, 2016).

Supportive roles

These roles relate to the private sphere with the main aim to take care of the household, husband and children. By assigning this role to women, ISIS sells the honour of performing traditional roles to unwittingly transform women into custodians of cultural, social, and religious values, naturally passing on these concepts to the following generation of the jihadi movement (Spencer, 2016). The Islamic State attaches the significant importance to marriage to as young a girl as possible to keep her immaculate. A role of a wife is expected of a woman that she will ensure the birth of the next generation, which is her divine duty and her main purpose of her existence. The wife is expected she will serve to her husband, to be his mainstay during his jihadi fight and by that become a good, obedient wife. Wives are supposed to remain in the house, hidden, veiled, and understanding and satisfying their husband's need for sexual intimacy (Spencer, 2016). The women play a significant role in terms of recruitment of new members of ISIS and its propaganda on social media. They lure potential members to the prospect of a better life in ISIS, offering escape and salvation from unhappiness. Also, women can represent the state-building roles of ISIS, which includes the work in hospitals or schools.

Active roles

The Islamic State created special roles for women in the field of security and military forces. ISIS misrepresents the Islamic verses in the Quran to justify the participation of women in a violent military operation, deeming that women also have to participate in the fight against nonbelievers and according to this, ISIS released an official statement stating that it is mandatory and necessary for women to perform jihad because the Quran endorses it (Chin et all, 2019).

In 2014 ISIS established a special security force, which is made up of only female fighters, called Al-Khansaa. This force is a de facto women's militia with an authority role, but they are just executors with no right to actively engage in ISIS politics. Al-Khansaa is responsible for keeping Islamic order and morality in the cities of ISIS. Other tasks of this unit include espionage, recruitment supervision and maintaining Sharia law. The members of Al-Khansaa, who are selected mainly from citizens of Middle Eastern states, undergo military and police training for several weeks before starting their missions and they are known for their brutal behaviour towards those who violate the rules and use violent

tactics to stifle dissent (Khelghat-Doost, 2016). In the later stages of ISIS, women from Al-Khansaa were also drafted into the front lines to fight for the Islamic State alongside men and also were tasked with managing camps where kidnapped Yazidis and other so-called enemies of ISIS were imprisoned. Al-Khansaa allegedly hurls verbal abuses and administers physical acts of violence toward the prisoners – often justifying their actions by quoting passages from the Quran (Spencer, 2016). Also, the number of terrorist attacks (mainly suicide bombs) committed by women is on the rise. One of the main reasons why women are such good stealth suicide bombers is that no one suspects them of being capable of such a thing and by that perception of women, they are overlooked as potential assassins.

CONCLUSION

With the emergence of the Islamic State, which was based on the ideology of religious extremism, specifically Islamic extremism, the topic of the role of women in Islamic State society has attracted much attention in academia. Initially, their role in the Islamic State was mainly supportive. They have been portrayed by Islamic ideology as mothers and wives whose only goal from Allah is to ensure the existence of the next generation of the jihadist movement and to take care of their husbands, to be their support in their struggle against the infidels and to satisfy their needs in all aspects.

But over time, as the Islamic State has been pushed into a corner, it has begun to harness the potential of women as active members who are obliged to participate in the struggles for the Islamic State and the defence of Islam. This new role for women has been exploited by ISIS in its promotion and recruitment of new members by attracting media attention. For fighting and maintain Islamic morality, ISIS established a special women's security unit that actively participated in ISIS's violent actions. Furthermore, ISIS exploited the potential of women as suicide bombers, as unexpected and surprising perpetrators of violent acts.

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