

## Female Violent Extremists: Implications for Public Safety

Female violent extremists have demonstrated an interest and participated in filling operational roles through a wide variety of tactics in the Homeland and abroad. Messaging by ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates through online videos, magazines, and social media has most likely played a role in radicalizing,<sup>a</sup> inspiring, and encouraging females to take an operational role in terrorism. There is wide range of gender-tailored implications for the public safety community to consider in the areas of critical thinking, information gathering, and terrorism prevention to help mitigate the threat of female violent extremists.

**SCOPE:** This product provides awareness of female violent extremists and the implications for public safety.

- In January 2018, police arrested an identified female for trying to set multiple fires in occupied buildings at an identified US university after she was unable to travel abroad with the intent to join al-Qa'ida or the Taliban. The female said that she hoped her actions would kill building occupants and that she tried to recruit other female classmates to join identified terrorist organizations.
- In December 2015, an identified female and her spouse carried out a firearms attack at a workplace event in California, resulting in 14 people killed and 22 wounded. The couple fled the scene and were later shot and killed by law enforcement personnel.
- In April 2015, police arrested two identified females in New York on charges of conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction. The females referred to themselves as "citizens of the Islamic State" and watched ISIS messaging videos.



In early 2018, an ISIS video was released online ostensibly depicting women combatants fighting for ISIS in Syria. The video appeared a few months after ISIS granted permission for women to fight alongside men on the battlefield and called women to take up arms and carry out attacks.

<sup>a</sup>Radicalization is the process through which an individual changes from a nonviolent belief system to a belief system that includes the willingness to actively advocate, facilitate, or use unlawful violence as a method to affect societal or political change.



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**NOTICE:** This product was developed by the Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT), which is a collaboration by NCTC, DHS, FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial government personnel to improve information sharing and enhance public safety. The product promotes coordination among intergovernmental authorities and the private sector in identifying, preventing, and responding to foreign terrorist activities in the US. Consider the product within the context of existing laws, authorities, agreements, policies or procedures. For additional information, contact us at [JCAT@NCTC.GOV](mailto:JCAT@NCTC.GOV).

**CRITICAL THINKING:** Law enforcement and security stakeholders are reminded to take into account the evolving roles (from supporting to operational) and the tactics of female violent extremists worldwide and how this dynamic may impact public safety in their area of operation. Western cultural norms and potential assumptions, biases, and mind-sets associated with gender have a tactical appeal to some terrorist groups, which they may seek to exploit. For example, using female operatives with their children or using males dressed as females to conduct an attack are examples of the terrorist perception that women have greater flexibility, raise less suspicion, and enable greater access to attack locations. While only a small percentage of female violent extremists have taken on operational roles in the West, public safety officers and security personnel should remain mindful of the pitfalls of assumptions, biases, and mind-sets that could inhibit, complicate, or prevent following appropriate security protocols and an effective response. Officers should incorporate this knowledge into service training.

**NOTE:** First responders, security stakeholders, and social services personnel, as well as peers, neighbors, and family members, are in a position to identify and report suspicious activity to appropriate authorities for further vetting. Any determination of possible suspicious behavior or indicators should be supported by additional facts that justify reasonable suspicion. Although one activity may seem insignificant on its own, one should look at the indicators under the totality of the circumstances.

- In 2018 and 2019, two identified mothers in Indonesia and Sri Lanka conducted suicide bombings with their children present. The familial nature of these limited but highly publicized attacks may challenge public safety mind-sets and security-screening protocols that often underestimate the threat posed by females.
- From 2014 to 2017, Boko Haram deployed 244 female suicide bombers. For perspective, from 2011 to 2017, Boko Haram deployed 94 male suicide bombers; however, a portion of these male suicide bombers also dressed as women to appear less suspicious to security and to increase their chances of carrying out a successful attack. The use of men dressed as women suggests that the terrorist group is aware of the effectiveness of female suicide bombers.

**INFORMATION GATHERING—INTERVIEW CONSIDERATIONS:** When responding to calls for service or conducting an interview, public safety personnel should account for gender differences as well as cultural sensitivities as they relate to gender. Public safety officers should consider a rapport-based approach, taking culture and faith-based sensitivities under consideration, but these sensitivities should not supersede personal or public safety.

- Ensure that security checks and physical searches are comprehensive, irrespective of gender.
- Be mindful of cultural differences when interviewing or questioning an individual. For example, some female witnesses may be reluctant to speak with a male first responder without another male relative or acquaintance present.
- Attire may prevent or delay the immediate identification of an individual, and a private screening with a first responder of the same gender may be preferred or even required for cultural or religious-based sensitivities.
- As resources dictate, consider using translators of the same gender as the interviewee.



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- Be mindful that eye contact or shaking hands with public safety officers may be frowned upon.
- Accommodate the needs of female suspects who are pregnant or with children, are of limited mobility, or who require support equipment.

## **INFORMATION GATHERING—UNDERCOVER EMPLOYEES AND INFORMANT POOL**

**DIVERSITY:** The reliance on and desire of violent extremists to communicate and express their beliefs, plans, and intentions with like-minded individuals present unique opportunities for public safety authorities. Depending on the circumstances of an investigation, the use of a female undercover employee or informant<sup>b</sup> may be a more natural fit, potentially providing superior placement and access to report credible information to law enforcement, than a male counterpart. This underscores the importance of recruiting and drawing on a pool of female undercover employees and informants.

- In 2018, an identified female instructed an FBI undercover employee, posing as a female online, about how to send money covertly to foreign fighters. A federal grand jury indicted the female subject with trying to provide material support to a terrorist organization and aiding and abetting others.
- In 2016, a female informant for Germany's domestic intelligence agency alerted authorities that an identified female ISIS supporter tried to recruit her and other German women online for the purpose of marrying ISIS fighters in conflict zones so they could be granted permission to enter Germany.

**FEMALE INFLUENCE IN TERRORISM PREVENTION:** A whole-of-government approach to terrorism prevention may be more effective with active participation from influential women within communities, such as female first responders, community leaders, educators, counselors, physicians, or mentors. Gender-specific approaches to terrorism prevention programs and deradicalization can promote awareness of influences and observable behaviors, such as online violent extremist messaging, which may be an indicator of premeditated violent acts.

## **TERRORISM PREVENTION CONSIDERATIONS**

- Promote community-based policing techniques that build relationships within faith-based communities to counter and prevent feelings of exclusion that may cause women to be more susceptible to narratives of terrorist groups.
- Promote education for public safety personnel that highlights emerging trends in community policing, interaction, and engagement.
- Incorporate training for public safety personnel that highlights assumptions, biases, and mind-set pitfalls associated with gender.
- Develop awareness of the reasons why women join terrorist groups to aid in terrorism prevention efforts and rehabilitation and reintegration strategies.

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<sup>b</sup>Using undercover employees or informants should be coordinated with appropriate federal CT authorities for deconfliction and investigative purposes.



- Build and improve substantive relationships among the community, the private sector, and law enforcement to foster trust and facilitate early and frequent information sharing, which is critical for the prevention of terrorism and targeted violence.
- Understand that indicators and behaviors of mobilization toward violence can be the same for all genders.
- Be aware of female-offender support services that may better aid in an offender's transition back into society.

## RESOURCES

- **COMMUNITY-LED ACTION IN RESPONSE TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM (CARVE):** A four-hour Federal Emergency Management Agency–certified, self-paced, online course that addresses the topic, "Radicalization to Violence Awareness."  
<https://www.start.umd.edu/training/community-led-action-response-violent-extremism>
- **COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM TOOLKIT:** Provides an overview of approaches to terrorism prevention, factsheets, training, guidance, best practices, engagement activities, and additional resources. <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/cve-tool-kit>
- **CRIMESOLUTIONS.GOV:** The National Institute of Justice's website uses rigorous research to inform practitioners and policymakers about what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services. The site provides reviews of specific programs and practices that focus on a variety of justice topics and populations, including women and girls.  
<https://www.crimesolutions.gov/>
- **EGUARDIAN:** Developed to help meet the challenges of collecting and sharing terrorism-related activities among law enforcement agencies across various jurisdictions.  
<https://www.fbi.gov/resources/law-enforcement/eguardian>
- **FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS (BOP) FEMALE OFFENDERS:** The BOP provides female offenders with appropriate programs and services to meet the physical, social, and psychological needs of this group.  
[https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody\\_and\\_care/female\\_offenders.jsp](https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/female_offenders.jsp)
- **HVE MOBILIZATION INDICATORS—2019 EDITION (22 January 2019):** The indicators of violent extremist mobilization described herein are observable behaviors that could help determine whether individuals or groups are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities. [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf)
- **NATIONAL DIRECTORY OF PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT:** The National Institute of Corrections, in partnership with the Women's Prison Association, has developed this directory to provide information on programs available in each state that provide guidance and assistance to females involved in the justice system.  
<https://info.nicic.gov/jiwp/>
- **NATIONWIDE SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY REPORTING (SAR) INITIATIVE (NSI):** Provides law enforcement with a tool to help prevent terrorism and other related criminal activity by



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establishing a national capacity for gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing SAR information. <https://www.dhs.gov/nsi>

- **OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION (OJJDP) MODEL PROGRAMS GUIDE (MPG):** Assists practitioners and communities in implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention programs that can make a difference in the lives of children and communities. <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/>
- **PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE VIDEO AND FACTSHEET:** The DHS Soft Targets and Crowded Places website includes information regarding behavioral indicators that assailants often demonstrate before committing a violent act as well as engagement strategies and recommended responses to mitigate an incident.
  - Video: <https://www.dhs.gov/pathway-violence-video>
  - Factsheet: <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/pathway-violence-fact-sheet>
- **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:** For additional information, please see the following products on the Homeland Security Information Network (<https://hsin.dhs.gov/>), the Law Enforcement Enterprise Portal (<https://www.cjis.gov/>), and the Regional Information Sharing System (<https://riss.net>).
  - Case Studies Highlight Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics (9 November 2016)
  - Radicalization Dynamics, A Primer (June 2012)



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## PRODUCT FEEDBACK FORM

(U) JCAT MISSION: To improve information sharing and enhance public safety. In coordination with the FBI and DHS, collaborate with other members of the IC to research, produce, and disseminate counterterrorism (CT) intelligence products for federal, state, local, tribal and territorial government agencies and the private sector. Advocate for the CT intelligence requirements and needs of these partners throughout the IC.

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ADDITIONAL COMMENTS, SUGGESTIONS, OR QUESTIONS. HOW DOES JCAT MAKE PRODUCTS BETTER?

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WHAT TOPICS DO YOU RECOMMEND?

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