NEW TRENDS IN JIHADISM

QUARTERLY RESEARCH REVIEW

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
CSO	Civil society organisations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
EDL	English Defence League
EU	European Union
EU MS	European Union Member State
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
RPG	Role-playing game
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VE	Violent extremism
VEO	Violent extremist offender
VRWE	Violent right-wing extremism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Quarterly Research Review (QRR) investigates the main trends in the recent evolution of jihadism across three levels of analysis: individual, social/organisational, and contextual. Additionally, it considers the cross-cutting importance of gender dynamics. The selected articles cover a wide range of relevant topics, including gender narratives, roles and trajectories in jihadism; the strategies and tools for generating propaganda content; the convergence of different forms of extremism; the radicalisation of adolescents and young people; and the dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation following the collapse of the Islamic State's caliphate.

Key takeaways identified by this review include the following:

- **Interpersonal relationships continue to be crucial in the radicalisation process** for both young individuals (including minors) and lone actors. Contrary to the traditional view that family ties act as protective factors, close family connections often reinforce extremist beliefs. Romantic relationships and extensive peer and adult extremist connections also significantly influence radicalisation. Furthermore, despite lone actors being perceived as isolated, they are actually deeply embedded in radical milieus, maintaining intense, though unstable, social ties that play a critical role in their radicalisation.

- **Mental health issues play a complex role in radicalisation.** For young individuals, mental health problems and deviant behaviour often precede radicalisation, making them more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. However, children from families with links to violent extremism (VE) suffer severe trauma and PTSD from exposure to violence and abuse, profoundly affecting their development and well-being. Lone actors frequently have mental health disorders that, while not direct causes of radicalisation, significantly influence their social interactions and stability within radical networks.

- Despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), **the jihadist movement shows remarkable resilience**. Persistent grievances against the state, anti-government sentiments, perceptions of discrimination, failed integration policies, and the rise of populist parties promoting Islamophobia create fertile ground for jihadist ideologies. Global networks of ISIS activists remain active on encrypted social media platforms, sustaining communication, coordination and recruitment efforts despite territorial losses.

- However, **the collapse of the caliphate weakened the cohesion and operational capabilities** of ISIS, leading to internal conflicts and ideological disagreements over tactics, objectives and leadership, particularly between ISIS and Al-Qaeda (AQ). The loss also disrupted their ability to maintain territorial control, reducing their financial means, as well as their influence and capacity to mobilise large-scale attacks. Furthermore, it **had a demoralising effect on its global base of supporters**, leading some to view the loss as a significant ideological setback and to reassess their involvement.

- **Gender emerges as a critical approach** and analytical tool for understanding the mobilisation of individual women and men to Salafi-Jihadist inspired terrorist groups. Jihadist organisations **exploit patriarchal gender narratives in their propaganda** to advance their **political and military objectives**, which in turn fuels exaggerated masculine identities that favour individuals to engage in violent actions. While jihadi conceptions of femininity were traditionally linked to conservative roles of mothers and wives, **women's roles within ISIS have diversified and adapted strategically to shifting contexts**, with some even assuming operative roles not only in the conflict zone but also in EU MS.

- Since 2018, all EU Member States have consistently prosecuted female jihadist VEOs; however, **sentencing practices vary significantly across countries.** The **cumulative sentencing** strategy employed by some EU MS – which integrates domestic offenses and/or international crimes alongside terrorism charges – helps clarify the complexities surrounding female involvement and results in longer sentences while broadening rehabilitation opportunities. The literature review highlights the necessity of adopting a **gender-specific approach to the prosecution and penal execution of jihadists, as well as to risk assessment and rehabilitation**. This approach is essential for effectively addressing the unique circumstances and needs of both male and female offenders, ensuring responses are tailored to their distinct experiences and roles within extremist movements.

INTRODUCTION

This Quarterly Research Review (QRR) provides a comprehensive summary of the current state of research regarding recent trends and developments in jihadism, with a particular emphasis on the role of women. The objective of this review is to provide policymakers with a selection of the most pertinent publications and key insights related to strategies and narratives developed by Salafi-jihadist ecosystems in the online realm for radicalisation and recruitment purposes, including the existing convergences between violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) and religiously inspired violent extremism, characteristics of relevant actors involved in jihadist activities, and issues of gender. It also examines macro trends currently influencing the jihadi landscape in the European Union (EU) and their potential impact on European security. While the reviewed literature primarily reflects the experiences of European Union Member States (EU MS), it also incorporates comparable perspectives from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA).

This Quarterly Research Review centres on the following subtopics and is structured as follows:

Methodology: this section outlines the research methods, specifically the criteria for the inclusion of publications and limits of the proposed review.

Strategic summary: this section highlights the key takeaways from the literature review.

Selected papers: this section includes 15 one-page reviews of the selected literature as well as key messages regarding each specific topic, organised in four subsections:

1. **Current narratives, strategies and the online sphere:** the first subsection includes papers addressing the use of automated tools in jihadist recruitment and radicalisation processes, content diffusion methods and strategies adopted by Salafi-jihadist ecosystems online – including gamification of violent extremism and humor – as well as existing convergences between VRWE and religiously inspired violent extremism.

2. **Actors:** this section focuses on lone actors who are currently identified by security experts as a primary terrorist threat to western Europe, as well as youth (including minors), who have become one of the main targets of the recruitment strategies employed by jihadist groups following the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. **Macro trends and their impact in the jihadi landscape in the EU:** this section examines socio-contextual trends and their impact on the jihadi landscape within the European Union (EU), emphasising the potential evolution and future trajectories of jihadism as a non-existential but important threat to western democracies. Additionally, it explores the post-caliphate characteristics of EU jihadi contingent and environments, highlighting potential convergences with criminal gangs.

4. **Gender:** this section analyses gender and jihadism focusing on several key themes. It examines masculinities and their roles in radicalisation pathways and engagement in religiously violent extremism, as well as the gendered narratives that permeate jihadi propaganda. Furthermore, the chapter investigates gendered roles within jihadism and analyses the gendered trajectories of disengagement, particularly in relation to the penal justice response in the EU.

Conclusion: this section offers an overview of the key findings derived from a comprehensive analysis of the evidence and insights presented in all the reviewed papers.

METHODOLOGY

To develop this Quarterly Research Review (QRR), the research team first conducted targeted searches in English, French and Spanish to identify literature relevant to the overarching theme of the review, specifically, 'recent trends and developments in jihadism (including the role of jihadist women)'. Subsequently, the authors established the following inclusion criteria for selecting the papers:

- References published since 2021

- Sources that are accessible either as open-source publications through academic journals or as a grey literature publication (i.e. research published outside traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels). An exception to this general criterion is the inclusion of Heckner, M. & Koller, S. (2024), which is published behind a paywall. Given the relevance of the case study and richness of the article for the declared purposes of the QRR, the research team considered its inclusion justified.

- Literature produced and focused on the European Union (EU) context; however, researchers also considered extra-EU papers and experiences when appropriate, either because of the absence of an equivalent text focusing on EU countries, or because of the quality of the selected paper and its potential to inform evidence-based responses to EU MS. The study team had to make two exceptions to uphold quality standards given the scarcity of relevant open-source EU publications on select topics: Cherney, A. *et al*. (2022) and Mendelshon, B. (2024), from Australia and the United States respectively.

- Relevant search terms include: radicalisation and jihadism; gender and Islamist extremism; toxic masculinities and jihad; women and jihad; jihadi online radicalisation and jihad; jihadi lone actors; youth and online radicalisation; youth and Islamist extremism; jihadi strategies of mobilisation; extra-European scenarios and jihad; jihad and far-right; reciprocal radicalisation; and cumulative extremism.

In this framework, researchers identified 15 relevant sources which were subsequently organised into four subsections aimed to highlight the significance of individual (micro), social/organisational (meso), and contextual (macro) levels of analysis, as well as to incorporate a cross-cutting gender perspective: (1) narratives; strategies and the online sphere; (2) actors; (3) macro trends and their impact in the jihadi landscape in the EU; and (4) gender.

In some instances, the selected papers address both violent right-wing and jihadist extremism. However, when the comparison is not pertinent to the objectives of this QRR, the authors have concentrated on findings specific to jihadism, which is the primary focus of this paper. Examples of such cases include Ingram & Campion (2024) and Kingdon (2024).

This review includes a significant range of sources related to the overarching topic of 'recent trends in jihadism (including the role of women)' and the proposed subtopics. However, it is important to note that this is not an exhaustive review, and the authors' limitations should be acknowledged:

- Considering the final audience of the paper, the authors focus on the EU and other comparable western countries' experiences. Therefore, this review does not reflect the whole array of contemporary literature published on the topic and subtopics.

- Some of the topics are more comprehensively covered than others in the literature – for instance the academic literature on the online activities of jihadi activists is significantly more extensive than the one addressing the connections between religiously-inspired VE and masculinity, or the influence of geopolitical developments on the current jihadi landscape in Europe. In addition, most of the academic references

recently published on such topics do not meet the inclusion criteria. Most commonly, the relevant articles are found behind paywalls.

• This work addresses a topic considered sensitive from a security perspective; references based on empirical evidence from primary sources are still limited.

Finally, the overview drew on the findings of the following past RAN PS deliverables in the design of the QRR and they have been considered in the conclusions.

• García-Calvo & Driessen (2024), "The shifting role of women in extremist and terrorist groups: implications for prosecution and rehabilitation", consolidated overview nº8 (Research), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

• Farinelli, F. & Marinone, L. (2023), "Frenemies united: an overview of interlinks between right- and left-wing extremism and politico-religious groups of Sunni and Shia strands", consolidated overview nº4 (Research), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

SELECTED PAPERS

NARRATIVES, STRATEGIES AND THE ONLINE SPHERE

Alrhmoun, A., Winter, C., & Kertész, J. (2023). "Automating Terror: The Role and Impact of Telegram Bots in the Islamic State's Online Ecosystem". Terrorism and Political Violence, 1–16. Available here.

> **KEY MESSAGES:**
> - The resilience of Telegram-based jihadist networks rests on the fact that, despite the short lifespan of most bots, the system remains robust thanks to a delete-recreate cycle, in which bots are recreated with similar usernames, ensuring their continued operation and evasion of detection.
>
> - Telegram bots operate in a core-periphery structure, with admin bots controlling activities and peripheral bots distributing content. This reflects ISIS's decentralised nature, adapting to pressures and sustaining its presence through distinct, complementary roles targeting specific audience segments.

This article aims to explore the **role and impact of Telegram bots within the Islamic State's (ISIS) online ecosystem**. Bots on social media, including but not limited to Telegram, are best understood as automated accounts that execute specific tasks such as publishing, sharing and resharing content. The study uses network science methods to analyse data from 106 bots predominantly posting in Arabic (with significant activity in English and Urdu), identifying bot interactions and activities like content distribution, discussion facilitation and administrative tasks.

The empirical study provides some relevant **clues to understand the resilience and regenerative capacity of networks operating on platforms such as Telegram** serving the objectives of jihadist organisations. Notably, the study found that, despite the short individual lifespans of most Telegram bots – averaging around eighteen days but ranging from one to 213 days – the overall system remains robust. **Bots with longer lifespans likely engage in less explicit activities (i.e., activities other than media distribution), evading detection** and complicating efforts to disrupt their communication networks. Additionally, the weakening of the ISIS community on Telegram is limited by their ability to generate a **removal-recreation cycle, where removed bots are recreated multiple times with similar usernames** (e.g., @UrduNashir_24bot, @UrduNashir_27bot, and @Urdu_nashir28bot, showing successive versions of the account with slight variations in the username), maintaining the network's resilience.

The analysis also showed that the bots operated in a **core-periphery structure**, where core nodes (mainly admin bots) controlled and moderated activities, while peripheral nodes engaged in content distribution. This structure reflects the **broader decentralised nature of ISIS's influence activities**. The distinct roles and evolution of these communities mirror ISIS's **shift from a centralised territorial entity to a decentralised insurgency**, adapting to external pressures and **sustaining its online presence**.

The authors also identify that the efficient and resilient recreation cycle of the ISIS ecosystem is based on the fact that the communities of ISIS supporters on Telegram serve specific purposes, targeting audiences with general commentary on the Islamic State, media materials tailored for local contexts, and facilitating ISIS activities online. Communities engage with the same audience segments but have evolved to serve different yet complementary roles. The study also reveals that these bots are not intelligent but deploy basic scripts to perform simple tasks. Despite their simplicity, they are crucially embedded in ISIS's online network, directly facilitating its survival and content dissemination while counteracting Telegram's disruption efforts.

Mehran, W., Byrne, M., Gibbs-Pearce, E., Macfarlane, A., Minihane, J., & Ranger, A. (2024). "Humour in jihadi rhetoric: comparative analysis of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, TTP, and the Taliban". Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 16(2), 263–284. Available here.

> **KEY MESSAGES:**
> - Jihadi groups such as ISIS, AQ, TTP and the Taliban use humour as a strategic communication tool in their rhetoric to dehumanise enemies, strengthen in-group cohesion and recruit new members.
> - Differences between these groups can be found in the frequency with which they employ humour, the extent to which they use each type, and the purpose with which they employ each type. They share the fact that religion and religious elements are beyond acceptable humour.

This paper explores the use of humour in the rhetoric of four prominent jihadi groups: ISIS, AQ, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Taliban. Specifically, this comparative research analyses how often, in what way and with which purpose each group uses humour. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 82 English-language magazines.

The paper highlights that humour, which is not new in politics, can fulfil multiple roles in the rhetoric of organisations, including VE groups. On one hand, it has an **inclusive function** through its potential to create and strengthen social identities through the projection of common norms and values. On the other hand, humour also has an **exclusive function** by establishing a distinction between those who understand and appreciate the jokes and those who do not. Also, it is a means to reinforce stereotypes about the out-group. The authors highlight an additional function that is particularly relevant to the field of VE: the **use of humour to numb or desensitise its consumers to the use of violence.** This is important for the future of jihadism as a younger generation (Gen-Z[1]) of Salafis have been found to appropriate the aesthetics and language of alt-right online milieus in what has been baptised as 'Islamogram'. They adapt memes and pop-culture content, exposing users to increasingly bold content disguised in humour to draw new generations towards Salafi ideology and identity.

The results of this study confirm that **humour does play an important role in the rhetoric of ISIS, AQ, TTP and the Taliban**, although each group uses this tool with different frequencies. ISIS and AQ were found to use humour more often than the rest. The authors use the following classification of humorous utterances: dehumanising humour, which implies that the targets are sub-human, unworthy of respect and therefore legitimate targets of violence; ironic and sarcastic humour, which primarily unveils and diffuses viewpoints in a clever or subtle way; mocking humour, which is more aggressive than the previous type; and situational humour, which normalises and romanticises jihadi life. **Each jihadi group uses these types of humour, but to different extents**. ISIS, for instance, is the group that more widely uses dehumanising and mocking humour, which mirrors their violent and intolerant stances vis-à-vis out-group members. By contrast, TTP is more likely than the rest to resort to ironic and sarcastic humour, and AQ to situational humour.

Also, the study shows that **each group uses different types of humour to reach the same purposes**. For instance, to build an identity, AQ focuses on group cohesion and shared experiences through situational humour, while ISIS vilifies and dehumanises the enemy to reinforce in-group cohesion. The authors include an example to illustrate the latter from the *Dabiq* magazine: "I found out that she was the wife of the donkey that was coming to me almost every day to rebuke me and to 'teach' me my religion, or so he claimed!"[2]. However, **the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable humour are shared** by all examined groups: religion and religious symbols cannot be mocked.

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[1] Generation Z is the one born in the late 1990s or the early 21st century, perceived as being familiar with the use of digital technology, the internet, and social media from a very young age.

[2] Dabiq Magazine, Issue 10.

Pauwels A. (2023), "Cumulative extremism: behind the scenes of toxic us-versus-them dynamics", *Analysis*, Flemish Peace Institute. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Interactions between (violent) extremist movements or groups shape individual radicalisation pathways, generate spirals of violence, and can foster antagonism among groups in wider society.

- Governments play an important role in shaping in-group and out-group perceptions, potentially leading to increased tensions, or to de-escalation.

Based on a review of academic and grey literature, this report explores **cumulative extremism**, which refers to a process where different forms of extremism interact and reinforce each other, escalating dynamics of reactions and counter-reactions. Drawing on examples in Europe and the United Kingdom (UK), the report analyses narrative tools and third-party influence driving these dynamics, which go beyond tit-for-tat-violence. Cumulative extremism can lead to spirals of violence and fuel radicalisation and polarisation. This **escalating antagonism shapes the evolution of VE movements and groups**, which is why studying them allows for an increased understanding of new trends in jihadism. The report identifies two key elements explaining cumulative extremism dynamics.

One is **the use of 'us-versus-them' narratives**, which are a necessary condition for the phenomenon to take place. Extremist groups and movements distort 'us-*and*-them thinking', which is natural in society, into 'us-*versus*-them' thinking, portraying the in-group at risk and victimised, and the out-group as the threat. The author points to three ways in which these narratives foster cumulative extremism. First, they have an **escalating and perpetuating effect**; perceptions of threat in one movement can lead to mobilisation, which in turn will fuel propaganda around victimhood in the other group. This dynamic was seen in the attempted attack on an English Defence League (EDL) demonstration in 2012, driven by jihadist narratives of a global crusade against Islam. Additionally, 'us-versus-them' narratives **portray the out-group as an existential threat**, aiding recruitment and legitimising the in-group's actions; and they **normalise violence** by presenting it as a necessary, as evidenced by the narrative of inevitable conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The second aspect which, according to the paper, explains cumulative extremism dynamics is **the influence of third-party actors** – the author focuses on the state – in the development of us-versus-them narratives. Public policies can, for instance, foster feelings of stigmatisation, or they may cause suspicion towards minority communities of 'special treatment' or additional burden on public resources, feeding grievances and ultimately extremist narratives. In this regard, the report concludes by providing recommendations to governments:

- **Avoid risk inflation and ensure equal treatment and transparent communication in policies targeted at different VE groups**. Overestimating the threat posed by a VE group and adopting an overly securitised approach can simultaneously increase perceptions of victimhood in the group targeted by the policies, as well as perceptions of danger in the opposed group. It can also stoke narratives about the inevitability of violence. Additionally, inconsistent policy application can fuel perceptions of discrimination and erode the trust in the government of the group's social base. For example, past differing UK policies toward the EDL and Al-Muhajiroun, where the latter was repeatedly banned and EDL faced arrests, fuelled grievances on both sides.

- **Pay attention to the social base or target audience to whom extremist groups address their propaganda, to prevent recruitment and social support of a VE movement.** 'Us-versus-them' narratives can both connect with existing grievances and shape the organic perceptions of the social base.

Kingdon, A. (2024). "Beauty is Power. The Use of Gaming References and Gaming Aesthetics in Extremist Propaganda", in Schlegel, L. and Kowert, R. (2024) Gaming and Extremism. The Radicalization of Digital Playgrounds, (New York: Routledge): 130-147. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:
- Violent extremist groups exploit popular culture, particularly video games, to radicalise and recruit by embedding extremist narratives and visuals into gaming aesthetics.

- Gaming propaganda is effective in evoking emotions, conveying ideas and fostering a sense of community while evading content moderation, making it a powerful tool for extremist recruitment.

This publication is a chapter of a book that employs visual empirical data to illustrate how and why jihadi and far-right groups and movements have incorporated gaming aesthetics and cultural references to their propaganda. To remain within the scope of this QRR, this review will focus solely on jihadi groups.

The paper underlines the importance of visual popular culture for the study of VE groups, as it offers a vast array of visuals and narratives that propagandists use to shape their own messages and evoke emotions. Violent extremist (VE) groups have hijacked western popular culture, including video games, as a recruitment strategy. The study shows that video game aesthetics have become a symbol of a virtual and political culture war, frequently appearing in extremist propaganda to expose specific audiences to violent and radicalising materials. Gaming propaganda is effective due to its ability to **facilitate socialisation, education and the communication of ideas and ideologies, while creating emotions and a transnational cyber-community**. It also easily evades content moderation. Consequently, VE movements and terrorist organisations commonly create and leverage existing video games for recruitment purposes. The paper describes the most notable instances in which these strategies have been used.

Regarding the first one, the author highlights Al Qaeda's first-person shooter video game, *Quest for Bush,* launched in 2006, featuring key figures of the 'war on terror', such as George W. Bush, Tony Blair, or Donald Rumsfeld. Other mentioned examples are videogames produced by the Shia group Hezbollah: *Special Force*, which focused on Israel's withdrawal of Southern Lebanon, and *Holy Defense*. The latter constitutes the group's most valuable videogame, as it re-enacts key battles in Syria and Lebanon, legitimises the group's intervention in the Syrian civil war and ultimately aims to push young people to 'join the cause'. Newly created games are effective for propaganda purposes because of their capacity to normalise weapons and terror, transforming them into something fashionable.

The author also shows that VE and terrorist groups have also used existing games to sanitise and normalise violence among young men they wish to recruit. For instance, ISIS propaganda has often included gameplay footages from videogames such as *Syrian Warfare*, *What Kind of Arab Would I Be If I Didn't Have an RPG*[3], *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto V* in its propaganda – particularly people being killed by suicide bombers, vehicle ramming attacks and the use of rocket-propelled grenades or other uncomplicated but powerful explosives. These games have also been manipulated to create characters resembling ISIS militants, depicting scenes that feature the Islamic State flag, as well as recreating violent scenes including executions, suicide bombings and plane hijackings. ISIS combines these images and modified games with calls for players to join 'the real games' by taking part in jihad.

The author concludes with a call for further research focusing on visual evidence and how imagery shapes popular opinion and the social perception of extremism and radicalisation.

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[3] RPG is the acronym for "role-playing game".

ACTORS

Malthaner, S., O'Connor, F. and Lindekilde, L. (2023) "Scattered Attacks: The Collective Dynamics of Lone-Actor Terrorism", Perspectives on Politics, 2023, 1–18. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:
- Most radicalisation pathways of lone-actors involve intense social ties to other radicals but follow complex, discontinuous and conflictive trajectories, often evolving on the network's periphery.

- Lone-actor violence should be viewed as a collective phenomenon, occurring in clusters due to parallel responses to events, diffusion of tactics across movements and interactive coordination.

This article draws attention to the social embeddedness of terrorist lone-actor radicalisation and the collective dynamic of lone-actor attacks, moving beyond simply noting that lone-actors are 'not that alone'. Specifically, the study examines how **lone actors are connected to radical movements, despite their often unstable and conflicting relationships**, and sees their **attacks as parts of broader, interconnected waves of decentralised violence**. The authors draw on empirical data, including the Lone Actor Radicalisation and Terrorism (LART) dataset, which includes more than 300 events of violence by lone actors, covering the majority of known instances of lone-actor terrorism in Europe and North America between 1991 and 2021, as well as a number of in-depth case studies.

The study's findings reveal that lone-actor radicalisation pathways are socially embedded in radical milieus, networks and personal relationships. Radicalisation is driven by interactions within or on the margins of online and offline settings, facilitated by the structures and legitimising discourses of radical milieus. **Most pathways involve intense social ties to other radicals but follow complex, discontinuous and conflictive trajectories**, often evolving on the periphery of radical networks. The study identifies several subtypes of lone-actors: some were once part of radical groups but left or were expelled, others remain on the margins or withdraw after conflicts, and some act autonomously despite being integrated into movements. Additionally, subtypes include passive individuals who refrain from active involvement, antisocial actors marginalised due to poor social skills, volatile actors who alternate between engagement and withdrawal, and those who act alone due to distrust of their peers or to protect the movement by taking individual responsibility for violence.

The authors also emphasise the need to view **lone-actor violence as a collective phenomenon,** noting that these attacks are rarely isolated incidents but often occur in clusters or 'waves' as part of broader episodes of violent mobilisation. They suggest **three complementary approaches to theorise these processes and their temporal and interactive dynamics**. First, the **clustering of attacks** in time and space can be understood as **'parallel responses'** by disconnected individuals to specific events or changes in their political and sociocultural environment. Second, episodes of lone-actor violence can be analysed by focusing on **'processes of diffusion'**, where **tactics and ideas are transmitted across movements** and societies, leading to the spread of particular violent practices. Finally, a third approach examines patterns of **'interactive coordination'**, where autonomous perpetrators exhibit **'microstrategic agency'** by **linking their actions to prior attacks** and broader movements, thereby collectively constructing an interconnected violent campaign.

The study's typology clarifies the **role of personality traits or mental disorders**, not as direct causes of radicalisation or violence, but as factors shaping how perpetrators form and maintain different types of relationships with their social environment. Additionally, the study highlights that **certain movements and local milieus are more likely to produce lone actors**. The vast majority of lone-actor attacks occur within jihadist and right-wing movements, as well as single-issue movements like anti-abortion, but are rare in left-wing militant activism or separatist movements.

Cherney, A. et al. (2022) "Understanding youth radicalisation: an analysis of Australian data", Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, 14(2), 97–119. DOI: 10.1080/19434472.2020.1819372. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Radicalisation among Australian youth was linked to social dislocation, active social media engagement, exposure to radicalised networks, personal grievances, and triggering events, with higher mental health issues and deviant conduct compared to US and Europe.

- Contrary to protective family ties, many radicalised youths had close familial relationships that reinforced extremism. Romantic relationships and extensive connections to peer and adult extremists also played significant roles in their radicalisation.

This study focuses on understanding youth radicalisation in Australia by analysing 33 cases of individuals aged 19 and below who have been radicalised to violent extremism. The research draws on the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) dataset, which includes data from open sources on individuals who have radicalised in the country. The majority of the participants are male, with only three females in the sample. The average age is 17 years, with the youngest being 14 years old. In terms of ideological affiliation, 31 of the cases identified as Islamist, while the remaining two were associated with white supremacist and other unique issues. Most participants did not complete secondary education. The authors utilise criminological theories, specifically social control, social learning and strain theory to inform their analysis.

The analysis revealed that radicalisation to violent extremism among the youth in the sample was associated with **several key factors: social dislocation (e.g. educational disengagement or failure), active engagement with online social media, exposure to other radicalised networks and associates, personal grievances, and triggering events**. Notably, compared to previous studies in the US and Europe, the Australian youth sample exhibited a higher prevalence of mental health issues and deviant conduct.

In contrast to the protective role of family ties suggested by academic literature, the study found that **many radicalised youths maintained close relationships with their families**, which sometimes reinforced extremist beliefs rather than challenging them. Additionally, the presence of romantic relationships, with over one-third of the subjects married despite their youth, highlights how committed relationships can play an active role in the radicalisation process. The study also emphasised the **extensive connections to other extremists**. Many youths were part of tight-knit cliques that reinforced extremist behaviours and beliefs through peer influence and group dynamics. Additionally, interactions with adult recruiters, who leveraged their authority and charisma, played a crucial role in drawing young individuals into extremist networks.

Additionally, the study revealed the **significant role of online social media in radicalisation**, with 76.2% of the sample actively engaging with extremist content on platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X) and YouTube. This engagement facilitated the spread of radical ideologies and recruitment into extremist networks, emphasising the substantial impact of digital platforms. Additionally, 88.9% of the youth experienced significant triggering events, such as geopolitical conflicts or personal grievances like discrimination and family disruptions, which intensified their radical beliefs and emotional responses.

Cook, J. and Schneider L. (2024) "The life of children in families affiliated with terrorism: an ecological systems theory approach", Critical Studies in Terrorism, DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2024.2322563. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Parents' involvement in ISIS produces diverse impacts on children at multiple levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem.

- Findings highlight trauma and abuse at the micro level, deteriorating family relationships at the meso level, and societal stigma at the exo level, affecting children's wellbeing and development.

The article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the **impact on children in families linked to terrorism**, using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The study specifically examines the multifaceted effects on children's lives beyond a security-oriented perspective, focusing on their overall wellbeing. The research uses a qualitative case study approach of an American family who travelled to Syria in 2015 and joined ISIS until 2018, analysing open-source data from various media and government sources. The EST framework, which includes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels, guides the analysis.

At the micro level, the **children's environment changed drastically, experiencing trauma, including physical and psychological abuse and radicalisation through propaganda**, as their day-to-day interactions shifted from family members to ISIS fighters and enslaved persons. They witnessed their father's death, who had become increasingly abusive, and were exposed to severe family violence. Following extradition to the US, the mother was incarcerated and the children were placed in the care of child protective services and, subsequently, various family members. **Although in a safer environment, signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were observed**, reflecting extensive exposure to violence in Syria.

At the meso level, **interactions among family members and their relationships with the external environment significantly impacted the children**. In Syria, the relationship between the mother and her husband deteriorated due to his physical abuse and deceit. The family's move to Syria severed relationships with extended family in the US. After extradition, the mother's court case and PTSD treatment attracted media attention. Child protective services worked to arrange living situations, with family structures appearing as a protective factor for the children. The family faced public scrutiny and stigmatisation due to the high-profile nature of the mother's case.

At the exo level, **the children were indirectly impacted by broader social and economic networks of their parents**. In Syria, forced participation in ISIS propaganda videos gained international media attention, associating the children directly with ISIS. The mother experienced torture and rape during her imprisonment by ISIS, facilitated by her husband's connections. Following extradition, the mother's imprisonment for supporting terrorism and the father's terrorist status led to social stigma. **Public attitudes towards ISIS-affiliated child returnees are softening, though they remain seen as potential threats**.

At the macro-level, **societal and political dynamics – including increasing legal, political and military responses to ISIS – influenced the family and children**, impacting their repatriation and public perception. The children's experiences were shaped by age and gender, with older siblings having more interactions with non-extremist family members, easing their reintegration. **The chronosystem highlights significant life events, such as moving to Syria, a parent's death and repatriation, cumulatively affecting personal development**.

MACRO-TRENDS AND THEIR IMPACT IN THE JIHADI LANDSCAPE IN THE EU

Mendelsohn, B. (2024) "On the Horizon: The Future of the Jihadi Movement", CTC Sentinel, 17: (3). Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:
- The jihadi movement constitutes a viable resistance ideology due to persistent anti-government grievances and the capacity to inflict harm with low-tech and less ambitious modus operandi.

- The movement is adapting to its circumstances, shifting their focus from global jihad to regional and local efforts.

Drawing on a revision of the literature, official documents and press articles, this publication analyses the current state and future perspectives of the global Sunni jihadi movement. The author notes that the map of actors that make up global jihadism is marked by its diversity: established local, regional and transnational groups, as well as independent radical scholars, unaffiliated foreign fighters, cell-sized small leaderless groups, online sympathizers and lone wolves. At a transnational level, the author observes two diverging trends.

On one hand, the central leadership of both AQ and the ISIS is in decline and their global ambitions have seen themselves thwarted: ISIS has lost its territorial possessions and since then has had a series of short-lived leaders; and AQ has not regained stability since the loss of its leader Al-Zawahiri in 2022. Beyond the fact that, as non-state actors, they have considerably **inferior resources and capabilities than States, the author argues that their strategies have proven ineffective.** AQ's focus on the US as the prime enemy grew less attractive over time. In the case of ISIS, its highest point of success – the establishment of the so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2014 – was short-lived and ultimately limited, as the group's leaders were unable to force unity on all jihadis and more generally appeal to Muslim masses in their efforts to unite the ummah under an Islamic State. This desired shift from an international state-based order to a religiously-based order is challenging because of **nationalistic or sub-national (e.g. ethnic) elements of the average believer's identity**. Additionally, **intra-jihadi disagreements** have prevented collaboration and have also produced violent conflict, particularly after the advent of the ISIS, who claimed authority over all jihadi groups and did not tolerate ideological diversity.

In spite of the above, the paper argues that **global jihadism remains a viable resistance movement due to persistent grievances against the state and the movements ever-evolving ability to hurt**. Firstly, **anti-government sentiments** – which the author places at the origin of the jihadi movement – remain widespread both in Muslim-majority and western countries. In the latter, perceptions of discrimination framed through the lens of religion may increase the attraction that jihadi groups exert over some Muslims. Failed integration policies, populist parties promoting Islamophobia and jihadi entrepreneurs who channel grievances in religious terms can foster hostility against state institutions, potentially leading to violence. The author also notes that the effects of specific events, such government's reactions to **the ongoing war in Gaza**, may constitute a driver for recruitment and violent action by lone wolfs. Secondly, although Jihadi actors have not been able to repeat a strike like 9/11, they still have a **significant ability to hurt**. Technological advances have allowed governments to limit it, but low-tech strategies and unsophisticated attacks by small cells or lone actors are increasingly common.

The author concludes that the threat in Europe and the US is 'real but small' and that the path forward, particularly in the global south, involves more modest strategies with a regional focus. The decline of transnational jihadi groups should not lead western states to reduce their attention to the jihadi threat; policymakers should use the current low-tide moment of the global jihadi movement to refine its counterstrategies and **prepare for a potential resurgence**.

Nilsson, M. and Esholdt H.F., (2022), "After the Caliphate: Changing Mobilization in the Swedish Salafi-Jihadist Environment following the Fall of ISIS", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:
- The Salafi-jihadist environment faces challenges in recruiting new members, and its capacity for violence within the domestic context is lower than that of criminal gangs.

- While small segments of the environment may be integrated into non-violent Salafist groups, many remaining members continue to maintain connections with a global network of ISIS activists.

The paper examines informants' observations and perceptions regarding trends in mobilisation within the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment following the fall of ISIS in 2019. The authors conducted **10 interviews with adult men who have either been members of the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment or have social ties to it, including returnees and former jihadist recruiter**. The interviews were **analysed thematically** to identify how jihadis are trying to recruit new members, retain existing ones and maintain support from other radicals who may not be active participants in the Salafi-jihadist scene. The authors note that some findings may be more generalised than others, highlighting possible local variations in the experiences of Salafi-jihadist environments in the west. In this context, **five distinct themes emerged** from the interviews:

1. Competition from criminal gangs: the decline of ISIS's influence has weakened the recruitment appeal of jihadist groups allowing gangs to capitalise on this void by providing a platform for disaffected individuals to express their frustrations, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. This has resulted in individuals oscillating between jihadist and gang affiliations in their pursuit of purpose and recognition.

2. Increasing fuzziness of the environment: Salafi-jihadist groups have migrated to less visible platforms, leading to uncertainty over who aligns with militant ideologies. This ambiguity has encouraged a shift toward non-violent Salafist groups which now absorb former members of violent organisations, which raises questions about the mobilisation potential of non-violent Salafist groups. Meanwhile, many remaining members continue to be linked to a global network of ISIS activists, which sustains the risk of attacks in the west.

3. Limited ability of external events to mobilise members: the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2022, has had minimal impact on the mobilisation capacity of the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment. While the takeover demonstrated the feasibility of establishing an Islamic governance system, ISIS's disavowal of the Taliban and the latter's lack of need for foreign fighters reduced its appeal for young men seeking new identities.

4. Variation in the ease of leaving the Salafi-jihadist environment: the difficulty of exiting the Salafi-jihadist community significantly affects the retention of old members. The strong sense of brotherhood and social pressure can create barriers to leaving, with some members facing potential threats against their personal security.

5. Lack of new heroic mobilisation narratives: young men today are increasingly influenced by the intersection of rap culture and jihadist consciousness, where traditional Islamist ideals may become overshadowed by gang violence and criminal behaviours. This trend emphasises the ongoing challenges in maintaining recruitment and the retention of members in the Salafi-jihadist environment.

The prospects for the Swedish Salafi-jihadist environment are grim despite a strong presence of supporters on encrypted social media platforms. The push factors resulting from socioeconomic situations remain constant, but changes in pull factors indicate challenging mobilisation dynamics, with some experts predicting a **potential shift towards cyber warfare and online disruption as future avenues for jihadist activities.**

KEY MESSAGES:
- Most supporters respond to ISIS territorial setbacks with belief reaffirmation, by interpreting territorial losses as divine tests, maintaining support activities, and emphasising global support while trivialising setbacks.

- A minority distances itself from ISIS, questioning the jihad's effectiveness, disillusioned by personal and organisational issues, seeking stability, and withdrawing from extremist activities.

The article investigates how jihadi supporters respond to the territorial decline of ISIS. The study focuses on sympathisers of this organisation in Belgium and the Netherlands, examining their reactions and adaptations to ISIS's military defeats. Using cognitive dissonance theory (CDT), the study aims to understand **how these supporters re-negotiate their beliefs and commitments when confronted with the collapse of ISIS's caliphate**. The research is based on empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews and electronic conversations with 12 Belgian and Dutch jihadi supporters who did not engage in jihadist activities, but who have been involved in supportive milieus sharing ISIS's frame of reference.

The study reveals **two primary responses to territorial setbacks among supporters: belief reaffirmation and disengagement**. **Belief reaffirmation** is a form of cognitive resistance where individuals reinterpret reality to conform to their belief system. This dissonance-reducing process is grounded in the wider context of their faith, for the idea of being tested by hardship, suffering and tribulation is an inherent aspect of Islamic belief; the more one suffers, the stronger one is in the eyes of God. Thus, this strategy is **more likely to occur when individuals place high importance on the beliefs or thoughts under threat**. In this regard, most **participants reaffirmed their commitment to ISIS by reinterpreting the significance of territorial losses, ascribing divine meaning to setbacks** and maintaining support activities. They viewed the defeat as a minor setback or a test of faith, often trivialising the loss of the caliphate while emphasising ISIS's global support and local victories. These individuals continued to engage in moral and financial support, proselytism and propaganda efforts, framing their actions as more beneficial to the jihadi cause than direct involvement in the armed struggle.

Conversely, **a minority of participants distanced itself from ISIS, perceiving the defeat as a significant ideological setback**. These individuals **questioned the effectiveness of armed jihad and reassessed their involvement due to personal and organisational disillusionment, prosecution and changing priorities**. They highlighted discrepancies between their values and ISIS's methods, such as the killing of Sunni Muslims and the orchestration of attacks in the west, as well as clashes within the movement itself, particularly between ISIS and Al Qaeda. This group experienced a shift in priorities, often driven by personal factors such as parenthood, incarceration and a desire for stability, leading them to withdraw from extremist activities and seek more conventional forms of social involvement.

The study highlights the importance of **considering individual psychological and social factors when examining the adaptive responses** of jihadi supporters to ISIS's territorial decline. It reveals that personal circumstances, such as family responsibilities, social relationships and legal pressures, significantly influence whether individuals reaffirm their commitment or disengage from extremist activities. The findings emphasise that **adaptive responses are not uniform but vary widely based on the supporters' levels of cognitive dissonance, emotional resilience, and the extent of their integration into radical milieus**.

GENDER

Ingram, K. M., & Campion, K. (2024). "Of Heroes and Mothers: Locating Gender in Ideological Narratives of Salafi-Jihadist and Extreme Right Propaganda". Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 1–27. Available here.

> **KEY MESSAGES:**
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> - Gender ideologies offer audiences a more local and personalised frame through which to view and understand themselves and their place within the world. Gender can play a strategic role in propaganda by motivating audiences to perform and fulfil the specific gendered expectations of violent extremism contingent upon ideology, strategic conditions and socio-political objectives.

This paper analyses **how and why gender ideology is constructed in Salafi-jihadi and extreme right propaganda to engage and appeal to target audiences.** The purpose is to **clarify** some **existing assumptions** about the gender and extremism discourse in relation to women's political agency, their strategic political-military value and their attraction to extremist movements with a strong misogynist and hyper-masculine character. The authors apply **discourse analysis to four case studies**: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine, ISIS's *Dabiq* magazine, James Mason's *Siege* and Anders Breivik's *2083: A European Declaration of Independence,* for the extreme right. Since this paper focuses on jihadism, we will omit findings on the far right also due to space constraints.

Propaganda aims to shape perceptions and mobilise the support of a target audience by deploying rational-choice and identity-choice messaging. Drawing on the 'linkage' approach the authors analysed how this is achieved by constructing a **'competitive system of meaning'** that creates a dichotomised perception of the world by **championing an in-group as bearers of solutions** while **condemning an out-group as creators of crises.** Perceptions of crisis tend to be characterised by uncertainty, the breaking of tradition and the influence of the 'other' (members of the out-group), which can motivate individuals to engage in 'uncertainty-reduction' behaviour that re-establishes security and stability through an in-group identification.

The paper argues that both Salafi-jihadist and extreme right propaganda construct their respective 'competitive systems of meaning' by creating **five categories of gendered narratives** that are purposefully designed to persuade audiences in the west to conform to gender representations within their respective in-groups to align their own gender identity with them: (1) narratives that **link a corrupt gender order to the breakdown of historical tradition by the out-group**, considering this corrupt gender order foundational to crises; (2) narratives that **legitimise the in-group** by associating the reinstatement of a historically traditional gender order with the in-group and its **solutions**; (3) narratives that **break down collective in-group and out-group identities** into individual gender identities, or **'gender representations';** (4) narratives that **justify in-group action** by portraying local gendered crises caused by the out-group; and (5) narratives that **juxtapose femininities and masculinities to either shame or empower audiences into action.**

The authors' findings demonstrate that Salafi-jihadist propaganda symbiotically manipulates the five gendered narratives to increase the appeal and resonance of their competitive systems of meaning and strategically construct a gender order that is foundational to achieving its politico-military ends. More precisely, *Inspire* constructs a gender order that motivates men to wage individual jihad globally to save themselves, victimised women and the transnational *ummah*, while *Dabiq's* gender order is characterised by a diverse range of in-group female and male representations whose roles are portrayed as equally as important in establishing and maintaining the functions for a governing polity. The use of the father/brother/husband in conjunction with mother/sister/wife representations demonstrated that supporters are not just joining ISIS to fight, but to live.

Nilsson, M., (2024), "Jihad and Heroic Hypermasculinity–Recruitment Strategies, Battlefield Experiences, and Returning Home". Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 1-18. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Young males, particularly from socio-economically vulnerable communities, who are critical of the feminist ideas and gender equality of western societies, and perhaps even associate them with their own experience of masculine failure, can find jihadist groups and the heroic hypermasculinity they construct appealing.

- Male jihadist returnees from Syria face significant challenges. Many wrestle with the loss of identity and purpose and they may not automatically re-experience failed masculinity, but as time passes, they risk feeling meaningless and emasculated, which leads some to seek a sense of belonging in gangs.

This paper aims to investigate **the role of masculinity concepts in the various phases of the jihadi mobilisation cycle among Swedish foreign fighters, with a particular focus on 'heroic jihadist hypermasculinity'.** This form of hegemonic masculinity exaggerates stereotypical male behaviours, including violence and aggression, and serves as a framework for understanding how these notions influence particularly recruitment, participation in jihad and the return to civilian life.

Employing a qualitative empirical approach, the **study is grounded in data collected from seven semi-structured interviews; six with Swedish jihadists and one with a former jihadist recruiter.** The data were analysed thematically to uncover patterns and insights representative of the contexts in which these individuals operate. In this context the author identified **five relevant topics of interest for the analysis**: (1) the relation between **recruitment strategies and masculinity**; (2) from **masculine failure** to protecting sisters in faith; (3) the relation between **jihad and gangs**; (4) the construction of the **'warrior ideal'**; and (5) **jihad, patriarchy and brotherhood**.

The findings indicate that **heroic jihadist hypermasculinity is a significant driving force within the jihadist framework**, particularly in socio-economically vulnerable communities, where young men often lack positive male role models, leading to the adoption of 'risky adult masculinities'. Recruitment strategies leverage notions of masculinity, promoting jihad as an exciting adventure or a means of achieving access to women, particularly for those with previous feelings of failure in traditional masculine roles. In this regard, one prominent narrative among western jihadists centres around the duty of Muslim men to protect their brothers but particularly their sisters in faith, viewed through a patriarchal lens that frames women predominantly as victims, placing them in a situation of inferiority with respect to men who have the obligation to protect them. This perception sharply contrasts with western societal feminist and egalitarian values, enhancing its appeal to male recruits. The 'warrior ideal' extends this notion further by emphasising freedom and violence and encouraging a strong sense of brotherhood and emotional bonding among fighters, which reinforces hypermasculine identities and a sense of purpose amid perceived societal failures.

However, the study also notes **significant challenges faced by jihadists returning home after the collapse of the ISIS caliphate**. Many wrestles with the loss of identity and purpose, leading some to seek a sense of belonging in **gangs** which, while offering excitement and an outlet for hypermasculinity, do not provide the same sense of heroic identity as jihad did. This underscores the **complexities of identity reconstruction** following jihad.

Finally, the paper emphasises the **need for future research to explore how differing backgrounds and social contexts shape expressions of masculinity among jihadists**, particularly as they navigate the challenges of reintegration into society. The findings highlight the **importance of adapting narratives and strategies to foster resilience and reestablish identity** for males transitioning from the battlefield back to ordinary life.

Mehra T., Renard, T., & M. Herbach (Eds.), (2024,) "Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Press. Pp 124-143. Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:

- Prosecuting females for mere membership offences does not reflect the entire range of activities female VEOS were engaged in in Syria and Iraq. Cumulative prosecuting results in a more accurate picture of of female involvement in jihadist activities and can lead to longer sentences.

- Personal circumstances, including gender-specific ones like motherhood or sexual abuse, are considering by judges at the time of sentencing female VEOs. The types and length of sentences differ between the four countries analysed.

This research analyses on a comparative basis the criminal justice management of women sentenced of jihadism-related offenses in **Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands between 2012 and 2023**. The study draws on **277 cases of female violent extremist offenders (VEOs)**, including those who joined or attempted to join jihadist organisations abroad and those prosecuted at home. Data collection included **69 interviews** with relevant stakeholders, experts and practitioners from the selected countries in the fields of prosecution, prison administration, rehabilitation and reintegration. Since the most novel aspect is the systematic approach to prosecution and sentencing of female VEOs, this review focus on these topics.

The systematic prosecution of female VEOs linked to jihadism began in **2018 when perceptions of females as potential threats became tangible[4]**. This shift was facilitated by **new terrorist offenses and expanded legal definitions** that **enhanced EU Member States' prosecution capabilities**. Additionally, international mechanisms and tools such as **structural investigations**, the **IIIM[5], UNITAD[6]** and **Operation Gallant Phoenix,** along with the proliferation of **civil society organisations (CSOs)** committed to advancing accountability for international crimes, and have improved **evidence collection** from conflict zones, strengthening national prosecutions' ability to hold female VEOs accountable.

The data obtained show that sentencing practices for VEOs vary significantly among countries, affecting sentence lengths. First, some countries now **cumulatively charge** female VEOs with broader crimes in addition to terrorism offenses, **including domestic offenses** like child neglect and **core international crimes** such as war crimes. These can lead to **longer sentences**. All women in the dataset faced terrorism charges. Germany had the highest rate of additional domestic charges at 75%. Netherlands and Germany also charged female VEOs with international crimes. Second, courts consider both **mitigating and aggravating** factors when sentencing female VEOs. Common factors include remorse, severity of the crimes, individual gender specific circumstances like **motherhood,** and **mental health**. As a result, including cases tried in absentia, France imposed the longest average sentences, while the Netherlands had the highest imprisonment rates despite shorter average sentences. Finally, **acquittal rates** for women are low across Europe, at 6.4%, with female returnees facing an even lower rate of 5.2% compared to 9% for those who did not travel to conflict zones.

Authors encourage conducting structural investigations for complex crimes and relying more on cumulative charging. Also, EU Member States should invest in expanding capacity and expertise to prosecute core international crimes and enhance agency cooperation at both national and international levels. These recommendations are also useful for similar male VEOs.

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[4] See Heckner, M. & Koller, S. (2024).

[5] International Law committed in the Syran Arab Republic since March 2011.

[6] Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da´esh/ISIL.

Hecker M., Koller S. (2024), "Les femmes sont-elles des djihadistes comme les autres?",Esprit, 2024/3, Available here.

> **KEY MESSAGES:**
> - The proportion of female VEOs in France has risen significantly, placing new demands on prison management and rehabilitation.
> - Risk assessment, prison management and rehabilitation efforts in France need to be gender-specific.

This article examines the shift in the perception of jihadi women in France regarding their contributions to ISIS and subsequent changes in approaches to their prosecution, management in prison and rehabilitation. The paper is based on a review of academic literature, semi-structured interviews with female VEOs and practitioners, and an analysis of over 90 judgments of women convicted for terrorist offenses.

Jihadi women traditionally serve as spouses and mothers. While non-violent, the authors stress that **these functions are vital for nurturing future generations and reinforcing the ideological and social structure of the caliphate**. Women's roles in ISIS-held territory further extended to recruitment, education, healthcare and defensive jihad. In France, the perception of female jihadis evolved due to some women's positive reactions to the 2015 Paris attacks, support for male operatives, increasing online glorification of violence, and the foiled Notre Dame attack planned by women in 2016. Initially viewed as merely the wives of jihadi men, they are now seen as jihadis themselves, leading to new approaches in prosecution, prison management and rehabilitation.

Since 2016, the **legal concept of 'association de malfaiteurs[7]' encompasses not only those directly involved in violent action, but also those who provide operative or logistical support**, including women who take care of their jihadi spouses. This broader interpretation has facilitated the direct placement in pre-trial detention and prosecution of women returning from Syria and Iraq, often resulting in their separation from their children. Convictions in France vary, with some women charged for recruiting others, for involvement in the Al-Khansa Brigades[8], or for their roles as mothers and wives. The article shows that France has applied international crime statutes less frequently and tends to impose stricter sentences, compared to other EU member states.

The surge in female convictions has challenged the French prison system. Although jihadi inmate numbers decreased, the proportion of female VEOs rose from 10% in 2017 to 25% in 2023. All jihadi VEOs, including women since 2021-2022, undergo multidisciplinary risk assessments (tailored to the individual, not to gender considerations) to determine their prison treatment and eligibility for disengagement programs. These programs, housed in radicalisation management units, involve psychologists, educators and religious mediators. Currently, only one such unit accommodates women, with adaptations being made to allow for the presence of inmates' babies, and a second unit is anticipated.

The wave of jihadi VEO releases since 2015 led to a recidivism prevention program, initially treating 12 men and 10 women. This program, eventually named PAIRS, is now implemented by Groupe SOS, offering support from psychologists, educators and religious mediators. Over the past four years, 154 individuals (including 70 women) have participated. Interventions are tailored to individuals, though some issues like sexual violence, the veil and motherhood require a gendered approach. The authors stress the **need to mainstream gender in risk assessment and rehabilitation efforts** and advocate for more attention to deradicalisation efforts despite its controversial aspects, such as the right to freedom of religion.

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[7] French for "criminal association".

[8] Created in 2014 in Raqqa, the Al-Khansa Brigades was an all-female morality police that sanctioned women for not following the rules of the Caliphate, also with corporal punishments.

Gómez, Á., Chiclana, S., Chinchilla, J., Blanco, L., Alba, B., Bautista, H., & Pozuelo-Rubio, F. (2022). "El espejismo de la yihad: el desencanto como camino para la desvinculación de las mujeres yihadistas. Un estudio de caso sobre la radicalización en las cárceles españolas". Available here.

KEY MESSAGES:
- The study empirically supports the need to include a gender perspective in penal execution, particularly regarding the development of treatment programs and risk assessment tools, as well as the choice of the penitentiary regime applied to jihadists.

- The evidence highlights the importance of considering a 'mental time-travel' perspective when evaluating the role of key factors for radicalisation and disengagement, such as fusion with significant groups and values.

This is a **quasi-experimental**, **multi-method study conducted within prison environments**. It involved the analysis of **primary data** obtained through **qualitative and quantitative** techniques from a **sample of 23 Muslim women incarcerated** in **six Spanish prisons**. The aim of the paper is to understand the underlying mechanisms that motivate the radicalisation of female jihadists and their potential disengagement. To this end, participants were divided into two sub-samples: the first included **12** cases of **women convicted of jihadist terrorism-related activities**, and a **control group** consisting of **11 women** with a similar socio-demographic profile but **convicted of non-terrorism-related offenses**. In the first phase of the research, the authors conducted **life history interviews** as a method to study identity and personality. In the second phase, data were collected through **questionnaires** on **variables associated** with: (1) **individual factors related to personal identity,** self-esteem and the search for meaning; (2) variables related to **group processes tied to social identity,** group resilience and group cohesion; and (3) the **identity fusion** with religion and Muslims in the past, present and future.

Following the author´s findings, **key factors facilitating the radicalisation** of jihadist women include experiences of rejection and exclusion due to their Muslim identity, as well as the perception that others dehumanise them. Additionally, losing key family ties can lead to feelings of isolation and motivate the search for radical groups online, which fosters a romanticised view of jihad and the female participation, as well as an increased interest in religion that may result in mobilisation towards these jihadi terrorist groups.

Regarding **disengagement**, the study corroborates some findings from previous research but **advances the agenda by identifying two novel key considerations**.

(1) The **role of disenchantment** as a potential reason for disengagement: jihadist females demonstrated lower self-esteem compared to the control group, as their personal aspirations were not fulfilled and they did not gain the respect of group members as they had hoped. This feeling could be exacerbated by abuse suffered within the group and social stigma associated with their militancy.

(2) The **need for a comprehensive perspective that encompasses time** when studying disengagement, through individuals' **'mental journey'.** This involves investigating how women perceive the mutually influential network between their present, recalled past and possible imagined futures. The study revealed that the **level of fusion** experienced by jihadist women with Muslims and religion d**iminished from the past to the present**, and they perceived this reduction as sustained into the future. **This is an encouraging outcome** since fusion is one of the high-risk factors for radicalisation and potential factor for disengagement; the authors consider that this finding reinforces the thesis of the disenchantment of jihadi women.

Finally, while this study does not provide clear evidence to answer the question of what the **preferable prison regime for jihadists** is, the authors argue that it is **desirable to treat women as a separate category from their male counterparts** because they do not share the same factors of radicalisation and disengagement, roles within groups, or the severity of the crimes committed.

CONCLUSIONS

This section of the document synthesises the most significant and cross-cutting ideas from the various contributions reviewed. Each subsection presents key findings relevant to the specific subtopic, including perspectives on related issues when pertinent.

NARRATIVES, STRATEGIES AND THE ONLINE SPHERE

Jihadi actors have long leveraged the online sphere to increase their recruitment and propaganda diffusion capacities. To avoid content-moderation efforts, they use adaptive and multifaceted strategies, increasingly turning to smaller platforms with more lenient policies and end-to-end encrypted chats, such as Telegram. The resilience of Telegram-based jihadi networks is underpinned by a robust delete-recreate cycle, ensuring their continued operation despite frequent bot deletions. Additionally, jihadi Telegram networks function in a core-periphery structure, where admin bots control core activities and peripheral bots disseminate content, mirroring the decentralised nature of groups like ISIS and allowing them to navigate external pressures while ensuring a continued online presence. This structural adaptability is also evident in their exploitation of popular culture, particularly gaming culture. Extremist groups embed their narratives within existing or newly created videogames, effectively evoking emotions, conveying ideas and fostering a sense of community. This dual use of Telegram and gaming platforms helps jihadi groups to evade content moderation and to reach large and diverse audiences.

In parallel, humour has emerged as a significant strategic communication tool for a range of jihadi actors; from groups such as ISIS, AQ, TTP and the Taliban to Gen Z Salafis who are part of loosely connected networks which share the aesthetics and language of the alt-right (the 'Islamogram'). The use of humour is useful to dehumanise enemies, strengthen in-group cohesion and desensitise consumers to violence and mainstream radical ideas, which indicates that this trend is likely to continue.

Lastly, dynamics of cumulative extremism will further shape future trends in jihadism. Escalating antagonism between extremist groups influence individual radicalisation pathways, fostering spirals of violence and affective polarisation. Governments play a crucial role in cumulative extremism dynamics, as they have the capacity to exacerbate or mitigate tensions through the shaping of in-group and out-group perceptions.

ACTORS

In the analysis of the jihadist movement, special attention has been paid to young people (including minors) and lone actors, as key actors for understanding the future evolution of the phenomenon. Three cross-cutting trends in their radicalisation are evident: the importance of personal relationships, the central role of social media and the influence of mental health conditions.

Interpersonal relationships are crucial in the radicalisation process, even among actors typically presumed to have a high degree of social detachment. In a view that challenges the conventional understanding of family relationships as protective factors, it has been found that close family ties often reinforce extremist beliefs among young people rather than protect against them. Romantic relationships and extensive connections to peer and adult extremists also play significant roles, with over one-third of radicalised youths being married. Among children, belonging to a family environment linked to violent extremism has far-reaching impact that goes beyond the assumption of radical ideas, as children suffer abuse, exposure to violence and isolation and stigma, which profoundly affect their development. Finally, lone actors, although often perceived as isolated, are deeply embedded in radical milieus. Their radicalisation involves intense, though unstable, social ties, and

they frequently emerge from or remain on the margins of radical groups, highlighting the critical role of interpersonal bonds in spreading extremist ideologies.

Social media also play a crucial role in the radicalisation of both youths and lone actors. For young individuals, platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube provide easy access to extremist content, fostering a sense of community and reinforcing radical beliefs through constant interaction. These platforms are instrumental in recruiting young people and disseminating propaganda. For lone actors, social media facilitates the diffusion of violent tactics and strategies, and provides inspiration by linking their actions to broader extremist movements. This digital interaction helps lone actors build and validate their radical identities, contributing to a decentralised yet interconnected campaign of violence.

Finally, the relationship between mental health and radicalisation is complex and multifaceted and can act as a contributing or resulting factor to radicalisation. In particular, the case of children from families linked to terrorism reveals that severe trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from exposure to violence and abuse are often consequences of their parents' extremist activities, which has a profound impact on their development and wellbeing. Among young individuals, mental health problems and deviant behaviour often precede radicalisation, making them more susceptible to extremist ideologies by intensifying feelings of social dislocation and personal grievances. In the case of lone actors, mental health disorders – while not direct causes of radicalisation – often precede their involvement and significantly influence their social interactions and stability within radical networks.

MACRO-TRENDS AND THEIR IMPACT IN THE JIHADI LANDSCAPE IN THE EU

The socio-contextual evolution of the jihadist phenomenon is determined by the end of the Islamic State's territorial project and its various offshoots. The decline of central leaders and groups within the jihadist movement, such as AQ and ISIS, has significantly impacted global terrorism dynamics. The deaths of key leaders, such as Al-Zawahiri of AQ, and the territorial loss of ISIS, culminating in 2019, have weakened the cohesion and effectiveness of these groups.

AQ has struggled to remain relevant, with its focus on the United States becoming less attractive over time. Additionally, AQ faces a disconnection from the Muslim base and a lack of ideological unity, limiting its ability to unify all jihadists. Conversely, ISIS's peak with the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014 was short-lived, as they failed to unify all jihadists or appeal to the Muslim masses in their attempt to establish an Islamic State. This collapse has led to internal conflicts and ideological disagreements within the jihadist movement, particularly between AQ and ISIS, over tactics, objectives and leadership. At the personal level, the territorial defeat had a demoralising effect on ISIS's global base of supporters, leading some to view the loss as a significant ideological setback. These individuals questioned the effectiveness of armed jihad and reassessed their involvement due to personal and organisational disillusionment, prosecution and changing priorities, leading some of them to abandon the jihadist movement.

Despite ISIS's territorial defeat, the jihadist movement exhibits remarkable resilience. Persistent grievances against the state and anti-government sentiments, particularly in western countries, continue to fuel hostility towards institutions. These grievances, exacerbated by perceptions of discrimination, failed integration policies and the rise of populist parties promoting Islamophobia, create fertile ground for jihadist ideologies to take root and spread. Furthermore, global networks of ISIS activists remain active and have demonstrated a capacity for regeneration, maintaining their presence on encrypted social media platforms. This allows them to sustain communication, coordination and recruitment efforts despite territorial losses. At the personal level, supporters of ISIS adapt to these setbacks by reinterpreting them as divine tests, which strengthens their resolve. They continue to provide moral and financial support, engaging in propaganda and proselytism to keep the movement

alive. This adaptability also extends to recruitment strategies, as jihadist actors leverage specific events, such as the Gaza conflict, to channel grievances into violent action. However, the significance of these events varies depending on organisational loyalties, as demonstrated by the lack of enthusiasm among ISIS supporters following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

The evolution of jihadist organisations has also impacted their relationship with other movements and contexts, such as non-jihadist Salafism and gang movements, creating a complex and interconnected dynamic. Following ISIS's decline, some former jihadists have shifted towards non-violent Salafist groups, creating ambiguity over militant alignments. Additionally, the recruitment appeal of jihadist groups has weakened, allowing criminal gangs to attract disaffected individuals, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. This crossover between gang culture and jihadist ideology underscores the adaptive strategies of extremist groups and the challenges in distinguishing between different forms of radicalisation, complicating efforts to develop targeted intervention and prevention strategies.

GENDER

Gender has emerged as a critical approach and analytical tool for understanding the mobilisation of individuals, women and men to Salafi-Jihadist terrorist groups. Jihadist groups strategically utilise gender narratives in their propaganda to gain appeal and support for their political and military objectives. The contrast between ideal traditional femininities and masculinities is crucial for articulating their political-military project and the roles men and women occupy within it, exacerbating stereotypical conceptions of men and women that stem from their strict patriarchal view of society.

In this view, women are framed predominantly as victims, placing them in a state of inferiority compared to men, who are obligated to protect them. The propaganda reinforces hypermasculine identities appealing to young men with feelings of failure in traditional masculine roles, that compel them to adopt primarily violent roles within the group to fulfil their duty of protection of victimised women. In contrast, gender identity and jihadist femininity are constructed based on the traditional roles of mothers and wives. But female roles within ISIS have evolved, engaging actively in education, healthcare, online radicalisation and recruitment efforts, providing logistical support, and even taking on violent roles within the deployed security forces during the caliphate, or acting as frontline operatives. The study by García-Calvo and Driessen (RAN-PS, 2024), corroborates the dynamic nature of women's roles within Salafi-Jihadist groups as they adapt to changing strategic and tactical realities, highlighting significant legal and security implications for EU MS.

The stereotypical view of female jihadists as victims lacking the will and agency to mobilise in favour of politically violent extremist groups has resulted in challenges for the prosecution and rehabilitation of female jihadists. The shift in the perception of these women as a potential threat has favoured a systematic and more accurate approach to the complex reality of women's involvement in the global jihad today, by considering the variety of circumstances and roles of women in the global jihad at the present. For instance, the legal concept of 'association de malfaiteurs' in France encompasses not only those female VEOs directly involved in violent action, but also women who take care of their jihadi spouses. In addition, cumulative sentencing, which includes domestic offenses and/or international crimes alongside terrorism charges, contributes to extended sentences and broadens the scope for rehabilitating female VEOs. The adoption of structural investigations and cumulative sentencing emerges as valuable practices that can be replicated by other EU Member States to address the prosecution of female jihadists and facilitate their subsequent rehabilitation.

The reviewed literature presents several significant findings regarding the rehabilitation and reintegration of female jihadists. On one hand, returning male jihadists often struggle with loss of identity and purpose after the collapse of the ISIS caliphate. Some may seek a sense of belonging in gangs, which offer excitement and an outlet

for hypermasculinity but fail to provide the heroic identity that was associated with jihad. This underscores the complexities of gender identity reconstruction following jihad. On the other hand, recognising the above-mentioned complexity of female involvement and the variety of roles they currently occupy, allows for more tailored rehabilitation strategies that respond to their needs.

However, there remains debate regarding the necessity of developing specific gender approaches, or whether an individualised approach is sufficient. The reviewed papers (except one[9]) recommend developing specific gender-sensitive approaches in prosecution and penal execution, particularly concerning the creation of treatment programs and risk assessment tools, as well as the choice of penitentiary regimes applied to jihadists, since female and male jihadists do not share the same factors of radicalisation and disengagement, or the severity of the crimes committed. Nevertheless, the general trend for the rehabilitation of female violent extremists in EU Member States still promotes interventions tailored to individual needs which might not always adequately consider important aspects, like sexual violence or motherhood, that require a gendered approach, to ensure effectiveness and mitigate the risk of potential re-engagement (García-Calvo and Driessen, RAN-PS, 2024: 16). This indicates that there is potential for advancing the implementation of gender-specific approaches and responses.

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[9] This refers to Merah et al. (2024). This paper states that the evidence gathered during the research does not allow it to take a clear position on either option. However, other publications, such as Gómez et al. (2023), do have evidence that leads them to recommend the adoption of a gender-specific approach to the penal execution of female VEOs.

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