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December 2016

Traditionally, terrorism has been perceived as a preserve for men, a perception that has been reinforced by the mainstream media, where women are typically represented as victims or bystanders of terror. This perception is increasingly being challenged in various parts of the world, including in Africa. While Kenya has not seen female suicide bombers, media reports indicate a small but rising number of women involved in violent extremism, mostly working behind the scenes in support of terror activities. These women, most of whom it appears are radicalized through marriage links and family ties, have been dubbed “jihadi brides.”

The evolving global nature of terrorism, including the entry of women into terrorism in Kenya, calls for a better understanding by the counterterrorism community of the role and scope of women’s involvement. A lack of effective research, coupled with public perceptions informed by gender normative roles in society, has limited understanding. Consequently, jihadi brides and other women who radicalize are understood within a limited and prescriptive gender framework that compels society to view them as deviants, as a result of the false perception that women are naturally peaceful.¹ This has affected interventions aimed at preventing female violent extremism in Africa. Furthermore, the narrow conceptualization, definition, and application of gender roles in countering violent extremism (CVE) emphasizes responses targeted at women which has alienated men and other equally important stakeholders. Finally, states have focused on material preventive approaches to addressing violent extremism while neglecting philosophical and ideological (political) approaches to the issue.

Researching important questions regarding women’s involvement in terrorism in Kenya and constructing more informed media and government responses is paramount. What motivates women to radicalize should be investigated, as should whether or not there are identifiable and consistent socio-economic, cultural, political, or religious patterns among these women, and whether that can be applied across the board to accurately develop a profile of such women for effective preventive or corrective responses. It is important for the counterterrorism community to extend their focus to address both immediate dangers posed by terrorists and strategic prevention, which deals with the radicalization and recruitment of individuals into terrorist groups and the urgent need for socio-economic empowerment to create more resilient communities.

The Kenyan government has established the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NCTS), which is enforced by a number of agencies, but more needs to be done to make its response human rights and gender-sensitive.² Generally, security discourses surrounding female violent extremism conceptualize women as passive actors,

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This publication was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of the

devoid of agency, yet some women join terrorist groups out of free will. It is important to localize causes of female violent extremism in order to respond in a multi-dimensional manner. That allows for the application of a gender lens that is cognizant of the differences in social experiences of gender in different contexts and how this interplays with socio-economic and political factors that drive violent extremism at the community level.³ If the complexity of gender is appreciated, then an understanding of why young women are involved in violent extremism can be safely established.

Media organizations in Kenya have played a reactive—rather than proactive—role in counterterrorism. In order for the media to evolve in line with contextual security and gender realities, it requires sensitization to be peace- and gender-literate for more meaningful and nuanced coverage of what motivates violent extremism. This is critical, since there can hardly be a single distinctive causal pattern in extremism and jihadi terrorism that can be applied across the board. This is why government efforts should now include efforts that will allow

Efforts should be made to ensure this program dovetails with the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy's gender strategy in order to measure levels of interaction for proper application of funding.

Recommendation 1: Kenya: The United States could develop policies that will support improved relations between the Kenyan government and civil society groups to encourage more civil society organizations in Kenya to work under the "sisters without borders" program to target mothers whose daughters are married to al-Shabaab militants. Targeting mothers is important due to the supportive roles women play in family relations especially in Muslim communities. Women are understood to be wives and camp mothers in al-Shabaab discourses and young men are expected to be fighters. Mothers are therefore the strongest link for sourcing intelligence and building community resilience in the absence of men, and they need government support to play this important role.⁵

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Kenya: (1) The United States should support the Kenyan government to (1) 111 22 1 1

