Chapter 67
The Role of Women From a Social Media Jihad Perspective:
Wife or Warrior?

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ABSTRACT

Female roles in online social media forums are continually changing and often reflect the global social and political context. In addition, the security context also plays an important part in the role of females online. Social media evidence suggests that females are very active online in terms of recruitment. This chapter looks at two case studies focusing on the roles of women as wives and warriors and the changing dynamic between the two roles. Overall, women demonstrate a high level of gender utility and can change roles as required by the security and political context.

INTRODUCTION

The murky world of terrorism is not exempt from gender issues and gender identity. Extremists have sought to undertake a global scoped jihad against the West in response to perceived grievances and injustices against Islam. Islamic extremism is a phenomenon that we are very familiar with in the West. However, what is less well known is the role that women play in this phenomenon. Equally important to any terrorist activities carried out by extremists is their online presence and how they seek to pervade the hearts and minds of as many people as possible.

This chapter seeks to explore how the online world, in particular social media, is used to influence the gender roles and gender identities of women in relation to this global jihad. As the title suggests two primary identities are discussed: the women as an active jihad warrior including taking part in jihad and martyrdom operations; and secondly, the women as the wife and supporter of her mujahideen (warrior) husband.

Initially, this chapter explores the context of the online and social media jihad and subsequently looks at the two primary gender roles for women in the online global jihad. This chapter will also utilise

case studies from an extensive research project on social media discourses on Facebook conducted over several years. Finally, trends found on gender Identity will be discussed as well as future implications based on female gender utility.

ONLINE JIHAD

Since 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, al-Qaeda and other Islamic jihad groups have been very adept at evolving to the changing shifts caused by continual attacks to their physical locations (Michael, 2009). One of the primary areas of adaptation is in the use of internet technology to support a number of its strategic and operational objectives that include recruiting, fundraising, strategic direction and research (McNeal, 2007). Even Islamic State in 2014 when expanding and controlling large geographic areas of Syria and Iraq, relies heavily on its online media for propaganda and recruitment. Specifically, internet technology also opens up a worldwide audience able to access extremist views and form networks, all in a ubiquitous and virtually untraceable environment (O'Rourke, 2007). Importantly, the internet provides an essential media battlefield as part of their terrorism strategy as al-Qaeda's Dr. al-Zawahiri stated: 'We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our *umma*' (Michael, 2009). Therefore, it is this battle for hearts and minds that will be addressed.

Research by Weimann (2008) on the target audiences of terrorist websites indicates that their intended audience is actually very broad and includes potential recruits, the international community and its enemies. However, the focus on potential recruits is an important aspect and often involves more culturally sophisticated planning coupled with more tech savvy skills in its implementation. Key aspects include the use of colour, latest multimedia technologies, professional finish and interactivity (McNeal, 2007). Many of these sites are targeted at younger males with reports in the United Kingdom (UK) indicating terrorist groups specifically targeting male university undergraduates and even secondary students (Mendez, 2008). However, recruitment has by no means been limited to males and jihadist groups have been appreciating the value of female recruits.

Furthermore, it is the disaffected and the alienated that are especially vulnerable to the 'seductive' efforts of recruiters (Murphy & White, 2007). These groups include diasporic communities (Awan, 2007) as well as first and second generation Muslims who are "citizens in name but not culturally or socially." (Leiken, 2005, p. 123). Nevertheless, it is this 'citizen in name' aspect that is important, just like the ring of Roman citizenship gave freedom to travel throughout the Roman Empire, likewise a 'Western' passport gives greater freedom to travel throughout the Western world. This freedom to travel is especially important given that some of those travelling on Middle-Eastern, North African or Asian passports are coming under increasing scrutiny given their regional reputations for terrorist activity, radicalism and training activities (Michael, 2009).

'White Moors' and home grown jihadists are often considered prized recruits and highlight the global reach of online social media jihad. Any Western recruits for Islamic State whether male or female have attracted large scale attention from Western media. Coupled with this, there has been the increasing individualisation of the concept of *jihad* as part of a global resistance (Michael, 2009). One of al-Qaeda's most notable strategists, al-Suri, has articulated the power of the Internet as a key tool in promoting individual terrorism (Michael, 2009). It is therefore critical to look at the dynamics of how the internet has been used as such an important strategic tool in promoting home grown terrorism.

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