

## **The Internet and the Radicalization of Muslim Women**

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*“to kill one and frighten 10,000 others” - Chinese Proverb*

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## Abstract

The Internet, with its built in anonymity and continuous availability – 24 hours a day, seven days a week- is for some the perfect venue for chatting, meeting new people, learning about topics of interest, and a source for countless hours of entertainment. Moreover, the Internet allows individuals from all over the country, or the world, who are from different socioeconomic backgrounds but who share similar interests and ideologies to interact and communicate privately. However, the Internet is also a readymade platform for the spread of hate, terror, and other radical ideas and messages, all of which can be transmitted at the speed of light, anonymously, and available on demand. The Internet is, therefore, an ideal venue for women to interact with likeminded individuals or organizations without having to sacrifice or tarnish their standing in the community or among their families. Women from repressive countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Palestine can participate in jihad without leaving their homes and without having to meet strange men face-to-face and, consequently, bring shame to their families or themselves – as per traditional Islamic practices. Likewise, women involved or interested in radical environmentalism can meet online, share ideas, and continue their struggle against governments and corporations. Similarly, women involved, or fascinated with, right-wing religious movements or hate groups such as the KKK or neo-Nazis can likewise meet in a private setting, virtually, with little concern that their reputations or image within the community will be tarnished by their surreptitious activities online. The power of information is, therefore, leveling the playing field for women to join radical organizations that were previously unavailable or taboo but are now accessible virtually, from the comfort of one's home, and anonymous.

## The Internet and the Radicalization of Muslim Women

While the West has experienced radicalization of female members of the Islamic diaspora, and with recent converts to Islam who seek violence against the West, in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and the United States among others (Cunningham 2003; 2007; Ducol 2012; Hoffman et al. 2007; Knop 2007; Lubold 2010; Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008), media and other accounts have noted that women in repressive countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt are increasingly involved in jihadist activities (Knop 2007; Mostarom and Yasin 2010; The Washington Times 2004). It is important to ask if this is indeed happening, and, if so, how are these women engaging in such activities given the restrictions on their public behavior?

There is some anecdotal evidence that these women are using the Internet for jihadist activities (Cunningham 2003; 2007; Ducol 2012; Lubold 2010; Zedalis 2004). Indeed, the Internet is a readymade platform for the spread of hate, terror, and other radical ideas and messages, all of which can be transmitted at the speed of light, anonymously, and available on demand (Wright 2008). With its built-in anonymity and continuous availability – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – the Internet is an ideal venue for women in repressive countries to interact with likeminded individuals or organizations without having to sacrifice or tarnish their standing in the community or among their family (Mostarom and Yasin 2010). Women from repressive countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Palestine, as well as other countries of the Muslim world, can participate in jihad without leaving their homes and without having to meet strange men face-to-face and, consequently, bring shame to their families or themselves, as per traditional Islamic practices (Mostarom and Yasin 2010).

In this paper, I examine how and to what extent women in these countries are using the Internet to participate in jihad, either directly by performing suicide attacks, or indirectly by providing financial or moral support. I argue that the power of the Internet is leveling the playing field for women to join radical organizations that were previously unavailable or taboo, but are now accessible virtually and anonymously, from the comfort of one's home.

Radical organizations such as Al-Qaida instruct women to support jihad by encouraging their husbands, sons, and brothers to participate in armed struggle, while at the same time helping to maintain the home and raise the next generation of jihadi fighters (Ducol 2012; Mostarom and Yasin 2010; Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008; The Washington Times 2004; Wright 2008). I hypothesize that the number of radical websites directed towards women has increased over the last decade, and that the increase has led to an increase in the number of female members that directly contribute to their organizations through propaganda and/or direct action.

This paper will elucidate the extent to which women's engagement in predominantly patriarchal radicalism is leveling the playing field and leading to a somewhat more emancipated woman among radical groups.

### **Background**

Historically, women's participation in armed struggle is not a new phenomenon, even in the Muslim world, where, for example, during the time of the Prophet, women engaged in arm struggle to ensure the survival of Islam (Bin Sālih Al-'Uyayrī 2000; Knop 2008; Sims 2011).

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Likewise, women have been involved in anarchist radical organizations in Tsarist Russia (Knight 1979; Millar 2003), Jewish terrorist organizations in British controlled Palestine (Perliger and Weinberg 2003), left-wing groups in Europe (Daly 2009), Communist rebel groups in South America (Daly 2009), and more recently, Muslim extremist activities in England (Alexander and Ceresero 2013; Briggs 2012; Bryan-Low and MacDonald 2010; Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2011; Somaiya and Helft 2010; The Associated Press 2010) and the United States (Ahmed 2010; Alexander and Ceresero 2013), as well as various Western and Eastern countries (Daly 2009; Hoffman 2006). However, women's involvement in radical or extremist movements in the past was seen more as outlier behavior, occurring during times of great struggle for particular groups, such as early Muslims fighting to ensure the survival of their new faith, or Jewish extremists fighting to establish a homeland, than as the norm. Or more recently, women's involvement in guerrilla groups like the Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) in Algeria, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka was focused primarily on struggles of liberation, or perceived liberation, from an illegitimate or occupying power (Daly 2009).

Over the last several decades, the number of women involved in terrorism, or other radical activities, has increased to levels not previously witnessed (Jacques and Taylor 2009). For example, women have taken a more visible role in such organizations as the World Church of the Creator (WCOTC), a right-wing extremist group; the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a Palestinian groups dedicated to carrying out attacks in Israel; Al-Qaida, and other radical groups (Anderson and Sloan 2009; Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009). Likewise, Muslim women in the Middle East during this same time period, have begun taking a more public role by participating

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in every crisis, from Wahdat camp in the 1970 Amman battles to the latest Israeli invasion in South Lebanon (Cunningham 2003). Although women were willing to participate in the struggle against Israel, and later the United States, many radical leaders were unwilling to fully incorporate women into their ranks (Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009; Mostarom 2009). Today, despite the lack of public support from established organizations, such as Al-Qaida, women continue to support and/or join radical organizations.

As can be seen, involvement by women in radical organizations is not a new phenomenon, however the number of female participants in jihad and the diverse location of supporters is unprecedented. Lastly, recent actions by Muslim women in support of jihad are not likely to abate in the near future, which necessitates a better understanding of the phenomena in order to hinder recruitment attempts by radical groups.

### **The Internet**

Much has been written about radical groups' use of the Internet to disseminate information, coordinate plans, solicit funds and support, and at times, recruit (Bloom 2005; Cunningham 2003; 2007; Dienel et al. 2010; Hoffman 2006; Hofheinz 2005; Knop 2007; 2008; Weimann 2004; 2008). With its built-in anonymity and continuous availability – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – the Internet, according to Last and Kandel, is an ideal medium for radical organizations to communicate and prepare for operations (2005). Last and Kandel note:

The truth is that the Cyberspace is an ideal environment for international terrorist groups willing to communicate with each other at maximum security and minimal cost. ... the following four [key] areas of terrorist use (and abuse) [are facilitated by] the Internet: covert communications, intelligence gathering on potential targets, propaganda dissemination, and attacks on the Internet itself and the critical infrastructures connected

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to it. All these activities can be safely conducted under the anonymity cover provided to the web users by Internet cafes, wireless access points, and alias email accounts. Public availability of advanced encryption techniques, including steganography, adds one more powerful level of security to those who have something to hide from the law enforcement authorities. (Last and Kandel 2005, vi)

The Internet is international; there are no national boundaries and there is no owner, which means that radical groups have little to fear with regards to censorship and/or identification by law enforcement or other security organs of state. The Internet is the result of the open architecture of the networks, meaning that anyone with suitable equipment and software can connect to it; one could argue that the Internet is truly a democratic technology for the masses, but one readily exploited by radical groups.

Moreover, the cost of accessing the Internet has decreased over the years, meaning that access is no longer limited to elites or those with means but rather is now more available to the masses (Hofheinz 2005). And while various security organs of state have either attempted to block access, ban, or monitor activity to or from radical sites, the attempts primarily serve to channel the average user away from banned or censored sites. However, those individuals who are determined to access radical information can find ways around official controls with ease (Hofheinz 2005). For example, according to Hofheinz, the Internet has been utilized to criticize the governments of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, countries that exercised the most heavy-handed control of Internet traffic in the region, yet they too were not able to stem the flow of critical comments towards their regimes (2005). The Internet, therefore, has proven to be a powerful tool for those seeking to promulgate their messages and/or ideology.

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In fact, potential recruits or sympathizers no longer need to travel to “radical” mosques in order to hear, or be exposed to, radical sermons or texts from famous imams because that role has increasingly moved to the Internet (Dienel et al. 2010). The transition of radical information and propaganda from the physical to the cyber realm has both decreased the cost of access but also exponentially increased the pool of potential audience members for said material.

Additionally, a greater numbers of terrorist, radical, nationalistic, and ideological groups are targeting women as potential recruits and/or seeking their support (Bin Sālih Al-‘Uyayrī 2000; Jacques and Taylor 2012; Knop 2007). Not surprisingly, the Internet has emerged as a key conduit between potential recruits and supporters and radical groups, with many groups now targeting propaganda specifically at women (Cunningham 2003; 2007; Knop 2007; Zedalis 2004). After all, with its anonymity, accessibility, and easy of use, the Internet plays a key role in the radicalization of Muslim women.

### **The Internet and Radicalization**

In traditional Islamic culture, the notion of women freely associating with men outside the family is frowned upon and can lead to a loss of honor for the woman, and more importantly for the family. Indeed, in some instances women have been killed for damaging family honor, in what has been termed “honor killings,” where male family members murder female relatives in order to restore the family’s standing within the community (BBC News 2013; Chesler 2010). Conventionally, the lack of contact with outside influences limited the radicalization of women to families that consisted of radical members who perpetuated their ideology within the family, as noted by Van Knop:

In the past, a Muslim woman was seen as the responsibility of her male relatives. Militant organizations could not recruit women directly without transgressing familial and societal



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honor codes that require women to seek permission for every action they take outside the family home. To secretly recruit a woman as a suicide bomber or even as a courier of messages and weapons would be seen as an insult to the family's male honor (Knop 2007, 407).

In the past, traditional culture served to minimize female involvement in activities by limiting their actions outside the home and their contact with outside organizations or individuals. However, despite traditional Islamic culture, over the last decade greater numbers of women have become radicalized, some even paying the ultimate price for their ideology by detonating themselves as suicide bombers (Bloom 2007; Cunningham 2003; 2007; Jacques and Taylor 2009; Knop 2007).

The increase in the number of female radicals can be partly explained by the Internet, which allows women to communicate and interact with radicals, zealots, and fundamentalists, without familial knowledge or permission. Moreover, women are able to freely search for ideological material that facilitates their radicalization (Dahlberg 2007; Dienel et al. 2010; Ducol 2012; Wright 2008), both with ease and with anonymity, therefore maintaining personal and familial honor. And unlike older communications technology, such as radio and newspapers, which were expensive to operate and could be easily censored, the Internet allows radical organizations to publish information relatively inexpensively, uncensored, and accessible to the masses. For example, according to Von Knop, radical online periodicals such as al-Khansaa encourage women to participate in jihad:

Increasingly, [women's participation in jihad] seems to be changing, evident by the al-Khansaa article saying that women need not ask for permission to become a Jihadi, as it is their duty to do so. In fact, al-Khansaa exploits the woman's traditional role in family and society as mother and nurturer of her children to get women to play a larger role in the Jihad (Knop 2007, 407).

In fact, the democratic nature of the Internet, coupled with its relatively inexpensive cost to access, has increased its accessibility while at the same time eliminating the need to be an elite to have almost immediate access to knowledge and radical propaganda. According to Von Knop, while some Internet users are well educated, have readily available Internet access, and are able to write, more or less fluently, the national language or in English, other Internet users are only able to use their mother tongue and/or have no education (2007, 409). Either way, the Internet is readily available for those women that wish to use it to learn more about jihad, to seek a greater role in the struggle to restore perceived slights, or for emancipation.

Admittedly, Muslim women's access to the Internet does not guarantee radicalization, however the Internet provides a venue for those who seek greater understanding about Islam and perceived slights or threats to the religion or culture. The Internet serves as a critical link between those seeking to participate in jihadi struggle and those seeking support or recruits for their organizations. For example, according to Andrew Silke, in *The Internet & Terrorist Radicalisation: The Psychological Dimension*:

... the internet for extremists is that it can make the cause seem much more popular and much more mainstream than is actually the case. Newcomers are exposed to online discussion groups and chat rooms which are populated by individuals who believe in the cause. Even though these individuals may be geographical very isolated from each other – and overall still very small in number – exposure to the group creates the impression of a clear and vibrant community of support which will endorse any violent action the individual carries out on behalf of the cause ... (Dienel et al. 2010, 34).

Seeing that the Internet is a useful tool for propaganda and recruitment, one must understand that radicalization is a process whereby individuals join groups that share the same

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beliefs, and the Internet facilitates radicalization by connecting said individuals to online communities that provide access to terrorist groups and networks, networks that might not be readily accessible due to government restrictions. This is very important in the case of Muslim women because they are more exposed, or have greater access, to unknown individuals who facilitate their radicalization without violation of familial or cultural norms (Brunner 2005).

According to Mariana Stan, in *Islamic Terrorism in Europe*:

During the pre-radicalization and identification phases, the Internet represents mainly a source that provides information on Islam. The aggressive proliferation of Jihadist-Salafist ideology through Internet makes it almost impossible to avoid extremist interpretation of Islam. During the indoctrination phase talking to like-minded individuals from all over the world on chat-rooms and forums strengthens and legitimates one's beliefs and engagements. During such discussions religious issues or the development of Holy War are approached and opinions are exchanged. Terrorist leaders co-ordinate the topics and answer to the questions posed by the users (sometimes quite specific questions). Thus, Internet becomes a communication and cohesion platform between active members and passive Jihad supporters from all over the world, accelerating the isolation and radicalization process, also allowing them to enter the final phase of Jihadisation. During that phase, Internet becomes a tactical resource providing access to training manuals and instructions on IED (improvised explosive device) fabrication, also facilitating information gathering on potential targets (Dienel et al. 2010, 49-50).

Moreover, jihadi websites allow potential recruits and sympathizers to be exposed to propaganda material, such as graphic images of abuses (Abu Ghraib), U.S. collateral damage in Iraq and Afghanistan, violence against Muslim populations in regions such as Kashmir, Chechnya, Pakistan (assassinations by areal drones), and Israeli actions in the Palestinian Territories (Dienel et al. 2010). Likewise, propaganda serves to increase feelings of hatred towards the West, kinship between sympathetic Muslims, and strengthens bonds between potential recruits, sympathizers, and radical groups that seek to spread jihad. The trend does not

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show signs of abating; on the contrary, according to the National Intelligence Estimate 2006-02R, *Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States*:

Anti-US and anti-globalization sentiment is on the rise and fueling other radical ideologies. This could prompt some leftist, nationalist, or separatist groups to adopt terrorist methods to attack US interests. The radicalization process is occurring more quickly, more widely, and more anonymously in the Internet age, raising the likelihood of surprise attacks by unknown groups whose members and supporters may be difficult to pinpoint (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2006, 7).

Furthermore, as noted by Regan, "... contrary to what some early studies of the Internet claimed, people are using the medium to create new relationships, and build on existing ones. The result is a 'vibrant world' of online individuals and communities" (2002). In the case of jihadists, the communities are composed of extremists and terrorists that form bonds online, and work together to achieve mutual goals. This trend should be monitored because activities planned on "... the Internet will move off the desktop and into [the] lives [of community members] in many other ways" (Regan 2002). This suggests that members that become radicalized online have the potential to seek a greater role in jihad than they can attain online, which leads them transition from the cyber to the physical world.

Equally important, the Internet facilitates a new manifestation of terrorist, the "lone wolf." According to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, lone wolves are individuals who are inspired by radical narratives - anger against a particular culture, policy, ideology, or race. This narrative motivates the individuals; they act alone or with minimal support, facilitation and financing from a wider network (Briggs 2012). The lone wolves are male or female, are difficult to identify, and can remain unidentified until after they strike. They lurk online, self-radicalizing, waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate their support for a particular cause.

In short, the Internet has become a critical link in the radicalization of Muslim women. It facilitates access to religious material, radical individuals, radical organizations, and more importantly, the Internet allows Muslim women to interact with strangers who would traditionally not have been accessible - individuals who promote extreme or radical interpretations of the faith. Moreover, the Internet allows Muslim women to sidestep cultural norms during the radicalization process, which can be achieved surreptitiously and from the comfort of one's home.

### **Women in the West**

In the West, women's participation in radical groups is not a new phenomenon; for example women have participated, or participate, in groups such as the FARC in Colombia; the German Baader-Meinhof gang (Red Army Faction); the Italian Red Brigades; the Shining Path in Peru; the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Earth Liberation Front (ELF), the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Aryan Nation, and anti-abortion activists in the United States (Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009). However, increasingly, extremist organizations have actively sought to attract female members; for instance, Cunningham notes that the WCOTC, a right-wing extremist group in the United States, has experienced a spike in female recruits, which it has attracted via the Internet (2003). In fact, according to Cunningham:

Both the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have noted an emerging trend in U.S. right-wing movements involving the growing mobilization of female members, particularly on the Internet. According to the SPLC, women now make up 25 percent of right-wing groups in the United States and as much as 50 percent of new recruits, and these young women want a greater role in their organizations, including leadership, than their predecessors have demanded (Cunningham 2003, 177).

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Equally important, Islamic terrorist organizations have also begun to target Western women, who are perceived as more able to evade scrutiny by security organs of state and able to inflict greater psychological damage to target populations (Al-Tabaa 2013). For example, Al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) uses digital media publication to target men and women for recruitment - magazines similar to *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle*. One of the magazines, *Al-Shamikha* (“the majestic woman”), was launched in March 2011, while the second, *Inspire*, printed in Yemen, targets young men (Al-Tabaa 2013). Both magazines can be found online, where they can be downloaded and read surreptitiously.

Correspondingly, Al-Qaida’s *Al-Shamikha* is published in English, while other messages and propaganda are published in a variety of Western languages, which highlights the organization’s desire to attract recruits outside of the Muslim world (Al-Tabaa 2013). For example, Ducol notes that large numbers of jihadi websites are now posting material in French, both translated material – whose accuracy ranges from poor to near excellent- and native French (2012). Additionally, Al-Qaida demonstrates an advanced understanding of Information Operations with its propaganda, as noted by Al-Tabaa:

Women play an important role in Western countries. Western advertising understands how to target the female population—from shopping habits to running households. Women play similar roles in other countries. Al-Qaida uses women in operational roles in its terrorists’ activities, and now makes terrorist activities attractive to more Muslim women, by implementing a magazine tailored for women. “By catering to women, al-Qaida’s publication [encourages women] to play an operational role (in terrorist attacks), which is largely ignored, [including how their cultural roles affects this] specific society.” Al-Shamikha’s potential to radicalize Muslim women creates an impact on Muslim communities. Women’s role in the family structure holds the fabric of a society together. Women are usually the main caretakers who raise children and help mold them into adulthood. If Muslim women accept AQAP’s propaganda, what sort of future children will Muslim communities then be raising? Legitimate Middle East governments struggle

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with terrorist groups infiltrating their communities and radicalizing the next generation (Al-Tabaa 2013, 12).

In fact, several cases have emerged that demonstrate the effectiveness of Al-Qaida's propaganda in the West. For example, Malika el Aroud (nom de guerre Oum Obeyda), a Belgian woman of Moroccan descent, established two on-line forums, *islamic-minbar* and *minbar.sos*, where she distributed radical messages, propaganda, solicited support for jihad, and facilitated connections between recruiters and possible recruits (Ahmed 2010; Ducol 2012; Knop 2007; 2008; Mostarom 2009; Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). Moreover, Ms. el Aroud goaded her male audience to participate in jihad by stating that women were doing more to assist the movement than some men, and therefore in order to save face the males should join the struggle (Knop 2008; Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). The success of her online activities attracted the attention of European security services, which ultimately resulted in the arrest of Ms. el Aroud in 2008 (Ahmed 2010; Knop 2008). Interestingly, Ms. Aroud was married to Dahmane Abd al-Satter, a Tunisian-Belgian fundamentalist who assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, on orders from Osama bin Laden prior to the 9/11 attacks (Knop 2008). The connection to Dahmane Abd al-Satter, and her link to Osama bin Laden, provided Ms. Aroud with bona fides which added weight to her on-line calls for jihad (Knop 2008).

Additionally, Roshonara Choudhry, a British student, succumbed to Al-Qaida's radical message, specifically the message espoused by Anwar al-Awlaki – a U.S.-born radical cleric connected to AQAP, and later assassinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 2011. On May 14, 2010, Ms. Choudhry attempted to murder Steven Timms, a British Member of

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Parliament, for his support of the war in Iraq, stabbing him twice in the stomach with a kitchen knife (Bryan-Low and MacDonald 2010). Later, Ms. Choudhry claimed she wanted to punish Mr. Timms to “get revenge for the people of Iraq” as justification for her actions (Bryan-Low and MacDonald 2010). Ms. Choudhry’s actions exemplify the new manifestation of terrorist, the “lone wolf.” Ms. Choudhry became self-radicalized via the Internet, through lectures from Mr. Awlaki she accessed on-line, and waited for her time to strike, realizing the fears of many in the counter-terrorism arena (Bryan-Low and MacDonald 2010). Moreover, Al-Qaida, through the organization’s on-line magazine, *Inspire*, celebrated Ms. Choudhry’s actions as a victory for jihad and highlighted the effectiveness of lone wolves (Briggs 2012). Again, Ms. Choudhry’s actions demonstrate the effectiveness of the Internet in the radicalization process and the Internet’s ability to facilitate surreptitious self-radicalization of “lone wolves.”

Likewise, Colleen LaRose (nom de guerre Jihad Jane), a convert to Islam, began to self-radicalize via the Internet after being exposed to coverage of Palestinians “screaming and crying” (Hurdle 2014). Later, Ms. LaRose made contacts on-line with jihadists as she immersed herself in the on-line jihadisphere as “Jihad Jane.” In January 2014, Ms. LaRose was sentenced to 10 years in prison for her role in a plot to assassinate Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist who drew a depiction of the Prophet Muhammad’s head atop a dog in 2007 (Hurdle 2014). Ms. LaRose was contacted by jihadist on-line and asked to join a plot to murder Mr. Vilks, which she accepted. Ms. LaRose subsequently traveled to Europe to carry out her mission. However, after failing to meet her contacts, she returned to the U.S. until her role in the plot was discovered and she was arrested on charges of conspiracy and recruiting for terrorist organizations (Hurdle 2014). Originally, Ms. LaRose claimed she was “honored” to be asked to join the machination



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against Mr. Vilks; however, after spending time with a moderate Islamic family, she decided that violent jihad was not the correct path and vowed to end her struggle (Hurdle 2014). Again, Ms. LaRose highlights the dangers of lone wolves, particularly those in the West who have no original ties to the Muslim world, and, therefore, are overlooked by security services.

Lastly, in 2006, Sonja B., a German convert to Islam, was prevented from traveling to Iraq, where she sought to detonate herself and her child in a suicide attack, after being radicalized on-line (Expatica.com 2006; Knop 2008). This example emphasizes the effectiveness of radical Muslim propaganda and radicalization of lone wolves and the ease by which women, and men, can be seduced by radical organizations into joining jihad against the West. In fact, Al-Qaida insinuates a large numbers of female recruits, through the organization's creation of a Burka Brigade, mandated to attack the West (Alexander and Ceresero 2013).

Of course, Islam is not the only force of radicalization on the web. For example, the KKK clearly targets females through women's websites, as does a variety of right- and left-wing organizations as noted by the ADL and SPLC (Cunningham 2003). Women in the West are clearly targeted, and receptive to, radicalization by extremist groups, a trend that must be monitored and studied further.

On the whole, radical groups exploit the Internet's ability to reach millions of people throughout the West and to manipulate the desire of individuals to protect their faith from perceived Western aggression. Al-Qaida uses on-line magazines to target Western women, while radical hate groups appeal to women who share their desire for a "pure race." Regardless

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of the message, the Internet allows supporters and possible recruits to seek radical organizations with similar views on-line and learn more about them, or in extreme cases, participate in armed struggle in support of their beliefs.

### **Women in the Muslim World**

During the time of the Prophet, it was not uncommon for women to be directly involved in combat; in fact it was expected that all Muslims should take up arms in defense of the faith. However, once hostilities were over women returned to their traditional roles as homemakers and rearers of the next generation of Muslims (Bin Sālih Al-'Uyayrī 2000; Knop 2007; 2008; Sims 2011). Likewise, women have taken up arms during times of great peril in various countries, or in support of various causes, throughout the Muslim world. For example, the first recorded battle where a Muslim woman participated was the Battle of Badr (624 AD) (Dienel et al. 2010; Sims 2011). Moreover, Muslim women have participated in various struggles in recent memory, to include Algeria, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and other primarily Muslim regions, such as Chechnya (Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009). For instance, according to the Palestinian National Authority, between 2000 and 2008, 95 women (34 – Hamas, 24 – The Islamic Jihad and 30 – Fatah) committed actions against Israel (Dienel et al. 2010, 100). Similarly, many Pakistani women supported, and/or became radicalized by, the Afghan jihad (Noor and Hussain 2009), demonstrating that when some perceive Islam as under threat, women respond to the call for action.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that a larger number of women have engaged in jihad over the last decade, particularly since some perceive U.S. military actions in Iraq and

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Afghanistan, coupled with perceived Western cultural encroachments into the Muslim world, as a threat to Islam (Sims 2011). Moreover, religious and extremist leaders have fueled the engagement of women in terrorist actions through religious edicts, and calls to arms (Dienel et al. 2010; Knop 2008). For example, Mariana Stan and Andrei Vlădescu noted in their article, *The Islamist Propaganda on Women and Children Web Sites*, that:

... the involvement of women in Jihad has been authorised so far by six fatwas issued by: Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi; Faysal al-Mawlawi, member of the European Research Council in Dublin; Nizar Abd al-Qadir Riyyam, a professor at the Islamic University in Gaza, as well as under the aegis of the 'Al-Azhar' University in Egypt (Dienel et al. 2010, 94-95).

Given the strategic value of women to extremist organizations, both as the rearers of the next generation of jihadist and as supporters, the online targeting of women as possible recruits by terrorist organizations is a logical progression in the global jihad (Ahmed 2010; Bloom 2005; Cunningham 2003; 2007; Dienel et al. 2010; Knop 2007; Mostarom 2009; Sims 2011; Zedalis 2004). For instance in, *The Islamist Propaganda on Women and Children Web Sites*, Stan and Vlădescu highlight that:

The 'Sawt al Jihad' ('The Voice of Jihad') electronic magazine posted on the al-Qaeda's Centre for Islamic Studies and Research portal included a special section devoted to the promotion of radical Islam among women. The Indonesian web site 'Arrahmah Media', allegedly managed by the son of one of Jema'ah Islamiyah's leaders, Abu Jibril, also displays a page dedicated to women, pledging for their involvement in Jihad. The web sites [www.al-hesbah.org](http://www.al-hesbah.org), [www.shmo5alislam.net](http://www.shmo5alislam.net) and [www.al-faloja.info](http://www.al-faloja.info) host discussion forums dedicated especially to women, and to Muslim families, generally, with the clear goal of Jihad indoctrination, encouraging suicide attacks – contrary to the so-called peaceful spirit of Islam, which, at least formally, opposes crimes and eulogises the Greater Jihad (against the self, against temptation), to the detriment of the Small Jihad (the armed fight) (Dienel et al. 2010, 97).

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Moreover, Stan and Vlădescu suggest that the recruitment of women by Al-Qaida and other radical groups could be a strategy meant to widen jihad to every corner of the Ummah, and therefore globalize the Holy War (Dienel et al. 2010). Once again, through its actions, Al-Qaida demonstrates a keen understanding of its target audience, given that almost fifty-percent of Internet users in the Arab world are women, many of whom are between the ages of 20-30 and are more tech savvy than their predecessors (Hofheinz 2005, 82). Through the exploitation of the Internet, radical groups are able to promulgate their interpretation of Islam, and urge a disparate - and therefore more difficult to profile - audience to join their militant efforts.

In the Middle East, the Internet has become a better tool to access information than satellite television and newspapers, particularly outside information – information not censored or controlled by the state (Hofheinz 2005). In fact, Jihadi websites appear to be gaining in popularity; for example, during intense fighting in Fallujah, Iraq, in November of 2004 the popularity of radical websites, such as Islammemo.cc, increased. In fact, IslamMemo (“Mufkkirat al-Islam”) – a jihad oriented news portal established in March 2003 – overtook an older, more established site, Moheet.com – a populist portal appealing to Islamic and Arab national sentiments, established in 1998 (Hofheinz 2005, 88). As of January 2014, Islammemo.cc, was ranked 127 most visited site in Yemen; 283 in Qatar; 457 in Saudi Arabia, and 505 in Egypt (Alexa.com 2014b). In contrast, Al-Jazeera (aljazeera.net) – an Arabic language news portal – ranked 23 in Yemen; 31 in Qatar; 133 in Saudi Arabia; and 121 in Egypt during the same period (Alexa.com 2014a). While radical sites are not as popular as traditional news media sites, such as Al-Jazeera, they do appear to have a strong support base in the Muslim world.

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It is important to realize that the Internet has proved an ideal medium for sidelining traditional cultural norms imposed on women, a trend that should continued to be explored given that a younger generation, those younger than 25 years of age, are the fastest growing online demographic in the middle East; and almost half of that demographic is female (Hofheinz 2005, 93). And while a large portion of radical online material promotes the role of women as backers of jihad by supporting and encouraging their husbands, brothers, and male children to take up arms, they are also pressed to indoctrinate their children to radical interpretations of Islam. Moreover, an increasing number of radical groups, such as Al-Qaida, are advocating a greater role for women in their struggle against the West (Mostarom and Yasin 2010). For example, Hmayamah Hasan Ahmad, the wife of Ayman al-Zarahiri – the leader of Al-Qaida, as of January 2014 – implored women to support the mujahedeen in a November 2009 message (Ahmed 2010; Mostarom and Yasin 2010).

Another key point is that an increasing number of photographs online are of women, usually in Arab countries, holding weapons or featuring cartoons of mujahedeen, which highlights that female participation in radical groups is no longer only a “Western phenomenon,” but is also disseminating throughout the Ummah (Mostarom and Yasin 2010). Likewise, numerous female followers of Putri Munawaroh - the wife of terrorist suspect Adib Susilo, who was killed in a raid carried out by an Indonesian Special Forces counter-terrorism squad in September 2009, and who was subsequently sentenced to three years confinement for her role in supporting terrorists - have posted messages of support on a “Support Freedom 4 Putri Munawaroh” Facebook page (Mostarom and Yasin 2010). Lastly, many radical websites

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associated with Jihad mention a woman known as Umm Salameh, purportedly the widow of an Al-Qaida leader in Northern Iraq, who is a member of Al-Qaida's female battalion (Mostarom 2009), which if true can serve as a role model for other women and as propaganda to attract female recruits. The new development helps to demonstrate that at least some Muslim women are succumbing to online radical messages.

Even though Internet penetration, meaning the percentage of the population that has access to the Internet, is low in areas where large numbers of women engage in suicide bombings or actively support terrorist organizations by serving as carriers and messengers, such as Iraq (Mostarom 2009), the Palestinian territories (Dienel et al. 2010), Yemen (Knop 2008), Pakistan (Daly 2009), and Afghanistan (Hofheinz 2005), one cannot discount the Internet as playing some role in radicalizing women in said countries. According to the World Bank, World Development Indicators, 7 per 100 Iraqi users; approximately 40 per 100 Palestinian users; 17 per 100 Yemeni users; 10 per 100 Pakistani users; and 5 per 100 Afghani users had access to the Internet in 2012 (World Bank 2013). This is in contrast to 81 per 100 in the U.S.; 84 per 100 in Germany; 84 per 100 in South Korea; and 54 per 100 in Saudi Arabia who had access to the Internet during the same period (World Bank 2013).

As shown above, increasingly larger numbers of women have taken up the fight for jihad against those they perceive as enemies of Islam, and/or those who have invaded Muslim soil, either actively by, for example, committing suicide bombings, or passively by teaching their children more radical interpretations of Islam, or anything in-between (Knop 2007; 2008; Noor and Hussain 2009). The Internet has played a role in radicalizing many of these women, either

directly or indirectly (Hofheinz 2005), a trend that must be further observed and analyzed if policy makers are to address, and abate, the trend.

### **Emancipation?**

Many women join radical groups as a means to improve their lot in society (Cunningham 2003; Patkin 2004); however social change is not their only goal (Parashar 2010). As with any social phenomenon, the radicalization of women is complex, and due to a scarcity of sources, difficult to generalize (Jacques and Taylor 2012). This is especially true given the nature of traditional Islamic societies that limit access to females, particularly outside the home.

Despite traditional restrictions, some women are utilizing the Internet to self-radicalize without violating traditional honor codes (Berko and Erez 2007). But the acceptance of women's participation in Jihad, with regards to Islam, appears dependent on the organizations/movements that recruit women (Berko and Erez 2007). For example, the first female suicide bomber was Sana'a Mehaydali, who was dispatched on her deadly mission by the Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) (Bloom 2007, 94). Interestingly, according to Anderson and Sloan:

The al-Hizb as-Suri al-Qawmi al-Ijtima'i, or SSNP, was a Lebanese ethnonationalist militia dedicated to the incorporation of Lebanon into "Greater Syria," encompassing all of Syria, Jordan, Israel, much of Iraq and Turkey, and the island of Cyprus. ... it eventually evolved into a militia under Syrian state sponsorship with an anti-Israeli and anti-Western agenda similar to those of the Palestinian terrorist groups under Syrian control. ... The SSNP recruited young Arab women, often pregnant out of wedlock, whom they indoctrinated to become suicide bombers (2009, 653).

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The ethno-nationalist nature, coupled with secular ideology, of the SSNP helps explain why the organization recruited females to support their organization, similar to other socialist/nationalist organizations, such as the FARC, a guerrilla group dedicated to creating a Marxist-Leninist state in Colombia; the LTTE, a Tamil ethnonationalist group in Sri Lanka that sought to create a separate state for the minority Tamils in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka; and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Marxist-Leninist Kurdish ethnonationalist group that seeking to create an independent Kurdish homeland comprising regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, which also recruited women to fulfill their mission (Anderson and Sloan 2009; Bloom 2007). Secular ideology allowed these organizations to utilize women comparably to men, without the fear of tarnishing traditional religious interpretations (Bloom 2007; Cunningham 2003).

Groups such as the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany, the FARC in Colombia, LTTE in Sri Lanka, PKK in Turkey, Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru, the Japanese Red Army (JRA), the Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation (FLAN) and *Los Macheteros* in Puerto Rico allowed women a more equal, relative to their societies, role in their groups, greater freedoms, or at a minimum, an opportunity to leave their traditional female roles in society and engage in activities that would have otherwise been taboo (Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009). However, gender equality is not the only motivator of women, as highlighted by Jacques et al., who note that personal distress and religion also play a role in motivating women to become radicalized (2009, 506-507).



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With regards to Islamic radical groups, their leaders did not condone the use of women as suicide bombers until the 2000s (Dienel et al. 2010, 94-95); however women have participated with Islamic groups since at least the 1970s (Beyler 2003). For example, Fatah allowed women to participate on the battlefield since the 1970s, but it was not until 2002 that women attained “parity” with men on every level of terrorist action, which included suicide bombings (Beyler 2003). Likewise, Yasser Arafat’s “army of roses” speech called upon women to join the Palestinian struggle against Israel as equals, coining the term *Shaheeda* as the Arabic word for a female martyr in the process (Patkin 2004, 82). However, according to Jacques et al.,

... the most favourable social condition for women's inclusion in terrorist groups is equality of gender roles in society, which can often pave the way for equality of gender roles in terrorism, such as in the radical American right-wing groups (2009, 510).

Surely, these findings shed light on the fact that female perpetrated suicide bombings have primarily taken place in the Palestinian/Israeli territories, Iraq, Chechnya, countries where women enjoy more freedom than, for example, Afghanistan, where female perpetrated suicide bombings are low (Bloom 2007; Jacques and Taylor 2009; Schweitzer 2006).

However, greater participation in society, and radical activities, does not always equate to a greater role in society in the long-term. For example, the National Liberation Front (FLN) allowed women greater freedoms in society during the Battle of Algiers against the French, in the late 1950s and early 1960s; nevertheless that did not result in greater freedoms at the end of the conflict (Bloom 2007; Schweitzer 2006). Likewise, women’s increased roles in the Palestinian struggle have not materialized into positions of leadership within Palestinian radical groups (Bloom 2007). Perhaps the lack of leadership positions for females is in part due to deep seeded patriarchal cultural traditions that have proven to be more difficult to overcome than

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some anticipated. Moreover, there is little sign that Al-Qaida, or other Islamist extremist groups, will promote women to senior leadership positions within the near future.

At the present time, patriarchal explanations for the participation of females in radical groups usually involves describing women as victims (Beyler 2003). For example, Patkin notes that women's suicide operations are more cost-effective than men's, both in terms of training time prior to a suicide attack, since women's training is limited to suicide operations, while male instruction could include additional combat and explosive training, and amount of death gratuity after a successful mission; both of which require less funds when compared to typical male perpetrated attacks (Patkin 2004, 86-87), highlighting the exploitation of women's role as a less expensive alternative to male perpetrated attacks. Moreover, women are often persuaded to participate in jihad to maintain honor after recruiters deceive women into breaking cultural norms, therefore making them believe they must atone for their actions through martyrdom (Beyler 2003; Bloom 2007; 2011; Patkin 2004). Likewise, Berko et al. interviewed an Israeli Arab woman who described her indoctrination into jihad:

An Israeli Arab woman agreed to purchase a cellular phone in her own name and hand it over to a terrorism activist. She soon discovered that she incurred a large debt due to his overuse of the phone. Being unable to pay the bills and knowing that the phone was used for purposes of terrorism, she was reluctant to report the incident to the Israeli police. To solve her problem, she contacted Palestinian men from the territories and asked them to pay the bills incurred. She stated that in return, she was willing to transfer explosives or suicide bombers to Israel and to communicate with Islamic Jihad organization members. She was arrested before she had the opportunity to follow through with her offer. According to the interviewee, this incident occurred after her engagement to a man that was supposed to marry her has been cancelled, and as a result she was highly upset and vulnerable (2007, 505).

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On the other hand, a feminist perspective on the radicalization of females paint a picture of empowered women who are the equal of men in the area of violence (Brunner 2005). This paradigm notes that women's roles in terrorism has researched parity with men, a considerable feat given radical Islamic culture where "... women's status as subordinate is fundamental: women are considered unclean, they must be kept hidden and their bodies covered, they must be made subordinate to men" (Patkin 2004, 87). Women's newfound status serves to encourage women to continue their struggle for independence, as noted by Berko et al. in their study:

Many interviewees thought that women's status in Palestinian society has been improving. Some were proud of their efforts to narrow the gender gap in Palestinian society. In the words of one woman, "I see myself as a Palestinian woman fighting for my rights; equality between men and women is the thing I fight about the most." Other women noted that "every woman wants to be strong and do special things on her own, because they always say that women are weak and are incapable of doing things" or "The woman has rights now and she works for herself and succeeds in the Palestinian community." Another woman explained: Whatever a man can do, a woman can also do. [Women can do] things that are very special. For instance, they can raise children and work at the same time (2007, 501).

In addition, some scholars argue that, "In attacking the Israelis, these female suicide bombers are fighting for more than only national liberation; they are fighting for gender liberation as well. For it's true that if women keep joining the ranks of men with explosives, their contribution to the nationalist cause won't be easily forgotten" (Shemin 2002). Likewise, comments such as the ones below give credence to the view that female perpetrated jihad serves to liberate women.

"When a teenage girl straps explosives to her body and blows herself up in a Jerusalem supermarket, you know feminism has arrived, even in places where Germaine Greer is not exactly a household name," says an Australian column writer. "It is a very liberating thing to watch, as a Palestinian woman. It shows how women can be equal to men in

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every way, even in military resistance,” says an expert for gender issues in a UN project in Gaza” (Brunner 2005, 43).

However, the Algerian example demonstrates that women’s participation in radical movements does not always equate to an equal, or greater, role in society (Bloom 2007; Brunner 2005; Shemin 2002).

On the bright side, greater female participation online, at least in Saudi Arabia, has expanded public debate about the role of women in society, and about women’s rights as a whole, which lead to a declaration by Saudi authorities that women will be allowed to vote and stand in elections in 2015 (Alsharif 2011; Benham 2011; Hofheinz 2005). Perhaps this trend will encourage others in the region to reconsider their policies towards women.

In sum, women’s participation with radical groups can generally be explained by two paradigms – patriarchal and/or feminist (Beyler 2003; Jacques and Taylor 2009; Mama 2012; Parashar 2010; Schweitzer 2006). One portrays women as victims, pawns, and cannon fodder for radical Islam, while the other argues that female radicals are fighters for women’s rights. While both paradigms offer salient arguments, the complexity of the subject, coupled with lack of generalizable data, suggests that the debate is far from over.

### **Method**

By analyzing literature regarding the radicalization of women via the Internet, in this paper I sought to describe the extent to which women’s engagement in predominantly patriarchal radicalism is leveling the playing field and leading to a somewhat more emancipated woman

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among radical groups. This is especially true for Muslim women in traditional societies, where their actions outside the family home are controlled, limiting their interactions with others in person, while on the contrary, the Internet allows these women to interact with strangers without fear of losing personal and familial honor.

Analysis of the radicalization of women through the Internet is primarily confined to secondary sources of data, be it content analysis of radical websites or literature reviews, and while some primary source data does exist, it is limited in scope, tends to be focused on men, and difficult to generalize without having to conduct future research to cover gaps in the knowledge base.

For example, articles note that the increase in the recruitment of women by radical groups might be a strategy to expand a group's war globally (Dienel et al. 2010); list the roles women can play in radical organizations (Dienel et al. 2010; Knop 2008; Noor and Hussain 2009); list the operational advantages females bring to the jihad (Dienel et al. 2010; Knop 2008; Noor and Hussain 2009); identify the location, and number of attacks carried out by women (Dienel et al. 2010; Jacques and Taylor 2012; Knop 2008); and describe the means by which women are radicalized (Dienel et al. 2010; Knop 2008). Furthermore, case studies of Muslim female extremists are limited, and of those available, their online activity is either not noted or fully explored. Unfortunately, the analysis and information provided does not transition from description to explanation. In other words, the authors identify the logic behind Islamist propaganda aimed at women online, but unfortunately the explanation of why said propaganda is

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effective, and the reason for its effectiveness, is absent. Likewise, literature regarding the emancipation of women is, at best, spotty and inconclusive.

Similarly, primary source information reviewed in this paper that addresses women's radicalization through the Internet tend to focus on venues of radicalization, such as social networks (Bermingham et al. 2009), website and chat rooms (Ducol 2012; Knop 2008), but unfortunately the information is not specific to the Ummah, but rather focuses on Western converts to Islam. Studies addressing Islamist radical websites tend to be unable to discern between male and female users, given that some users disguise their gender online, which is understandable due to the patriarchal nature of traditional Islam (Knop 2008). Moreover, literature specific to Muslim women and their activities online have been conducted in the West, with study subjects that live and study in a Western country (T. N. Walters, Quinn, and Walters 2003). Additionally, studies specific to Muslim women in the Ummah, conducted in a Muslim country, do not tend to focus specifically on the role of the Internet in the radicalization of women, but rather only suggest a connection (Noor and Hussain 2009). However, the limited Internet penetration into many Muslim countries might explain why women's access to the medium is not the primary focus of study.

Analysis of the Internet and the radicalization of Muslim women revealed a reliance on secondary sources and data, coupled with a lack of statistical data, similar, as noted by Silke, to the field of general terrorism research in the 1990s (2001). The combined issues of a shortage of primary sources and limited statistical data raise questions about the reliability of results and conclusions drawn within the available research (Jacques and Taylor 2009). The lack of data is

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of concern because according to Silke, subject areas that fail to make the transition from description to explanation are left with gaps in their knowledge base and an uncertainty over the true causes and factors at work (2001). In other words, in order to fully understand the motivation of Islamic women towards radicalization, one must transition from describing the effects of radicalization to explaining how and why women utilize the Internet to become radicalized, followed by testing of theories to solidify our knowledge of this subject, which is the ultimate goal of my research.

### **Conclusion**

The Internet is leveling the playing field for women to join radical organizations that were previously unavailable or taboo but are now accessible virtually and anonymously, from the comfort of home. Women are increasingly using the Internet for jihadist and other radical activities, and this is especially true for women in traditional Islamic cultures that restrict women's activities outside the home (Cunningham 2003; 2007; Ducoi 2012; Lubold 2010; Zedalis 2004). The Internet's ability to spread hate, terror, and other radical ideas and messages, all of which can be transmitted at the speed of light, anonymously, and available on demand appears to be perfectly suited for both recruiters and those seeking a role in radical activities (Wright 2008). With its built-in anonymity and continuous availability – 24 hours a day, seven days a week – the Internet is an ideal venue for women in repressive countries to interact with likeminded individuals or organizations without having to sacrifice or tarnish their standing in the community or among their family (Mostarom and Yasin 2010).

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Female radicalization is not only a Western phenomena but is a global one (Cunningham 2003; Daly 2009; Jacques and Taylor 2012; Noor and Hussain 2009) and should be monitored and studied in order to better understand, and ultimately prevent, the circumstances by which radicalization occurs. Future research should focus on women's Internet activities in the Middle East, to include sites visited and blogs posted and/or read. Moreover, public policy should be directed at engaging women as a means to prevent, or abate, radical messages that are aimed at recruiting.

The Internet is a tool that can be both constructive and destructive. The Internet allows women to interact with the world, which is important in more restrictive cultures, and helps build social capital through bridging; however the opposite can occur through bonding, the strengthening of bonds between radicals that can lead to the building of the "dark side" of social capital (Putnam 2000). A better understanding of the role the Internet plays in the radicalization of women would make it easier for leaders to prevent, or abate, radical organizations from swelling their numbers with new recruits.



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