



# WOMEN IN AMERICAN VIOLENT EXTREMISM: AN EXAMINATION OF FAR-RIGHT AND SALAFI- JIHADIST MOVEMENTS

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The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or George Washington University. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

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## Executive Summary

This report compares women's participation in far-right and salafi-jihadist movements in the United States through the examination of four case studies: the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. To do so, the authors apply a unique analytical framework that examines three key aspects of women's participation to compare similarities and differences. First, the report takes a top-down approach to analyze how organizations conceptualize women's roles. Second, it takes a bottom-up approach to explore how women have participated in violent extremism in the United States. Finally, it uses a gendered lens to address how groups have responded when women have participated in violent extremism in America. Key observations and findings include:

- To understand how groups incorporate women into their ranks, it is essential to look at group ideologies and goals. These factors help determine women's participation in violent extremism.
- Far-right and salafi-jihadist movements often adhere to gendered stereotypes, patriarchal societies, and power dynamics that incorporate both overt and underlying gendered beliefs that women must circumvent. These traditional gender roles ensure that women are rarely visible on the 'frontlines' of group activities. This in turn enables men to take on more public-facing and violent roles, leaving women's contributions to these movements often underplayed, underexplored, and misunderstood.
- Groups driven by conservative gendered ideologies are more likely to cultivate gender segregation and the exclusion of women in their ranks. This can result in the removal of women's agency and make it harder for women to undertake active, tactical, or leadership roles in organizations. On the other hand, while pervaded by casual misogyny, far-right anti-government groups are more likely to incorporate women into their ranks, while at the same time viewing women as pawns to further their causes.

- Women involved in violent extremism in the U.S. see themselves contributing to values and ideals they believe in. Despite gendered conceptualizations within violent extremist organizations, women find ways to engage in these movements in various manners, sometimes beyond the roles created by groups. While organizations may have clear conceptualizations of women's roles and gender dynamics, women themselves can be inspired by groups and movements, and reinterpret dictated gender roles in order to shape their own actions.
- Far-right movements in the U.S. provide women with greater personal capacity to participate in public-facing and leadership roles. In contrast, women in salafi-jihadist movements participate in auxiliary and, more frequently, operational roles that serve the strategic activities of the groups. However, women operating in the U.S. and inspired by salafi-jihadist ideology often have greater autonomy to carry out violent acts as they operate outside of the direct control of groups.
- When faced with women's participation in violent extremism, far-right and salafi-jihadist movements respond to women in varying ways, much of the time guided by their ideological and strategic goals. Women's engagement in violent extremism is often due to and shaped by these ideological and goal-oriented drivers.

## Introduction

September 11, 2001, had earth-shattering effects on America's understanding of national security and the dynamics of violent extremism.<sup>1</sup> Salafi-jihadist movements dominated this period of American history, while other forms of violent extremism, even those that brewed close to boiling, were often ignored or pushed aside in public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, January 6, 2021, was a catalyst that once again changed the national conversation (and comprehension) of violent extremism in America, expanding our understanding to include far-right extremism. Today, a dual threat of terrorism in the U.S. comes from homegrown violent extremist (HVE)<sup>3</sup> and domestic violent extremist (DVE)<sup>4</sup> groups.<sup>5</sup> Foreign salafi-jihadist groups and foreign racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) have greatly influenced extremism in the United States, both ideologically and cooperatively. Within each of these categories, there are several sub-categories, with the most lethal threat from HVE's originating from salafi-jihadists inspired by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and DVE's dominated by RMVE and

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, Joana. 2020. *A Woman's Place: US Counterterrorism since 9/11*. Oxford University Press.; Geltzer, Joshua A. 2009. *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Al-Qaeda: Signalling and the Terrorist World-View*. Routledge.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford. 2020. *Homegrown: ISIS in America*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, Brett, Will Carless, Marisa Kwiatkowski, and Tricia L. Nadolny. 2021. "A 2009 Warning about Right-Wing Extremism Was Engulfed by Politics. There Are Signs It's Happening Again." *USA Today*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2021/01/25/twelve-years-before-capitol-riot>.

<sup>3</sup> "HVEs are defined by the FBI and DHS as a person of any citizenship who has lived and/or operated primarily in the United States or its territories who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization, but is acting independently of direction by a foreign terrorist organization.;" "US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators." 2021. *The National Counterterrorism Center*. p. 3.

[https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/Mobilization\\_Indicators\\_Booklet\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/Mobilization_Indicators_Booklet_2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> "DVEs are defined by the FBI and DHS as an individual based and operating primarily within the United States or its territories without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power who seeks to further political or social goals, wholly or in part, through unlawful acts of force or violence.;" *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Matthew G. Olsen. 2022. "Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen Delivers Keynote Address at George Washington University Program on Extremism Symposium" Wednesday, June 15, 2022.

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-matthew-g-olsen-delivers-keynote-address-george-washington>.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Blyth Crawford, and Valentin Wutke. 2021. "Rise of the Reactionaries: Comparing the Ideologies of Salafi-jihadism and White Supremacist Extremism." The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.

militia violent extremists (MVE). Thus, it is crucial to understand how these trends have manifested over the last decade, along with their core beliefs.

Women have been understudied in both far-right and salafi-jihadist movements. While these movements have many ideological differences, they also share some similarities. Both are fundamentally reactionary movements that are hyper-masculine in nature.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, historically, they overlap in their framing of women's roles; both far-right and salafi-jihadist movements often promote strict gender roles that designate women fundamentally to the private sphere while promoting men in public spaces. Therefore, American women in public-facing roles in these movements are the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, as men take on more prominent and violent roles, women's contributions to American violent extremism can often be underplayed, underexplored, and misunderstood.

Notwithstanding the constant repetition of narratives surrounding women's inherent peacefulness, research on both the far-right and salafi-jihadism have shown that women involved in violent extremism provide logistical support, lend reputation to a cause, facilitate recruitment, and increase group stability.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as both of these

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<sup>6</sup> Aslam, Maleeha. 2012. *Gender-Based Explosions: The Nexus between Muslim Masculinities, Jihadist Islamism and Terrorism*. United Nations University Press.; Blum, Alice. 2017. "Men in the Battle for the Brains: Constructions of Masculinity within the "Identitary Generation." In *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: p. 321-334.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Blyth Crawford, Valentin Wutke. 2021. "Rise of the Reactionaries.;" Phelan, Alexandra. 2020. "Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*: p. 1-9.; Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Oxford University Press.; Worth, Owen. 2021 "Reasserting Hegemonic Masculinity: Women's Leadership within the Far Right." *International Affairs*. 97(2): 503-521.

<sup>7</sup> Cunningham, Karla J. 2003. "Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 26(3): 171-195.; Davis, Jessica. 2017. *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Jihad and the Islamic State*. Rowman & Littlefield.; Jacques, Karen and Paul J. Taylor. 2009. "Female Terrorism: A Review." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 21(3): 499-515.; Loken, Meredith. 2020. "Both Needed and Threatened': Armed Mothers in Militant Visuals." *Security Dialogue*. 52(1):21-44.; Manekin, Devorah and Reed M Wood. 2020. "Framing the Narrative: Female Fighters, External Audience Attitudes, and Transnational Support for Armed Rebellions." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 64(9):1638-1665.; Ness, Cindy D. 2008. "Female Terrorism and Militancy." In *Agency, Utility, and Organization*. Taylor & Francis.; Pearson, Elizabeth, Emily Winterbotham, and Katherine E. Brown. 2021. *Countering Violent Extremism: Making Gender Matter*. Springer Nature.; Sjoberg, Laura and Caron E. Gentry, eds. 2011. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*. University of Georgia Press.

movements seek to ingrain their ideology into the next generation, women as wives and mothers are seen as vital to the success of the cause.<sup>8</sup>

Despite being an underexamined field, some studies have looked at women's roles in American salafi-jihadist and far-right violent extremism, respectively.<sup>9</sup> While researchers have begun to compare far-right and salafi-jihadist groups,<sup>10</sup> very few studies have compared women in these movements,<sup>11</sup> and even fewer studies have compared

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<sup>8</sup> Jeansonne, Glen. 1996. *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II*. University of Chicago Press.; Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. "The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad." *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 26(5): 780-802.; Winter, Charlie, and Devorah Margolin. 2017. "The Mujahidat Dilemma: Female Combatants and the Islamic State." *CTC Sentinel*. 10(7): 23-28.; McRae, Elizabeth Gillespie. 2018. *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*. Oxford University Press.; Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry, eds. 2011. *Women, Gender, and Terrorism*.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, Audrey. 2016. "Cruel Intentions: Female Jihadists in America." The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.; Blee, Kathleen M. 1991. *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.; González, Alessandra L., Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak. 2014. "How Women Engage Homegrown Terrorism." *Feminist Criminology*. 9(4): 344-366.; Darby, Seyward. 2020. *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.; Latif, Mehr, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele, and Pete Simi. 2020. "Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*: 1-18.; Leidig, Eviane. "Lipstick Nationalism: Far-Right Female Influencers," Forthcoming, <https://www.evianeleidig.com/lipstick-nationalism>.; Matfess, Hilary and Devorah Margolin. 2022. "The Women of January 6th: A Gendered Analysis of the 21st Century American Far-Right." The Program on Extremism at George Washington University.; Pun, Raymond. 2020. "The Case of Jihad Jane: Engendering and Embodying Power, Femininity and Access." *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*. 3(3): 912-921.

<sup>10</sup> Abbas, Tahir. 2017. "Ethnicity and Politics in Contextualising Far Right and Islamist Extremism." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 11(3): 54-61.; McDonald, Kevin. 2020. "Jihadist and Far-Right Extremism: Subjectivity, Embodiment and Imaginaries of Violence." In *United by Violence, Divided by Cause?* edited by La Toya Waha: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG: 31-50.; Silva, Jason R. 2022. "Ideologically Motivated Mass Shootings: A Crime Script Analysis of Far-Right, Far-Left, and Jihadist-Inspired Attacks in the United States." *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*: 1-23.; Pearson, Elizabeth. 2018. "Why Men Fight and Women Don't: Masculinity and Extremist Violence." In *Debunking Myths on Gender and Extremism*, Institute for Global Change.; Brzuszkiewicz, Sara. 2020. "Jihadism and Far-Right Extremism: Shared Attributes with Regard to Violence Spectacularisation." *European View*. 19(1): 71-79.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Blyth Crawford, Valentin Wutke. 2021. "Rise of the Reactionaries."

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, Elizabeth. 2020. "Gendered Reflections? Extremism in the UK's Radical Right and al-Muhajiroun Networks." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*: 1-24.; Morgan, Skyler J., and Steven M. Chermak. 2021. "In the Shadows: A Content Analysis of the Media's Portrayal of Gender in Far-Right, Far-Left, and Jihadist Terrorists." *Deviant Behavior* 42(8): 933-949.; Leidig, Eviane. 2021. "From Love Jihad to Grooming Gangs: Tracing Flows of the Hypersexual Muslim Male through Far-Right Female Influencers." *Religions*. 12(12): 1083.

women in violent extremist activities in the American context.<sup>12</sup> A gap still remains in understanding women's roles in these movements, as well as conceptualizations of gender ideology across these movements.

In this report, we create a framework for comparing and contrasting women's roles in violent extremism in the United States across two ideological movements. First, we will define the parameters of this research project, emphasize the importance of utilizing a gendered lens, and introduce the four case studies: the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. In Part I, the report addresses a top-down approach, exploring how organizations conceptualize women's roles across these movements. Next, in Part II, we take a bottom-up approach, examining how women have participated in these movements. Then, in Part III, we discuss how organizations react when female members challenge specific gender dynamics of the groups. Finally, the report highlights the importance of a gendered lens and concludes with the main findings.

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<sup>12</sup> Matusitz, Jonathan, and Elena Berisha. 2020. *Female Terrorism in America: Past and Current Perspectives*. Routledge.; Gonzalez-Perez, Margaret. 2008. *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups*. Routledge.; Valeri, Robin Maria, and Kevin Borgeson. 2018. *Terrorism in America*. Routledge.

## Methodology

This report examines women’s participation in far-right and salafi-jihadist violent extremism in the United States. In order to address this large undertaking, our research focuses on four case studies, two from the far-right (the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers) and two from salafi-jihadism (inspired by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State). Utilizing these case studies, we seek to ask three questions. First, how do violent extremist groups operating in America conceptualize women’s roles? Second, how have women participated in violent extremist groups in America? And third, in these male-dominated spaces, when women have broken through the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ to participate in violent extremism in America, how have groups responded? As such, this report utilizes a unique framework that looks at both top-down and bottom-up understandings of women in American violent extremism to find similarities and differences.

The cases examined in this study are U.S. citizens, as well as permanent and long-term residents. This report uses primary and secondary open-source data, including court documents, news sources, social media posts, group propaganda, group leadership statements, and academic research. We have predominantly consulted English-language documents or documents that have been translated into English for this undertaking. Additionally, we apply a gendered lens to this research, which is discussed below.

### *A Gendered Lens*

History is often written by those in power. As Sonya O. Rose argues, “women had been neglected as historical subjects because historians viewed history to be almost singularly about the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics, arenas in which the actors were men.”<sup>13</sup> But such a narrow focus can lead to “gender blindness,”<sup>14</sup> or the idea that individuals ignore, or choose not to recognize, differences between how they view, treat, or acknowledge different genders. This is specifically true in the examination of violent extremist movements such as those in the far-right or salafi-jihadism, where women take on less public-facing roles and are thus harder to quantify. As such, it is vital to apply a gendered lens, in which research considers the

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<sup>13</sup> Rose, Sonya O. 2010. *What is Gender History?* Malden, MA: Polity Press, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Matusitz, Jonathan and Elena Berisha. 2021. *Female Terrorism in America*, p. 2.

gendered division of labor, norms, and appeals in violent extremist movements.<sup>15</sup> The failure to do so reinforces antiquated notions of gender identity.<sup>16</sup> This, in turn, has led to underestimations of women’s capabilities and engagement in violent extremism.<sup>17</sup>

Gender is a social construct that refers to “the socially defined roles, attitudes and values which society ascribes as appropriate for one sex or the other.”<sup>18</sup> These distinctions are very important when bearing in mind concepts that depict women as nurturers or in traditional roles, leading many to question why women would be involved in violent extremism.<sup>19</sup> For a long time, this biased way of thinking has caused female violent extremists to be viewed as passive actors, influenced by men and familial ties, taking away their agency and reinforcing maternalistic standards.<sup>20</sup> Yet, there are many examples where women take active roles in violent extremism, including as supporters, leaders, operatives, spies, recruiters, organizers, propagandists, and fundraisers.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, when considering women’s involvement in violent extremism, gender concepts can be both advantageous and unfavorable depending on how gender is perceived and enforced within a group or movement, and how they are applied outwardly in society at large. As such, we argue that it is important to acknowledge the gendered lens both from the perspective of the group, as well as from the perspective of the individual.

Structurally, this report proceeds in three parts. First, it studies how far-right and salafi-jihadist movements conceptualize women’s roles by examining their ideology and propaganda. It will focus on the organizational framing of women’s participation in these

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<sup>15</sup> Matfess, Hilary and Devorah Margolin. 2022. “The Women of January 6th.” p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Combs, Cynthia C. 2003. *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> For more information, please see: Alexander, Audrey. 2016. “Cruel Intentions.”; Blee, Kathleen M. 1991. *Women of the Klan*.; Scott, Trisha. 2016. “Female Terrorists: A Dangerous Blind Spot for the United States Government.” *University of Maryland Law Journal of Race, Religion, Gender and Class*. 16(2): 287-308.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, Ediom-Ubong and Inima E. Nelson. 2010. “Violence Against Women in Nigeria: The Factors and Dynamics.” *The Constitution*. 10(2): p.80.; Butler, Judith. 1986. “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*.” *Yale French Studies*. 72: 35–49.

<sup>19</sup> Matusitz, Jonathan and Elena Berisha. 2021. *Female Terrorism in America*.

<sup>20</sup> Gentry, Caron E. 2009. “Twister Maternalism.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 11(2): 235-252.

<sup>21</sup> Leidig, Eviane. 2012. “‘We Are Worth Fighting For’: Women in Far-Right Extremism.” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.; Mahan, Sue and Pamala L. Griset. 2012. *Terrorism in Perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.; Matusitz, Jonathan, and Elena Berisha. 2021. *Female Terrorism in America*.; Gonzalez-Perez, Margaret. 2008. *Women and Terrorism*.

movements. Second, it explores how women have participated in these groups. To do so, it pulls from primary and secondary open-source information examining women's motivations and personal experiences. Third, this report applies a gendered lens to explore how these groups and movements respond when women challenge the gendered assumptions of these ideologies. To look at how the far-right and salafi-jihadists conceptualize women's roles in violent extremism in the U.S., we must first define these movements.

### ***Far-Right***

In March 2021, the Office for the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) assessed that domestic violent extremists (DVEs) presented “an elevated threat” to the United States. The American far-right is difficult to categorize since it is “not a monolith but a convoluted landscape encompassing an array of movements and causes.”<sup>22</sup> This report will use the term “far-right” as a general header for analyzing the case studies. Due to the problematic nature of categorizing the collection of far-right ideologies and movements, we will rely on the United States Government's definition of the threat.

Per the ODNI's definition, domestic violent extremists (DVEs) include among other groups, racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs/REMVEs),<sup>23</sup> along with militia violent extremists (MVEs),<sup>24</sup> who together pose “the most lethal” DVE threat to the Homeland.<sup>25</sup> This reflects similar findings produced by the Federal Bureau of

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<sup>22</sup> Pitcavage, Mark. 2019. “Surveying the Landscape of the American Far Right.” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> RMVEs are “DVEs with ideological agendas derived from bias, often related to race or ethnicity, held by the actor against others, including a given population group.” Moreover, RMVEs are not monolithic, with many instances of RMVEs who adhere to an intersecting and conflicting array of ideologies as they seek justification for their planned acts of violence. This reactionary ideology takes on a dehumanizing and segregated tone with notions of superiority in relation to ethnicity, race, religion, gender, and sexuality.; “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021.” 2021. *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*. p. 4

<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> MVEs are defined as “DVEs who take overt steps to violently resist or facilitate the overthrow of the U.S. government in support of their belief that the U.S. government is purposely exceeding its constitutional authority and is trying to establish a totalitarian regime.”; Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 2.; The assessment also states that racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (hereafter RMVEs) are most likely to commit mass-casualty assaults on civilians, while MVEs tend to target government entities and law enforcement. Furthermore, recent examples of RMVE activity appear

Investigation (FBI), Department of Justice (DOJ), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).<sup>26</sup>

The following section introduces the two case studies through which we will examine trends within far-right groups in the United States in this report: the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers.

### *Case: the Proud Boys*

The Proud Boys are a highly misogynistic, far-right extremist organization with semi-independent chapters in the United States and abroad.<sup>27</sup> According to the Anti-Defamation League, there are 119 “active” chapters “across 46 states” that are acknowledged by the national Proud Boys organization.<sup>28</sup> The group, formed in 2016 by Canadian-American extreme far-right pundit Gavin McInnes, has an estimated 3,000-8,000 members in the United States, as well as a much larger following internationally

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to be driven by cross-ideological concepts, mobilization, narratives that defy traditional bucketing, and group-centric categorization that has long defined American counterterrorism strategy. See: Miller-Idriss, Cynthia and Brian Hughes. 2021. “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism.” *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>.; see also, “IntelBrief: ODNI Releases Report Detailing Domestic Violent Extremism Threat.” 2021. *The Soufan Center*. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-19/>

<sup>26</sup> Clifford, Bennett. 2021. “Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (RMVE) Attack Planning and United States Federal Responses, 2014-2019.” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University and the National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology, and Education Center. p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Kutner, Samantha. 2020. “Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.

<sup>28</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2020. “Proud Boys.” <https://www.adl.org/proudboys>. While this number is a useful barometer, it is important to recognize that the group intentionally obfuscates the size of its membership, number of national and international chapters, the connectivity between them, and the leadership structure and hierarchy. This muddying of the waters has grown even more pronounced following the arrest of national chairman Enrique Tarrío and other chapter leaders for their alleged role in the January 6 Insurrection

and on social media platforms.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, in February 2021, Canada officially designated the Proud Boys as a terrorist group under its criminal law.<sup>30</sup>

The Proud Boys describe themselves as “Western chauvinists,”<sup>31</sup> with members holding Islamophobic, anti-immigrant, transphobic, ethno-nationalist, fascist, and sometimes white supremacist and antisemitic ideologies.<sup>32</sup> The Proud Boys’ use of political violence involves street fighting, along with violent antagonism aimed at political opponents.<sup>33</sup> The group falls under the U.S. definition of RMVE due to their engagement in violence and white nationalist and anti-immigrant leanings.

Since December 31, 2021, approximately 83 individuals associated with the Proud Boys have committed ideologically motivated crimes across the U.S.,<sup>34</sup> including participants in the siege of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021.<sup>35</sup> The Proud Boys have also co-organized and co-attended events with known accelerationist and white supremacist entities, with some Proud Boys members holding membership or moving to groups like The Base, Atomwaffen Division, Identity Evropa, and the Rise Above Movement.<sup>36</sup> Although leadership at the national level of the organization has promoted political violence, they have refrained from overtly employing terrorist tactics, while turning a blind eye to some Proud Boys members who have dual membership with groups like The Base and Atomwaffen Division.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kriner, Matthew and Jon Lewis. 2021. “Pride & Prejudice: The Violent Evolution of the Proud Boys.” *CTC Sentinel* 14, n. 6: pp. 26-38; Kutner, Samantha. 2020. “Swiping Right.”; Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Proud Boys.” Accessed May 2022. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/proud-boys>; Coutts, Sharona. 2017. “How Hate Goes ‘Mainstream’: Gavin McInnes and the Proud Boys.” *Rewire News Group*, August 28, 2017.

<https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2017/08/28/hate-goes-mainstream-gavin-mcinnis-proud-boys/>.

<sup>30</sup> Austen, Ian. 2021. “Canada Formally Declares Proud Boys a Terrorist Group,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/canada/canada-proud-boys-terror-group.html>

<sup>31</sup> Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. “Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics.” *START*.

[https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local\\_attachments/Proud%20Boy%20Crimes%20and%20Characteristics%20January%202022%20FINAL.pdf](https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/Proud%20Boy%20Crimes%20and%20Characteristics%20January%202022%20FINAL.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2020. “Proud Boys.”

<sup>33</sup> Kriner, Michael and Jon Lewis. 2021. “Pride & Prejudice.”

<sup>34</sup> Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. “Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Kriner, Matthew and Jon Lewis. 2021. “Pride & Prejudice,” p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Crosbie, Jack. 2018. “Proud Bous Failed to Redact Their New Dumb Bylaws and Accidentally Doxxed Their ‘Elders’.” *Splinter*, November 28, 2018. <https://splinternews.com/proud-boys-failed-to-redact->

Recently, a handful of Proud Boys chapters reportedly disavowed the leadership of the national Proud Boys organization after the events of January 6, 2021, while authoritative figures of the group grappled with future directions of the organization.<sup>38</sup> Other chapters, by contrast, have been emboldened to act independently and latch onto grievances and narratives championed by the reactive right, mobilizing offline to protest and threaten local school boards, election officials, and members of the LGBTQ community.<sup>39</sup> This splintering effect, along with the semi-independent offshoot elements of the Proud Boys, will likely pose challenges to law enforcement in the future.

### *Case: the Oath Keepers*

The Oath Keepers are an anti-government extremist group that claims to be dedicated to defending the U.S. Constitution. The group, officially formed in March 2009 by Stewart Rhodes,<sup>40</sup> represents one of the largest anti-government, far-right militias in the United States.<sup>41</sup> In their own words, the Oath Keepers describe themselves as “a non-partisan

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their-new-dumb-bylaws-and-a-1830700905.; Moreover, via Twitter in 2017, Gavin McInnes announced the establishment of a paramilitary offshoot of the Proud Boys called the Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights (FOAK), with Enrique Tarrio, the head of the Proud Boys, among its members. See: Kriner, Matthew and Jon Lewis. 2021. “Pride & Prejudice.”

<sup>38</sup> Carless, Will. 2021. “Proud Boys Splintering After Capitol Riot, Revelation About Leader. Will More Radical Factions Emerge?” *USA Today*, February 12, 2021.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/02/12/proud-boys-splintering-after-capitol-riot-revelations-leader/6709017002/>

<sup>39</sup> Bellware, Kim. 2022. “Proud Boys Disrupt Drag Queen Story Hour Event, Prompting Hate-Crime Probe.” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/06/13/proud-boy-drag-queen/>; Frenkel, Sheera. 2021. “Proud Boys Regrouping, Focusing on School Boards and Town Councils.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/proud-boys-local-issues.html>;

Weill, Kelly. 2021. “Proud Boys are Teaming up with Anti-Maskers to Threaten School Boards Over COVID Mandates.” *The Daily Beast*, August 13, 2021.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/proud-boys-are-teaming-up-with-anti-maskers-to-threaten-school-boards-over-covid-mandates>

<sup>40</sup> Before its official founding, the Oath Keepers started out as a political blog in 2008, run by Rhodes, which morphed into a platform where rallies were organized, with it eventually turning into the self-appointed organization seen today.; see: McQueen, Eric. 2021. “Examining Extremism: The Oath Keepers,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers>.; Jackson, Sam. 2020. *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group*. New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Lucas, Ryan. 2021. “Who are the Oath Keepers? Militia Group, Founder scrutinized in Capitol Riot Probe,” *NPR*, April 10, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/10/985428402/who-are-the-oath-keepers-militia-group-founder-scrutinized-in-capitol-riot-probe>.

association” that pledges “to fulfill the oath all military and police take to ‘defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.’”<sup>42</sup> Although they claim to fight tyranny, the group’s former spokesman, Jason Van Tatenhove, described the Oath Keepers as “selling the revolution,”<sup>43</sup> with many of its members espousing a radical “libertarian interpretation of American citizenship”<sup>44</sup> and the U.S. Constitution. The organization seeks to “reach, teach, and inspire” its members and the American public about the perceived threat that the U.S. government poses to Americans, while educating them in defense and preparation.<sup>45</sup> The Oath Keepers have offered voluntary security services and engaged in vigilantism at events and protests in the U.S.,<sup>46</sup> with members of the group present at events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014,<sup>47</sup> the Unite the Right rally in

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<sup>42</sup> Oath Keepers Website. n.d. “About the Oath Keepers.” Accessed June 14, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Oath Keepers.” Accessed May 2022.  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/oath-keepers>

<sup>44</sup> Newhouse, Alex and Sean Kitson. 2020. “The Oath Keepers and Spreading COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories,” *Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism*, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, Sam. 2020. *Oath Keepers*.

<sup>46</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Oath Keepers.”; In reality, this strategy was aimed at giving the Oath Keepers a veneer of legitimacy by painting themselves as neutral observers on scene to support law enforcement - all in furtherance of the goal of the Oath Keepers to ultimately be recognized as quasi-official law enforcement representatives who could and would step in with force in the event of civil unrest. Crucially, the rhetoric put forth by the group and its members had long attempted to present their mobilization as purely defensive, lawful actions in support of law enforcement is and should be viewed as nothing more than a mechanism through which to hide the totality of the Oath Keepers’ conduct. This trend is starkly evident in the events of January 6, as the group allegedly engaged in plans to obstruct the congressional proceeding and commit seditious conspiracy - while publicly claiming they were on Capitol grounds to fight Antifa and in expectation that President Trump would use the Insurrection Act as a call to arms for the group to be used as an ad-hoc militia. See, Jackson, Sam, Matthew Kriner, and Lewis, Jon. 2022. “Oath Keepers Leader Indictment Just the Tip of a Scary Iceberg,” NBC News, January 17, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/oath-keepers-leader-indictment-just-tip-scary-iceberg-ncna1287555>; Kriner, Matthew and Jon Lewis. 2021. “The Oath Keepers and Their Role in the January 6 Insurrection,” *CTC Sentinel*. 14(10): 1-18.; Lewis, Jon. 2022. “The Role of the Oath Keepers in the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol,” Written testimony before the Alaska House Military and Veterans’ Affairs Committee. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/The%20Role%20of%20the%20Oath%20Keepers%20in%20the%20January%206%20Attack%20on%20the%20United%20States%20Capitol%20Lewis%20Testimony%2002102022.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Fowler, Sara. 2015. “Ferguson Unrest: Who are the Mysterious ‘Oath Keepers?’” *BBC News*.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33867245>.

Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017,<sup>48</sup> the 2014 Bundy Ranch standoff in Nevada,<sup>49</sup> and the siege on the U.S. Capitol building in 2021.<sup>50</sup>

At the national level, the structural makeup of the organization consists of Rhodes as the president, along with a vice president and a board of directors. At the local level, the Oath Keepers comprises state chapters and county militias.<sup>51</sup> Estimated membership numbers vary, with the organization claiming 30,000 members;<sup>52</sup> however, the Anti-Defamation League places membership numbers closer to 1,000-3,000,<sup>53</sup> with some researchers appraising it to be around 5,000.<sup>54</sup> As part of their recruitment strategy, the Oath Keepers have worked to enlist members of law enforcement, the military, veterans, and other individuals from public safety and security domains.<sup>55</sup> Leaked membership documents also reveal that at one point, close to two-thirds of Oath Keeper members had military or law enforcement backgrounds, while 10 percent were considered active duty.<sup>56</sup>

Members of the Oath Keepers have also been involved in a number of criminal activities.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, federal prosecution proceedings show that the Oath Keepers, along with the Three Percenters, another MVE movement, were actively involved in pre-

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<sup>48</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Oath Keepers.”

<sup>49</sup> Lucas, Ryan. 2021. “Who are the Oath Keepers?”

<sup>50</sup> The United States Department of Justice. 2022. “Leader of Oath Keepers and 10 Other Individuals Indicted in Federal Court for Seditious Conspiracy and other Offenses Related to U.S. Capitol Breach.” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/leader-oath-keepers-and-10-other-individuals-indicted-federal-court-seditious-conspiracy-and>

<sup>51</sup> McQueen, Eric. 2021. “Examining Extremism.”

<sup>52</sup> See, McQueen, Eric. 2021. “Examining Extremism;” and Neidig, Harper and Rebecca Beitsch, “Capitol Riot Probes Home in on Oath Keepers.” *The Hill*, April 25, 2021. <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/550067-capitol-riot-probes-home-in-on-oath-keepers/>

<sup>53</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2020. “Oath Keepers.” <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/oath-keepers>

<sup>54</sup> McQueen, Eric. 2021. “Examining Extremism.”; All membership numbers for the Oath Keepers are considered rough numbers since active membership versus passive membership (those who send in donations, or are online members) is not always clear.

<sup>55</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Oath Keepers.”

<sup>56</sup> Giglio, Mike. 2020. “A Pro-Trump Militant Group Has Recruited Thousands of Police, Soldiers, and Veterans,” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/11/right-wing-militias-civil-war/616473/>

<sup>57</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2020. “Oath Keepers.”

planning the U.S. Capitol siege on January 6, 2021.<sup>58</sup> On January 4, 2021, a “Call to Action” was posted on the Oath Keepers website, which encouraged people to deploy to Washington D.C., “in support of President Trump’s fight to defeat the enemies foreign and domestic who are attempting a coup, through the massive vote fraud and related attacks on our Republic.”<sup>59</sup> The “Call to Action” also displays Oath Keeper operational management, noting that in a “worse case scenario,” their “armed and equipped” teams would be “on standby,”<sup>60</sup> which demonstrates premeditated planning.<sup>61</sup> Oath Keepers president Stewart Rhodes is allegedly involved in this planning, including organizing a “Quick Reaction Force” for the event while also alluding to Oath Keepers being involved in further actions by walking “the founders’ path” even after the events of January 6.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Salafi-jihadism***

9/11 has, in many ways, defined the salafi-jihadist threat in the United States. Since then, the ideology’s proponents have demonstrated capabilities in the U.S. and abroad, with groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State attracting followers and inspiring attacks in the West.<sup>63</sup> Salafi-jihadists promote Islamism through violence, using their interpretation of the Quran to justify their actions.<sup>64</sup> Despite specific ideological differences, violence is a sacred responsibility carried out as a result of a dogmatic

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<sup>58</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2021. “This is our House! A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants.”

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/This-Is-Our-House.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> Oath Keepers Website. 2021. “Call to Action: Oath Keepers Deploying to DC To Protest Events, Speakers and Attendees on Jan 5-6: Time to Stand!” <https://oathkeepers.org/2021/01/oath-keepers-deploying-to-dc-to-protect-events-speakers-attendees-on-jan-5-6-time-to-stand/>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2021. “This is Our House!”

<sup>62</sup> Urquhart, Jim. 2022. “Feds Say Oath Keepers Plot Went Beyond Jan. 6 Attack On Capitol,” *NBC News*, February 16, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/feds-say-oath-keepers-plot-went-jan-6-attack-capitol-rcna16474>.

<sup>63</sup> Hoffman, Bruce and David Dryer. 2007. “Terrorism in the West: Al-Qaeda’s Role in ‘Homegrown’ Terror,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. 13(2): 91-99; Vidino, Lorenzo and Seamus Hughes. 2015. “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” The Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

<sup>64</sup> Holbrook, Donald. 2010. “Using the Qur’an to Justify Terrorist Violence: Analysing Selective Application of the Qur’an in English-Language Militant Islamist Discourse.” *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 4(3): 15-28.

imperative.<sup>65</sup> In a modern context, salafi-jihadists direct their attention toward those who do not follow their beliefs, those of differing religions, and Muslim-majority countries they view as illegitimate.<sup>66</sup> Violence is used as a tool toward their wider goals of taking possession of territory and establishing an Islamic state (caliphate).<sup>67</sup>

The two dominant salafi-jihadist movements today are those led by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.<sup>68</sup> While there are variations within salafi-jihadism, and al-Qaeda and the Islamic State diverge on a number of issues, all seek to create an Islamic State, overturn what they deem to be un-Islamic governments, remove Western influence, and reject the modern nation-state as a heretical affront to Islam.<sup>69</sup>

The following section will explore the two case studies which we will examine to explore salafi-jihadist movements in the United States: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

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<sup>65</sup> One of the three major strains of salafism, salafi-jihadism, which calls for, and uses, violence to disseminate salafist ideology. Salafism puts forth that everything that came after the first three generations (salaf) following the prophet Muhammed was innovation, and that any innovation or human logic applied to the Quran and the Sunnah detract from their original meaning and perfection, and is the source of all that went wrong with society. Shiraz Maher contends that there are five crucial characteristics of salafi-jihadism which are both found within literature produced by salafi-jihadist groups and mentioned by ideologues within the movement. These include, tawhīd (monotheism), ḥākimiyya (sovereignty in the sense that God has the exclusive privilege of making laws), al-walā' wa-l-barā' (loyalty and disavowal), jihad (in this sense, religiously-sanctioned combat), and takfir (accusing another Muslim of apostasy or proclaiming them an infidel). See: Hoffman, Bruce. 1995. "‘Holy Terror’: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 18(4): 271–84.; Jansen, Johannes JG. 1986. *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat’s Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East*. New York: Macmillan.; Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-jihadism.*; Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2006. "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 29(3): 207–39.

<sup>66</sup> Hamid, Shadi and Rashid Dar. 2016. "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A Primer," *The Brookings Institution*, July 15, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/07/15/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/>

<sup>67</sup> Bunzel, Cole. 2017. "Jihadism on Its Own terms: Understanding a Movement," *Hoover Institution*. [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/jihadism\\_on\\_its\\_own\\_terms\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/jihadism_on_its_own_terms_pdf.pdf), p. 1

<sup>68</sup> Zelin, Aaron. 2014. "Research Note: The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, no. 20: 1–11.

<sup>69</sup> Byman, Daniel. 2013. "Fighting Salafi-Jihadist Insurgencies: How Much Does Religion Really Matter?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 36(5): 353–71.; Byman, Daniel L., and Jennifer R. Williams. 2015. "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War." *The Brookings Institution*, February 24, 2015.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/>.; Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-jihadism.*; Zelin, Aaron. 2014. "Research Note."

### *Case: Al-Qaeda*

As the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks on U.S. soil, Al-Qaeda was for a long time the most prominent salafi-jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda founders envisioned the movement as a vanguard that would spread jihad, becoming “a systematic answer to the multiplicity of Muslim grievances around the world,” while being a “standing force” for the greater Muslim community.<sup>70</sup> As Al-Qaeda’s ranks grew, the organization remained centrally unified until a few years after 9/11, when leaders announced “franchises” in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Somalia, and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>71</sup> Al-Qaeda’s franchising policy was partially driven by the loss of several senior leaders, causing a need to adapt while also helping the movement to create an enduring public presence through affiliates who would bear the Al-Qaeda name while aiding the organization in its strategic goals.<sup>72</sup> After Bin Laden’s death in 2011, Al-Qaeda’s new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, played a major role in the decentralization of the movement.<sup>73</sup>

The post-9/11 period also saw Al-Qaeda inspiring individuals to carry out acts around the world in accordance with its ideology.<sup>74</sup> Due to the heavy security scrutiny the movement was under, it became much easier for individuals espousing Al-Qaeda beliefs to carry out attacks in their homelands as opposed to traveling outside their country’s borders.<sup>75</sup> In the U.S., the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Counterterrorism Center refer to such individuals as “homegrown violent extremists” (HVE).<sup>76</sup> Figures like New Mexico-born Anwar al-

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<sup>70</sup> Byman, Daniel. 2015. *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Hegghammer, Thomas. 2020. *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.; Mendelsohn, Barak. 2015. *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.; Mendelsohn, Barak. 2015. *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*.

<sup>71</sup> Mendelsohn, Barak. 2015. *The Al-Qaeda Franchise*, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. 2003. “Al Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 26(6): 429-442.

<sup>73</sup> “Al-Qaeda ‘Shadow of Former Self’ Decade After Bin Laden Death,” 2021. *France 24*, April 28, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210428-al-qaeda-shadow-of-former-self-decade-after-bin-laden-death>

<sup>74</sup> Sageman, Marc. 2008. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> The U.S. Government’s definition for a HVE is “a person of any citizenship who lives or operates primarily in the United States or its territories, and who advocates, engages in, or is preparing to engage

Awlaki, who became one of the leading ideologues for Western jihadism, were instrumental in spreading Al-Qaeda and jihadist beliefs while inciting violent acts within the homeland.<sup>77</sup>

The years following 9/11 have seen both successful Al-Qaeda-inspired attacks in the U.S., as well as unsuccessful plots. For instance, on December 6, 2019, a Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant who was enrolled in a Security Cooperation Education and Training Program killed three people and injured eight in an attack on the Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida.<sup>78</sup> Conversely, in the early 2000s, an Al-Qaeda plan to destroy a New York bridge with the help of a U.S. citizen was thwarted.<sup>79</sup>

### *Case: the Islamic State*

The Islamic State's 2014 declaration of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq garnered global attention. Its control of both physical territory that attracted thousands of citizens from around the world, as well as its global reach, has made it one of the most well-known terrorist organizations worldwide. It has undergone several iterations since its founding by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999.<sup>80</sup> Despite going through several evolutions, names, leaders, and allegiances, at its core the movement has remained the same.<sup>81</sup> What has changed has been its allegiance and alignment of values with Al-Qaeda.

On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate with himself as caliph, and the movement became known simply as the Islamic State. With the announcement of its

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in or support terrorist activities in furtherance of a foreign terrorist organization's objectives, but who is acting independently of foreign terrorist direction." See, "Homegrown Violent Extremist: Mobilization Indicators." 2019. *Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the Department of Homeland Security*. p. 22.

[https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NCTC-FBI-DHS-HVE-Mobilization-Indicators-Booklet-2019.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander. 2020. *Incitement: Anwar Al-Awlaki's Western Jihad*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Clarke, Colin. 2020. "The Pensacola Terrorist Attack: The Enduring Influence of al-Qa'ida and its Affiliates," *CTC Sentinel*. 13(3): 16-23.

<sup>79</sup> Arena, Kelli and Terry Frieden. 2003. "Ohio Trucker Joined al Qaeda Jihad," *CNN*, June 19, 2003. <https://www.cnn.com/2003/LAW/06/19/alqaeda.plea/>

<sup>80</sup> Fishman, Brian. 2016. *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory*. Yale University Press.; Stern, Jessica, and John M. Berger. 2015. *ISIS: The State of Terror*. HarperCollins.

<sup>81</sup> Whiteside, Craig. 2016. "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. 10(4): 6-20.

physical caliphate, the Islamic State made its global and territorial ambitions clear, challenging Al-Qaeda for the primacy of global jihadism. In doing so, it increased its outreach to supporters in the West, including the U.S. This consisted of encouraging citizens from around the world to join its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, or perpetrating attacks worldwide in the name of its ideology.

In the U.S., 83 American or U.S.-based adults are publicly known to have traveled to Iraq or Syria since 2011 to join jihadist groups, with the majority joining the Islamic State.<sup>82</sup> In addition, 17 percent of those who traveled from the U.S. are women; some are underage.<sup>83</sup> As of March 2022, 238 individuals in the U.S. have been charged with offenses associated with the Islamic State,<sup>84</sup> with 29% accused of plotting a domestic attack in the U.S. and 40% accused of traveling to or attempting to travel overseas.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the Islamic State's global operations and pull of American citizens make it an important case to examine.

### ***Limitations***

The American legal definitions of international and domestic terrorism and the lack of corresponding prosecutable statutes for the latter<sup>86</sup> make it harder for the government and researchers to track domestic violent extremism in the U.S., and to quantify women's participation in these movements. As such, we have decided to focus on specific groups to examine this phenomenon in a qualitative manner.

Moreover, we are strongly aware of both the ideological and organizational differences that exist between the far-right and salafi-jihadist movements. For example, salafi-jihadist groups tend to have more centralized narratives and organizational structures. On the other hand, the far-right is much more diverse and muddled in its ideological leanings, with more groups crowding for attention. However, as Crenshaw argues, comparative studies are an “essential foundation for general theoretical explanations of

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<sup>82</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2022. “The Travelers: A Statistical Profile,” Accessed May 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/travelers>

<sup>83</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo and Seamus Hughes. 2015. “ISIS in America”

<sup>84</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2022. “GW Extremism Tracker: ISIS in America.” Accessed March 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america>

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> See: McCord, Mary. 2019. “Filling the Gap in Our Terrorism Statutes.” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.; Laguardia, Francesca. 2020. *Considering a Domestic Terrorism Statute and Its Alternatives*, 114 Nw. U. L. Rev. 1061.

terrorism.”<sup>87</sup> That said, comparative studies require careful consideration and can suffer from selection bias.

This study investigates women across four case studies, two from each ideology. From the far-right, we narrowly examine the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, while from the salafi-jihadist ideology we examine Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. In all cases, we are centering these discussions around American (or U.S.-based) women and violent extremism.

It is important to understand previous models on women’s participation in far-right and salafi-jihadist movements from an organizational perspective and methodologically in this report. For both ideologies, women have played significant roles in the activities and capabilities of extremist groups. Although there are ideological differences, women’s participation in far-right and salafi-jihadist movements display many similarities, with women largely having complementary roles, as opposed to egalitarian or leadership positions.

In some circumstances, gender roles in groups or movements can take on physical attributions like gendered congregations and sex segregation. Sex segregation in violent extremism offers two principal effects. First, it excludes women from gender-combined structural power, and second, it can offer women spaces to create “their own discourse, practice, and modes of solidarity”, which can sometimes threaten male-dominated power.<sup>88</sup> In this vein, we seek to examine women’s participation in American violent extremism, from the group perspective, from the individual perspective, and to address the clashes that can sometimes occur between the two.

The following section will explore the top-down organizational perspective.

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<sup>87</sup> Crenshaw, Martha, ed. 1995. *Terrorism in Context*. Pennsylvania State University Press: p. ix

<sup>88</sup> Bacchetta, Paola, and Margaret Power, eds. 2002. “Introduction.” In *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists Around the World*. Routledge. p. 5.

## Part I: How Organizations Conceptualize Women's Roles

This section explores the top-down conceptualizations of women in American violent extremist movements. From the group perspective, gender roles can be used to control members and supporters. Violent extremists in the United States that adhere to far-right and salafi-jihadist ideologies are often hyper-masculine in nature.<sup>89</sup> In many cases, far-right and salafi-jihadist movements promote strict gender roles that designate women fundamentally to the private sphere while promoting men in public spaces. Groups in both ideologies use their propaganda to convey to supporters and members proper gender roles for men and women.

In doing so, these extremist groups often portray women as the weaker sex, requiring the protection of male members and supporters. Moreover, this gender segregation has sometimes led to the veneration of women who have suffered violence at the hands of those deemed to be part of the outgroup. For example, salafi-jihadists decry the West's killing of innocent women and children (often lumped together) in Iraq, and the far-right venerate the martyrdom of Vicki Weaver, the wife of Randy Weaver, who was killed during a multi-day standoff involving federal officials in Ruby Ridge, Idaho.<sup>90</sup> The following section will explore these manifestations.

### *Far-Right*

Women have had a long history of involvement in far-right movements in the United States.<sup>91</sup> When considering the Mother's Movement of the late 1930s, women were often constrained to subordinate roles as supporters, fundraisers, and recruiters, while having to subjugate their desires for larger freedoms in lieu of the greater objectives of their

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<sup>89</sup> Aslam, Maleeha. 2012. *Gender-Based Explosions.*; Blum, Alice. 2017. "Men in the Battle for the Brains;" Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Blyth Crawford, and Valentin Wutke. 2021. "Rise of the Reactionaries.;" Phelan, Alexandra. 2020. "Special Issue Introduction for Terrorism, Gender and Women.;" Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-jihadism.*; Worth, Owen. 2021. "Reasserting hegemonic masculinity."

<sup>90</sup> The Ruby Ridge standoff took place in the summer of 1992 when U.S. marshals tracked down Randy Weaver who was holed up in a cabin with his family, after having failed to attend his trial on firearms charges. See, Wilson, Jason. 2017. "Ruby Ridge, 1992: The Day the American Militia Movement was Born." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/26/ruby-ridge-1992-modern-american-militia-charlottesville>

<sup>91</sup> Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism.*

organizations.<sup>92</sup> In more recent times, Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey note that women are largely underrepresented in white supremacist movements that espouse neo-nazism and white nationalism.<sup>93</sup> For example, researchers point out the absence of women’s physical presence in the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, noting that far-right participants were largely male.<sup>94</sup>

In her research on women’s involvement in organized hate movements such as the KKK and Aryan Nations, Kathleen Blee observes women represented in four ways, including “as ethereal Nordic goddesses” or victims, as possible race traitors, as supportive wives and mothers, and as racial activists.<sup>95</sup> Thus, from a social perspective within the movement, women’s roles are to assist and engage in communal activities, while from a familial and Klan standpoint, they are seen as wives and mothers of the next Aryan generation.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, far-right rhetoric depicts women in three ways: as mothers, as sex symbols available to men in the movement, and, less commonly, as fighters for the cause.<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, in these movements, white women are vital to the domestic sphere, providing the backbone and longevity to far-right groups and movements.<sup>98</sup> The following sections will examine two cases to understand this manifestation in the American far-right.

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<sup>92</sup> Jeansonne, Glen. 1996. *Women of the Far Right*.

<sup>93</sup> Ebner, Julia and Jacob Davey. 2019. “How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right.” In *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.

<sup>94</sup> Ebner, Julia and Jacob Davey. 2019. “How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right.”; Kitchener, Caroline. 2017. “The Women Behind the ‘Alt-Right,’” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/the-women-behind-the-alt-right/537168/>; and Pitofsky, Marina. 2018. “Are Women Changing ‘Unite the Right’ or just ‘Rebranding’ the Movement?” *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/08/09/women-unite-right-rally-2018/874631002/>

<sup>95</sup> Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism*, p. 115.

<sup>96</sup> Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism*.; Campion, Kristy. 2020. “Women in the Extreme and Radical Right.” *Social Sciences*. 9(9): p. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Latif, Mehr, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele, and Pete Simi. 2020. “Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter?”

<sup>98</sup> Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. 2020. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far-Right*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 34.

*Case: the Proud Boys*

As “Western chauvinists,”<sup>99</sup> members of the Proud Boys claim to “venerate the housewife,” arguing that they respect women who uphold traditional gender roles and raise white children.<sup>100</sup> Such beliefs focus on concepts of aggressive patriotism and ideals of male supremacy, with women seen as inferior to men.<sup>101</sup> A statement on the “About” page of the Proud Boys website (now removed from the Internet) clearly displays the organizational standpoint towards women being excluded from the group: “this group is and will always be MEN ONLY (born with a penis if that wasn’t clear enough for you leftists)!”<sup>102</sup>

With that being said, there are some discrepancies between the national leadership of the organization and Proud Boys chapters regarding women’s roles in the group. Some women in the organization are known as the Proud Boys’ Girls, an informal female extension of the group established in 2016 and largely made up of girlfriends, wives, and “cheerleaders” of Proud Boys members.<sup>103</sup> Due to the misogynistic characteristics of the Proud Boys, Proud Boys’ Girls are largely viewed in relation to men within the organization, with Proud Boys dogma viewing women as having a duty to uphold traditional gender roles. Consequently, the group’s national leadership does not recognize women in any formal role; thus, Proud Boys’ Girls are an informal adjunct thought to openly uphold Proud Boy culture.<sup>104</sup> However, some Proud Boys’ Girls are forging their own paths, detailed in the following section, and have caused tension with male members.

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<sup>99</sup> Jensen, Michael, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane. 2022. “Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics.”

<sup>100</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2021. “‘Venerating the Housewife’: A Primer on Proud Boys’ Misogyny.” <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/venerating-housewife-primer-proud-boys-misogyny>

<sup>101</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Male Supremacy.” Accessed May 2022.

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>

<sup>102</sup> Kenny, Sarah. 2019. “Not Convinced a Gender Perspective Matters to Today’s Political Activism? Meet the Proud Boys (and their “Girls”).” *Women in International Security*. <https://wiisglobal.org/not-convinced-a-gender-perspective-matters-to-todays-political-activism-meet-the-proud-boys-and-their-girls/>

<sup>103</sup> See Proud Boys’ Girls (@proudboysgirls). 2017. Twitter Account. *Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170905164452/http://twitter.com/proudboysgirls>; and Southern Poverty Law Center. n.d. “Proud Boys.”; and Kriner, Matthew and Lewis, Jon. 2021 “Pride & Prejudice.”

<sup>104</sup> Zadrozny, Brandy and Corky Siemaszko. 2018. “The Boys and Girls of White Nationalism: ‘Proud’ Groups Labeled ‘Extremist’ in Newly Revealed FBI Files,” *NBC News*, November 20, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/boy-girls-white-nationalism-proud-groups-labeled-extremist-newly-revealed-n938546>

Overall, the Proud Boys is an openly misogynistic organization with views on women akin to other far-right and RMVE groups. In a May 2020 Telegram post, Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes stated that the organization did not see being a housewife as the only role for women and that “many of our wives are very successful career women.” However, in deeds and in actions, this seemingly forward-thinking stance of the organization’s founder is far from reality,<sup>105</sup> as women associated with the Proud Boys are largely excluded from public events and spaces.

### *Case: the Oath Keepers*

Compared to other far-right groups, women in the Oath Keepers have greater public-facing visibility, both in numbers and levels of engagement.<sup>106</sup> That visibility was especially evident before and during the events of the January 6 siege on the U.S. Capitol building, where women associated with the Oath Keepers took on public-facing roles and were involved in planning and participating in the events of that day.<sup>107</sup> Four women are alleged to have participated in criminal conduct on January 6.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, one of the women, Jessica Watkins has been described as an alleged Oath Keeper “recruiter,” “ringleader,” and “organizer” for the siege on the Capitol.<sup>109</sup> Women in the Oath Keepers are seen as playing an important role in defending the Constitution and as partners in this process.

On the other hand, the Oath Keepers have also viewed women as a sort of collateral damage. During the 2014 Bundy Ranch standoff with federal authorities in Nevada, Richard Mack, an Oath Keeper founding member, stated in an interview with Fox News

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<sup>105</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2021. “Venerating the Housewife.”

<https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/venerating-housewife-primer-proud-boys-misogyny>

<sup>106</sup> Matfess, Hilary and Devorah Margolin. 2022. “The Women of January 6th.”

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Women include Sandra Parker, Connie Meggs, and Jessica Watkins. Jessica Watkins identifies as a woman and thus has been classified as such. Also see, “First Superseding Indictment.” 2021. *United States of America v. Thomas Caldwell, et al.*” United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Caldwell%20et%20al%20First%20Superseding%20Indictment.pdf>

<sup>109</sup> Cohen, Marshall. 2021. “Alleged Oath Keeper Ringleader in Capitol Siege Ordered to Stay in Jail Before Trial,” *CNN*, February 27, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/26/politics/jessica-watkins-oath-keepers-capitol-attack/index.html>; Putterman, Samantha. 2021. “Everything We Trained For’: How the Far-Right Oath Keepers Militia Planned for Violence on Jan. 6,” *PolitiFact*, September 23, 2021.

<https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/sep/23/everything-we-trained-how-far-right-oath-keepers-m/>

that participants in the standoff “were actually strategizing to put all the women up at the front. If they’re going to start shooting, it’s going to be women that are televised all across the world getting shot by these rogue federal officers.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, women in the Oath Keepers are viewed to varying degrees both as active members and, one could argue, as pawns used to further the group’s cause. With that being said, there is a lack of national leadership statements on women in the organization, which in and of itself points to the Oath Keepers refraining from engaging in gender narratives.

### ***Salafi-jihadism***

Jihadist movements have likewise struggled with how to define women’s involvement in their groups.<sup>111</sup> Similar to many far-right groups, jihadists advocate for women’s participation in the domestic sphere, engaging in traditional gender roles like wives, mothers, educators, and providers of non-military support to movements such as preaching, recruiting, and fundraising.<sup>112</sup> Women have often been instrumental in forming strategic alliances through marriage, along with transporting goods, weapons, and correspondences.<sup>113</sup> Some researchers argue that women’s participation in jihadist movements is primarily seen within four categories:<sup>114</sup> the domestic sphere,<sup>115</sup> as propagandists, as recruiters,<sup>116</sup> and as facilitators.<sup>117</sup> More recently, women have also taken more violent and visible roles, especially in the form of suicide/martyrdom

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<sup>110</sup> Neiwert, David. 2014. “Richard Mack Explains Nevada ‘Range War’ Strategy: ‘Put All the Women Up in The Front’,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2014/04/15/richard-mack-explains-nevada-range-war-strategy-put-all-women-front>

<sup>111</sup> Margolin, Devorah. 2019. “The Changing Role of Women in Violent Islamist Groups.” In *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism*, The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.

<sup>112</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. “The Neglected Sex.”

<sup>113</sup> de Leede, Seran. 2018. “Women in Jihad: A Historical Perspective,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*.

<sup>114</sup> Termeer, Agnes and Isabelle Duyvesteyn. 2022. “The Inclusion of Women in Jihad: Gendered Practices of Legitimation in Islamic State Recruitment Propaganda,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*. 15(2): 463-483

<sup>115</sup> de Leede, Seran. 2018. “Women in Jihad.”

<sup>116</sup> de Leede, Seran. 2018. “Women in Jihad.”; Pearson, Elizabeth. 2016. “The Case of Roshonara Choudhry: Implications for Theory on Online Radicalization, ISIS Women, and the Gendered Jihad,” *Policy & Internet*. 8(1): 5-33.

<sup>117</sup> Bloom, Mia and Ayse Lokmanoglu. 2020. “From Pawn to Knights: The Changing Role of Women’s Agency in Terrorism?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. ; Cunningham, Karla J. 2007. “Countering Female Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 30(2): 113-129; Von Knop, Katharina. 2007. “The Female Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Women,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 30(5): 397-414.

operations or legal and moral enforcement. However, violent Islamist groups have consistently wrestled with determining the appropriate roles for women within their ranks. Ideologue Abdallah Azzam has been central to this debate, and his writings on women's roles in jihad have influenced Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, Hamas, and others.<sup>118</sup>

Despite jihadist groups' reluctance to use women in combat roles, classic jihadist doctrine argues that it is permissible for women to act as combatants only in cases of defensive jihad.<sup>119</sup> Under these very specific conditions, Azzam suggested that a wife could participate "without the permission of her husband."<sup>120</sup> However, Azzam later stipulated that women required "a non-marriageable male guardian (mahram)."<sup>121</sup> Moreover, Azzam described female supporter roles in Afghanistan, stating, "[t]heir duties are confined to education, nursing, and assisting refugees."<sup>122</sup>

Over time different groups have reinterpreted Azzam's writings to serve their own needs. Thus, one caveat to women being restricted from combat roles is jihadist support for women taking part in suicide/martyrdom operations; such operations lack an expressed call for women to take up arms and, for the most part, do not require a *mahram*.<sup>123</sup> In this capacity, Al-Qaeda in Iraq has used female suicide bombers, as have Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, Hamas, the Chechen Black Widows, and, more recently, the Islamic State.<sup>124</sup> The following section examines two cases to understand this manifestation in American salafi-jihadism.

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<sup>118</sup> Esposito, John L. 2002. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. Oxford University Press.; Aboul-Enein, Yousseff. 2008. "The Late Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's Books: Part III: Radical Theories on Defending Muslim Land through Jihad." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*.; Hegghammer, Thomas. 2011. "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security*. 35(3): 53–91.; Maliach, Asaf. 2010. "Abdullah Azzam, Al-Qaeda, and Hamas: Concepts of Jihad and Istishhad." *Military and Strategic Affairs*. 2(2): 79–93.; Margolin, Devorah. 2019. "The Changing Role of Women in Violent Islamist Groups.;" Turner, Kathleen. 2015. "Femme Fatale: The Rise of Female Suicide Bombers." *War on the Rocks*, December 14, 2015.

<sup>119</sup> Cook, David. 2005. "Women Fighting in Jihad?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 28(5): 375–384.

<sup>120</sup> Azzam, Abdallah. 1979. "Defense of the Muslim Lands."

<sup>121</sup> Azzam, Abdallah. 1987. "Join the Caravan", *Al-Jihaad Fesibillah (The Forgotten Obligation)*. p. 32

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>123</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. "The Neglected Sex."

<sup>124</sup> Margolin, Devorah. 2015. "The Changing Role of Women in Violent Islamist Groups.;" Kathleen Turner. 2015. "Femme Fatale;" Winter, Charlie and Devorah Margolin. 2017. "The Mujahidat Dilemma."

*Case: Al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda Central has historically denied the involvement of women within its organization, with its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri famously noting in 2008, “Al-Qaeda has no women, but the women of the mujahideen do their heroic part in taking care of their homes and sons in the roughness of the immigration, movement, unity, and expecting the Crusader strikes.”<sup>125</sup> However, such a statement is perhaps a misrepresentation of women’s roles in the movement, and a contradiction of al-Zawahiri’s own words. In a discussion on women’s non-military contribution towards the jihad, al-Zawahiri noted that “the *mujahidat* (female jihadists) are doing a heroic job watching over their homes and their children.”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, in his 1996 *Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*, Osama bin Laden wrote about women’s important role in encouraging sons, brothers, and husbands to support Al-Qaeda’s cause and carrying out jihad.<sup>127</sup> While seemingly excluding women from the movement, Al-Qaeda’s leadership underlined women’s roles in the private sphere in supporting the organization.

In 2009, al-Zawahiri’s wife, Umayma al-Zawahiri (Umayma Hassan), published “A Letter to Muslim Sisters,” in which she argued that women’s primary participation in jihad is to raise and cultivate a household where their sons, brothers, and husband can fulfill their obligations of defending the *ummah* (greater Muslim community) and Islam from apostates and the West.<sup>128</sup> Though not a leader in the movement, Umayma al-Zawahiri’s status as the wife of a leader lends weight to her comments. Moreover, she also mentioned two other groups of women: those who were victimized by the West and always remained in the hearts of the jihadists, and those women who wanted to carry out jihad. As noted by Nelly Lahoud, Umayma al-Zawahiri’s views on women fighting jihad “are open to interpretation...Women who wish to be guided by Umayma al-Zawahiri’s advice can therefore read into her missive both a military calling for themselves or a

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<sup>125</sup> al-Zawahiri, Ayman. 2008. “al-Liqa’ al-Maftuh,” *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad*.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> bin Laden, Osama. 1996. “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places.”

<sup>128</sup> al-Zawahiri, Ayman. 2009. “A Letter to the Muslim Sisters,” *Al-Sahab Media Foundation* (AQC).

peaceful one that translates into supporting the jihadis from home.”<sup>129</sup> This mixed messaging and women’s individual interpretations will be explored more in Part II.

Al-Qaeda consistently uses its propaganda to endorse women’s roles in the private sphere, and uses gendered narratives surrounding the need to protect women to invoke revenge by men.<sup>130</sup> Prominent throughout Al-Qaeda propaganda has been the need defend women from the West, and in particular, America.<sup>131</sup> In 2010, al-Zawahiri released a speech titled “Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui?”—a case involving a woman charged in the U.S. with supporting Al-Qaeda—in which he shamed men for their inaction. He noted, “So whoever wants to free Aafia Siddiqui and take revenge on those who violated her and all Muslim women should join the Mujahideen because there’s no dearness [to be had] except by Jihad and no pride but by it.”<sup>132</sup> Siddiqui and other women viewed as victims by the group became a rallying cry. Al-Qaeda’s gendered policies towards women have been exclusionary; women are seen as victimized by the U.S., and Al-Qaeda is there to offer protection for those who adhere to its values.

### *Case: the Islamic State*

In its iteration as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), rhetoric produced by the group on women focused primarily on two issues: first, perceived violations against Muslim women and the need for men to defend them,<sup>133</sup> and second, the use of female suicide bombers under exceptional defensive circumstances.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the group used female participation in violence to encourage men into action.<sup>135</sup> For example, in early 2004, AQI leader Abu

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<sup>129</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2010. “Umayma Al-Zawahiri on Women’s Role in Jihad.” *Jihadica*.

<https://www.jihadica.com/umayma-al-zawahiri-on-women%e2%80%99s-role-in-jihad/>.

<sup>130</sup> Mehran, Weeda, Dominika Imiolek, Lucy Smeddle, and Jack Springett-Gilling. 2022. “The Depiction of Women in Jihadi Magazines: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic State, Al Qaeda, Taliban and Tahrir-e Taliban Pakistan.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. 33(3): 382-408.

<sup>131</sup> bin Laden, Osama. 1998. *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement*.

<sup>132</sup> Al-Zawahiri, Ayman. 2010. “Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui?” *As-Sahab. Translation Available via the Global Terrorism Research Project at Haverford College*.

<sup>133</sup> Al-Zarqawi. 2015. “O Muslims Sternness Sternness”; Al-Zarqawi. 2005. “Zarqawi Clarifies Issues Raised by Sheikh Maqdisi.”

<sup>134</sup> Alexander, Audrey. 2020. “Seeing Is Believing: Notes on the Visibility of Women’s Contribution to the Islamic State Movement in 2019-2020.” *The ISIS Reader Blog*. [http://theisisreader.com/seeing-is-believing-notes-on-the-visibility-of-womens-contribution-to-the-islamic-state-movement-in-2019-;](http://theisisreader.com/seeing-is-believing-notes-on-the-visibility-of-womens-contribution-to-the-islamic-state-movement-in-2019-)

Al-Zarqawi, Abu Mus’ab. 2005. “Will the Religion Wane While I Live.”

<sup>135</sup> Al-Zarqawi, Abu Mus’ab. 2005. “Will the Religion Wane While I Live.”

Musab al-Zarqawi stated, “if you don’t want to be of the knights, then make room for the women to commence, and take the eyeliner O you women with turbans and beards, if not then to the horses and here are the reins and shackles.”<sup>136</sup> Al-Zarqawi shamed men for not stepping up in their presumed role of protector, spurned men into action, and foreshadowed AQI’s systematic use of female suicide bombers. Furthermore, women’s perceived abuse and imprisonment in Iraq rallied support behind al-Zarqawi’s decision to use female suicide bombers, a policy that continued under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.<sup>137</sup>

The Islamic State’s transition into governance in 2014 changed its engagement with women. Propaganda began directly targeting female audiences for the first time in order to govern women’s lives, telling them how to act in the home as wives, mothers, and steadfast supporters of the movement’s ideology, even using supposed Islamic State-supporting women to convey these messages.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, the Islamic State used propaganda to talk about women’s utility as active supporters abroad, travelers joining the group,<sup>139</sup> and, should the need require, participants in jihad.<sup>140</sup> Finally, the Islamic State continued highlighting women’s victimization to justify many of its actions and

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<sup>136</sup> Al-Zarqawi, Abu Mus’ab. 2004. “Follow the Caravan.”

<sup>137</sup> Al-Baghdadi, Abu Omar. 2007. “The Harvest of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists.”

<sup>138</sup> Dabiq 7. 2015. “To Our Sisters: A Brief Interview with Umm Basir al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 8. 2015. “To Our Sisters: The Twin Halves of the Muhajirin by Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 9. 2015. “From Our Sisters: Slave-Girls or Prostitutes by Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 10. 2015. “From Our Sisters: They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another By Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*. Dabiq Issue 11. 2015. “To Our Sisters: A Jihad without Fighting by Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 12. 2015. “Sisters: Two, Three or Four By Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 15. 2016. “How I Came to Islam by Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyyah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Rumiyah 7. 2017. “What They Never Told Me by Umm Musa al-Finlandiyyah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Rumiyah 11. 2017. “Sisters: Our Journey to Allah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Rumiyah 13. 2017. “Sisters: The Hijrah of Umm Sulaym al-Muhajirah.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*.

<sup>139</sup> Dabiq 7. 2015. “To Our Sisters: A Brief Interview with Umm Basir Al-Muhajirah;” Dabiq 10. 2015. “From Our Sisters: They Are Not Lawful Spouses for One Another By Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah;” Rumiyah 7. 2017. “What They Never Told Me by Umm Musa Al-Finlandiyyah.”

<sup>140</sup> Dabiq 11. 2015. “To Our Sisters: A Jihad without Fighting by Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah;” Rumiyah 2. 2016. “Foreword: A Message from East Africa.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Inside the Caliphate 6. 2017. *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*.

motivate male members.<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, throughout its governance, the Islamic State flipped between emphasizing women’s domestic roles and women’s usefulness to the organization’s strategy in its English-language propaganda.<sup>142</sup>

Key to the Islamic State’s strategy was its active recruitment of men, women, and children, including from the United States.<sup>143</sup> American women were welcomed by the Islamic State, and several recent cases explored below, including Samantha Elhassani and Allison Fluke-Ekren, have highlighted their experiences in the movement.<sup>144</sup> Importantly, and in line with the Islamic State’s ideology, even when women were given positions of power, it was always over other women, and never over men. This practice was evident in the workings of the al-Khanssaa Brigade, a female-led police and morality unit composed of women who enforced strict and frequently brutal methods on fellow Islamic State women.<sup>145</sup> Although the brigade worked stringently within the confines of women’s dictated roles within the Islamic State, by focusing on issues related to women and, to some degree, children, brigade members maintained levels of power unavailable to most women in the caliphate.

Finally, the Islamic State also engaged with several women who lived outside of its control and who operated and supported the movement from the United States. A

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<sup>141</sup> al Adnani al Shami. 2014. “Indeed Your Lord Is Ever Watchful.” *Furqan*. Available via *Pietervanostaeyen.com*; Al-Muhajir, Abu al-Hassan. 2017. “So Be Patient. Indeed, the Promise of Allah Is Truth.” *Furqan*. Available via *Pietervanostaeyen.com*; Dabiq 3. 2014. “Foley’s Blood Is On Obama’s Hands.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Dabiq 7. 2015. “Foreword.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Al-Baghdadi, Abu Bakr. 2015. “March Forth Whether Light or Heavy.” *Furqan*. Available via *Jihadology.net*; Rumiyah 12. 2017. “A Mujahid’s Memories from the Battle of Mosul.” *Al-Hayat*. Available via *Jihadology.net*

<sup>142</sup> For example, from 2015 through 2017, at the height of the group’s governance, the Islamic State emphasized women’s domestic roles. However, in 2014 and 2018, at the start and end of its territorial control, propaganda focused on ways in which women could further the group’s strategic cause. See: Margolin, Devorah. 2022. “How Do Governing Violent Islamist Organizations Conceptualize the Roles of Women? An examination into the English-language propaganda of Hamas and the Islamic State.” PhD Thesis, King’s College London.

<sup>143</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2022. “The Travelers;” Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. 2019. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate.” *CTC Sentinel*. 12(6): p. 30.

<sup>144</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. 2022. “American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Pleads Guilty.” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-pleads-guilty>.

<sup>145</sup> Peresin, Anita and Alberto Cervone. 2015. “The Western *Muhajirat* of ISIS.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 38(7): 495-509.

notable example is U.S. permanent resident Tashfeen Malik,<sup>146</sup> who, along with her husband Syed Rizwan Farook, carried out the 2015 San Bernardino, California attacks. This case, and the Islamic State's response, will be explored further in the report. Overall, the Islamic State's conceptualization of women was in the home and in private spaces, granting women access to more public roles when it served their strategic needs.

### ***Comparison***

The conceptualization of women's roles within these cases is aligned with their ideological drivers. Groups driven by conservative gendered ideologies are more likely to adhere to gender segregation and even the exclusion of women from their ranks. For example, the Proud Boys, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State demonstrate explicitly gendered ideologies that create a division of labor (and access) for men and women. All three use their ideologies to convey these conceptualizations of women's roles to their followers. Conversely, the Oath Keepers' far-right ideology is anti-government in nature, and the group views women as active members. However, to argue that gendered ideologies do not come in to play within the group would be a misunderstanding of the Oath Keeper's worldview. While women are members, they are also seen as pawns that can be used to further the group's cause. Thus, even groups and movements whose driving ideology is not conservatively gendered in nature, are still influenced by gendered conceptions of the world.

When delving closer into the differences between the ideologies, it is important to acknowledge that salafi-jihadism has a more cohesive gendered ideology than the far-right. The same ideologues often inspire salafi-jihadist movements like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; they conceptualize and adhere to strict gender roles that seek to exclude women from public spaces. Despite this cohesive gendered ideology, even between groups, outreach and incorporation of women differ depending on the groups' organizational and operational goals. As noted above, various groups have interpreted Azzam's writings on women's participation in jihad to serve their own needs. Groups understand that women are effective military and propaganda tools; women's participation and adoption of an ideology attracts men and future generations, while women's activity in a group shames male members into action. However, groups do not

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<sup>146</sup> Malik is defined as a U.S. person, having married an American and being a resident of the United States.

take incorporating women into their ranks lightly, and the decision to recruit and utilize women often aligns with organizations' strategic objectives. For example, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's territorial ambitions led it to actively recruit women alongside men, while Al-Qaeda's more operational rather than territorial ambitions led it to continue to exclude women from its ranks.<sup>147</sup>

This issue gets more complex with the American far-right, in which groups adhere to a more diverse set of beliefs. For example, while the Proud Boys exclude women due to their chauvinist supremacist ideology, the Oath Keepers have incorporated women, in some cases offering women leadership positions - even over men - which is not seen in any of the other cases examined. These notions on women's participation can be observed within groups themselves. For instance, the Proud Boys claim that they respect women who uphold traditional gender roles and who raise white children.<sup>148</sup> Similar sentiments are echoed by other far-right and neo-nazi groups that uphold women's participation as mothers, wives, and caregivers<sup>149</sup> who, to some extent, are seen as needing protection from the world at large.<sup>150</sup> Accordingly, in extreme

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<sup>147</sup> Al-Qaeda's strategy has continued to emphasize male fighters and female support roles. However, the Islamic State's territorial ambitions have triggered specific concepts of offensive and defensive jihad; even while operating its caliphate, the group constantly reiterated women's responsibility to participate in jihad should the need require.

<sup>148</sup> Anti-Defamation League. 2021. "Venerating the Housewife."

<sup>149</sup> Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism.*; Ferber, Abby L. 1999. "The Construction of Race, Gender, and Class in White Supremacist Discourse." *Gender & Class.* 6(3): 67-89.; Latif, Mehr, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele and Pete Simi. 2020. "Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter?"; Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. 2020. *Hate in the Homeland.*

<sup>150</sup> McClintock, Anet. 2022. "The Woman Paradox: Misogyny and Women in the Far-Right." *Australian Institute of International Affairs.* <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-woman-paradox-misogyny-and-women-in-the-far-right/>

far-right movements, traditional hierarchical power structures are enforced where women espouse gender roles such as being mothers and caregivers, having submissive characteristics, exhibiting feminine traits, and acting as sexual objects for men.<sup>151</sup> Yet, women are active in far-right groups and movements, often having to walk a fine line between operating in the public sphere while promoting traditional gendered roles.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Latif, Mehr, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele and Pete Simi. 2020. "Do White Supremacist Women Adopt Movement Archetypes of Mother, Whore, and Fighter?"; Samuels, Sarah and Ardian Shajkovic. 2022. "Far-Right Violent Extremist Women: Threats and Security Considerations." *Women & Criminal Justice*.

<sup>152</sup> Mansbach, Daniela and Alisa Von Hagel. 2020. "Right-Wing Women's Movements," In *Companion to Women's and Gender Studies* edited by Nancy A. Naples, 427- 445. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

## Part II: How Women Have Participated in Violent Extremism in America

While groups and ideological movements may have preconceived notions surrounding the roles of women, it is important to acknowledge that the motivations and experiences of both individuals and groups may differ. This section explores the bottom-up conceptualizations of women in violent extremist movements in America. It uses an individual perspective, observing how women have actually participated in violent extremism in America and how this has manifested in several different ways.

Some women associated with violent extremism take advantage of gender narratives to create community bonds, recruit, and radicalize individuals into their respective ideologies, groups, or movements. This is particularly noticeable in propaganda and with social media influencers that use gender narratives to appeal to both men and women. Women are motivated to join these groups and movements to become a part of, and adhere to, their gendered worldviews, which often focus on traditional gender roles, sisterhood, and women as wives, mothers, and educators of the next generation.

However, women can also radicalize into an ideological belief system while simultaneously challenging specific gendered assumptions tied to that particular ideology. Some women who engage in violent extremism also attempt to establish themselves in more active roles even when faced with patriarchal challenges. For example, while salafi-jihadism excludes women from combat except under specific defensive circumstances, some women have actively participated. The following section will explore how American women have participated in these groups and movements.

### ***Far-Right***

One way women have carved out spaces for themselves in far-right movements is through the creation of women's only groups or topic focused movements.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, to achieve their own agency, some women carve out their space in far-right movements by adopting roles that have not yet been defined by groups.<sup>154</sup> In many ways,

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<sup>153</sup> Mansbach, Daniela and Alisa Von Hagel. "Right-Wing Women's Movements;" and McRae, Elizabeth Gillespie. 2018. *Mothers of Massive Resistance*.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

this participation takes on the form of activism, whether through recruitment, fundraising, or the transmission of ideas.<sup>155</sup> The mainstreaming of ideologies, either on the ground—as seen with women in the KKK during the 1960s who were instrumental in spreading KKK dogma—<sup>156</sup> or more recently in virtual environments, is a common form of women’s activism in the far-right. Women in the far-right have often become influential as “broadcasters, dramatically amplifying messages” to wide audiences,<sup>157</sup> thus finding their spaces in digital environments.<sup>158</sup> Female influencers on the far-right spectrum have used a number of social media techniques, including vlogging (video blogging), as a medium to promote their messages. Moreover, women leverage their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers in need of protection to mainstream far-right ideologies in the United States.<sup>159</sup> Many use YouTube to discuss moments of awakening from fallacy to “truth,” blaming liberalism and feminism as being causes for their discontent.<sup>160</sup> Such participation on social media, even lacking a formal leadership role, still exerts power and influence by exposing viewers to ideological concepts.<sup>161</sup>

While women have long been involved in militia violent extremism (MVE), groups still skew towards predominantly white men.<sup>162</sup> Organizations that monitor hate estimated that almost 30 years ago in 1995, women comprised 10 to 20 percent of U.S. militia

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<sup>155</sup> Campion, Kristy. 2021. “Women of the Far-Right: Not Just Homemakers and Home Bakers,” *Charles Sturt University*. <https://news.csu.edu.au/opinion/women-of-the-far-right-not-just-homemakers-and-home-bakers>

<sup>156</sup> Blee, Kathryn. 2018. “Women in White Supremacist Movements in the Century after Women’s Suffrage” in *100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment: An Appraisal of Women’s Political Activism*, edited by Holly J. McCammon and Lee Ann Banaszak. p. 295-311. Oxford Scholarship Online.; Perliger, Arie. 2020. *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>157</sup> Ebner, Julia and Jacob Davey, “How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right,” p. 32.

<sup>158</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. 1999. “Women Extremists Organizations Stake their Claim on the Web.” <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1999/women-extremist-organizations-stake-their-claim-web>

<sup>159</sup> Matfess, Hilary and Devorah Margolin. 2022. “The Women of January 6th.”

<sup>160</sup> Leidig, Eviane. 2012. “We Are Worth Fighting For.”

<sup>161</sup> Mattheis, Ashley. 2018. “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness: (Alt) Maternalism and Women Recruiting for the Far/Alt-Right,” *Journal for Deradicalization*. 17: 128-161.; Campion, Kristy. 2020. “Women in the Extreme and Radical Right;” Lorenz, Taylor. 2019. “Instagram is the Internet’s New Home for Hate,” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/instagram-is-the-internets-new-home-for-hate/585382/>

<sup>162</sup> Cooter, Amy. 2022. “Citizen Militias in the U.S. Are Moving toward More Violent Extremism,” *Scientific American*.

leadership.<sup>163</sup> As Amy Cooter notes, “[t]here are a few women who fully participate in militias, and because of their activity they tend to be well respected and rise to leadership roles...Still, most militia units have a culture suffused with casual misogyny.”<sup>164</sup> Although not all women in MVE groups hold leadership roles, prevalent feelings of distrust in the government, devotion towards the Constitution, conservative family values, family ties to militias, the desire to learn survival and, in some cases, tactical skills, opposition towards feminist movement, and fears of a race war based on ideas found in the Great Replacement conspiracy theory<sup>165</sup> have all fueled women’s engagement in MVE groups.<sup>166</sup> Many women in these movements see themselves as taking an active stand for ideals and values that they believe in; for themselves, their families, and country.<sup>167</sup>

Whether as broadcasters that amplify messages and spread ideologies, facilitators, recruiters, or members of groups and women’s only branches, women’s participation in far-right movements can be seen to some degree as defined by traditional hierarchical power structures, while also being configured by women themselves.

### *Case: the Proud Boys*

The Proud Boys’ misogynistic ideology is, by definition, exclusionary of women. However, the case of Tara LaRosa, a former mixed martial arts fighter associated with the Proud Boys, is a good example of the rift between the Proud Boys and women associated with the group. LaRosa, a regular participant of protests with far-right and Proud Boys attendance including the November 2020 “Million maga march” in Washington, D.C.—where LaRosa marched and is claimed to have brawled alongside

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<sup>163</sup> Kovaleski, Serge F. 1995. “Women in Militias Say Ranks Are Not Just For Angry White Males,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 1995.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/09/09/women-in-militias-say-ranks-are-not-just-for-angry-white-males/75d49b27-7a36-4d79-8717-678db8f9c047/>

<sup>164</sup> Cooter, Amy. 2022. “Citizen Militias in the U.S. Are Moving toward More Violent Extremism.”

<sup>165</sup> Farivar, Masood. 2022. “What is the Great Replacement Theory?” *Voice of America*.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/what-is-the-great-replacement-theory-/6578349.html>

<sup>166</sup> Serge F. Kovaleski, “Women in Militias Say Ranks Are Not Just For Angry White Males.”

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

Proud Boys members—<sup>168</sup> has come under attack for being a woman and speaking out on social media and messaging platforms.

LaRosa posted a picture of herself with Enrique Tarrío, the head of the Proud Boys, along with podcaster Joe Briggs. She claimed in the caption that she was the “Noble Den Mother” of the Proud Boys’ Girls and that she would “lead us [the Proud Boys’ Girls] to wreck antifa like even the PBs have not” and that she “could probably beat up any Proud Boy in the world.”<sup>169</sup> LaRosa also claimed that Proud Girls USA was supported by Proud Boys chapters in New York City, Idaho, and South Carolina. However, there have been no official acknowledgments of this claim.<sup>170</sup> LaRosa’s attempt to bring women more to the forefront of the organization is not the first time a women’s group associated with the Proud Boys has been ventured. In 2016, a Facebook group called the Proud Boys’ Girls was created, which amassed a couple of thousand followers before it shut down in 2018, potentially due to Facebook’s ban of the Proud Boys on its platform that same year.<sup>171</sup> In 2020, a channel by that same name appeared on Telegram.

Another prominent case of women’s involvement with the Proud Boys is Felicia Konold. Konold claims to have been recruited by a Kansas City chapter of the group, and in February 2021 was charged with federal crimes for participating in the January 6 Capitol siege.<sup>172</sup> Konold, an Arizona resident, allegedly posted Snapchat videos boasting about her involvement in the Capitol siege while purportedly claiming that the Kansas City Proud Boys had recruited her, despite not being from Kansas City and that she was “with them now.”<sup>173</sup> In the same video, Konold allegedly shows a challenge coin with markings

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<sup>168</sup> Zidan, Karim. 2021. “Tara LaRosa: The Worrying Case of MMA’s ‘Proud Girl,’” *The Guardian*, January 21, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jan/21/tara-larosa-mma-far-right-proud-boys>

<sup>169</sup> Reid Ross, Alexander. 2020. “Proud Boys Are at War With Their Female Extremist Wing,” *The Daily Beast*, December 31, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/proud-boys-are-at-war-with-their-proud-girls-female-extremist-wing?ref=scroll>

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Hatmaker, Taylor. 2018. “Facebook Bans the Proud Boys, Cutting the Group Off From its Main Recruitment Platform,” *TechCrunch*, October 30, 2018. <https://techcrunch.com/2018/10/30/facebook-proud-boys-mcinnis-kicked-off/>

<sup>172</sup> “Criminal Complaint.” 2021. *United States of America v. Christopher Kuehne, et al.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1366446/download>

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

resembling those of the Kansas City Proud Boys chapter, presumably denoting membership in the group.<sup>174</sup>

Notably, court records do not explicitly identify Felicia Konold as a formal Proud Boys member. Rather, she was charged alongside four co-defendants who were members of the Kansas City chapter of the Proud Boys. On the day of the Capitol siege, Konold, along with her brother and four other individuals, are alleged to have traveled together as a group on January 6 and during the events of that day.<sup>175</sup> Court documents also claim that the group carried radios, wore camouflage attire, tactical gear, and eye protection, and applied orange tape to their clothing in order to identify one another in the crowds.<sup>176</sup> The group, including Konold, is also alleged to have broken past police lines, pushed through barriers, and entered the Capitol building.<sup>177</sup>

In a later interview with a local Arizona news agency, Konold describes her involvement in the Capitol siege as “not just fighting for my freedom” but “I’m fighting for all of America’s freedom.”<sup>178</sup> She expressed no initial remorse for her actions stating, “I’m not upset about it, I’m not mad about it. This is just magnifying why people feel so strongly that they needed to go there [the U.S. Capitol] because of the totalitarian oppression-like structure that has come down on people.”<sup>179</sup> These cases, along with others, highlight that despite the Proud Boys’ exclusionary and misogynistic gendered ideology, women are attracted to the group and seek to be a part of it.

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<sup>174</sup> Hegeman, Roxana. 2021. “Woman Charged in Capitol Melee Says Proud Boys Recruited Her,” *ABC News*, February 17, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/woman-charged-capitol-melee-proud-boys-recruited-75938662>; “Indictment”. 2021. *United States of America v. Christopher Kuehne, et al.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1377826/download>

<sup>175</sup> “Indictment.” 2021. *United States of America v. Christopher Kuehne et al.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1377826/download>

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> Coleman, Mary. 2021. “Exclusive: Tucson Woman Charged in Capitol Riots Speaks Out After Judge Signs Order of Transfer,” *KOLD News 13*, February 21, 2021. <https://www.kold.com/2021/02/23/exclusive-tucson-woman-charged-capitol-riots-speaks-out-after-judge-signs-order-transfer/>

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

*Case: the Oath Keepers*

The Oath Keepers have operated with a relatively gender-neutral policy compared to many other cases explored in the far-right. Several women associated with the Oath Keepers received ample public attention for their roles in the events of the January 6 Capitol siege, with the most notable case being Jessica Watkins.<sup>180</sup> However, even before January 6, women held important roles within the organization. The most documented case was Mary Emerick, described as a public information officer of the Josephine County Oath Keepers chapter.<sup>181</sup> Emerick provided a number of statements in relation to the April 2015 Sugar Pine goldmine incident in southwestern Oregon, where miners were ordered to cease work by the Bureau of Land Management due to building permission violations.<sup>182</sup> The miners approached the Josephine County Oath Keepers chapter seeking security assistance while they sought appeal results for their case.<sup>183</sup> This culminated in what the Oath Keepers described as “Operation Gold Rush,”<sup>184</sup> a 24-hour security operation over a handful of weeks in which the national leadership issued a call to action, resulting in dozens if not hundreds of Oath Keepers from different parts of the country responding to the call.<sup>185</sup> In a speech posted on YouTube, Emerick discusses her many press interviews with local, national, and international media outlets, noting that the world was “listening” and “watching” the events.<sup>186</sup>

A few months later, in August 2015, in western Montana, the Oath Keepers issued a call to “all American Patriots” to join “Operation Big Sky” over another mining/land dispute

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<sup>180</sup> “First Superseding Indictment.” 2021. *United States of America v. Thomas Caldwell et al.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/case-multi-defendant/file/1369071/download>

<sup>181</sup> Jackson, Sam. 2020. *Oath Keepers.*; Siegler, Kirk. 2015. “Armed ‘Oath Keepers’ Celebrate Montana Miners’ Incremental Victory.” *NPR*, August 14, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/14/432192414/armed-oath-keepers-celebrate-montana-miners-incremental-victory>; Hatewatch Staff. 2017. “Founder of Oregon Oath Keepers Chapter Making A Bid To Lead Oregon GOP.” *Southern Poverty Law Center* <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/01/30/founder-oregon-oath-keepers-chapter-making-bid-lead-oregon-gop>

<sup>182</sup> Jackson, Sam. 2020. *Oath Keepers.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Wiles, Tay. 2016. “Sugar Pine Mine, the Other Standoff,” *High Country News*, February 2, 2016. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/48.2/showdown-at-sugar-pine-mine>

<sup>185</sup> Jackson, Sam. 2020. *Oath Keepers.*

<sup>186</sup> Matthews, Dale. 2015. “Sugar Pine Mine Oath Keeper Mary Emerick: The World is ‘Listening and They’re Watching.’” *YouTube*. Accessed June 23, 2022.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_JbwGWz7JQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_JbwGWz7JQ)

between two miners and the U.S. Forest Service.<sup>187</sup> Emerick claimed that the miners reached out to the Josephine County Oath Keepers chapter seeking help, stating that she personally had “been in contact with them [the miners] over the past few weeks,” and that the miners asked if the Oath Keepers could come and help them “and we said ‘Yes this is what we can do for you.’”<sup>188</sup> Driving from her hometown in Oregon to Lincoln, Montana, Emerick joined the call to action to “support” the operation while once again speaking to the press on behalf of the Oath Keepers.<sup>189</sup> Local residents were concerned about the militia’s presence descending on their small town, but Emerick pointed out that the group was not there to intimidate residents and that “we [the Oath Keepers] do as small a footprint as we can when we do these operations, and we like to do it quietly, and that’s what we try to do.”<sup>190</sup>

Emerick’s case is notable in that she represents a position of authority as the public information officer of the Josephine County Oath Keepers chapter. Although her position does not fall under the national level of the organization, there is no evidence of national leadership advising Emerick to stand down or refrain from making public media statements. This inclusion of a woman (or lack of exclusion of a woman) in a public role with clout points to the Oath Keepers shying away from the strong misogynistic tendencies of other domestic violent extremist groups.

The case of Jessica Watkins also underscores this trend. As noted earlier, Jessica Watkins is alleged to have played a major role in the Oath Keepers’ involvement in the January 6 siege on the U.S. Capitol. Watkins, an Ohio bartender and military veteran, describes herself as the Commanding Officer for the Ohio State Regular Militia,<sup>191</sup> while federal

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<sup>187</sup> Swearingen, Marshall. 2015. “Dispatch from White Hope Mine Dispute in Montana,” *High Country News*, August 12, 2015. <https://www.hcn.org/articles/dispatch-from-oath-keepers-security-op-in-montana>

<sup>188</sup> “Oath Keepers in Lincoln Aim to Protect Miner Rights,” 2015. *Montana Right Now*, August 6, 2015. [https://www.montanarightnow.com/news/oath-keepers-in-lincoln-aim-to-protect-miner-rights/article\\_c8606ac6-db27-5874-be14-81dc473a9678.html](https://www.montanarightnow.com/news/oath-keepers-in-lincoln-aim-to-protect-miner-rights/article_c8606ac6-db27-5874-be14-81dc473a9678.html)

<sup>189</sup> Swearingen, Marshall. 2015. “Dispatch from White Hope Mine Dispute in Montana;” “Oath Keepers’ Declare Mission Accomplished at Lincoln Mine Operation,” *Montana Public Radio*, August 12, 2015. <https://www.mtpr.org/montana-news/2015-08-12/oath-keepers-declare-mission-accomplished-at-lincoln-mine-operation>

<sup>190</sup> “Oath Keepers’ Declare Mission Accomplished at Lincoln Mine Operation.”

<sup>191</sup> Margolin, Devorah and Chelsea Daymon. 2021. “Selfie and Siege: Women’s Social Media Footprint and the US Capitol Hill Siege,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*. <https://gnet-research.org/2021/03/03/selfie-and-siege-womens-social-media-footprint-and-the-us-capitol-hill-siege/>; The Ohio State Regular Militia is considered by domestic law enforcement to be a “dues paying

prosecutors and a judge in her case identify her as a “recruiter,” organizer, and “leader” in the Oath Keepers during the events of January 6.<sup>192</sup> Watkins was indicted as a co-conspirator with ten other individuals, including Stewart Rhodes, the founder and leader of the group.<sup>193</sup> Watkins and fellow members of the organization are alleged to have moved in a stack formation up the east steps of the Capitol building and entered the building with other rioters.<sup>194</sup> Further evidence points to Watkins attempting to organize, attend, and operate a training camp in Ohio to become “fighting fit,” prior to the events of January 6.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, her social media footprint displays conspiratorial ideas regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential elections.<sup>196</sup> In May 2022, Watkins was charged with seditious conspiracy for her involvement in the Capitol siege, one of the most serious charges related to the events of January 6.<sup>197</sup>

Watkins’ case is significant because it shows a woman associated with the Oath Keepers in an active, operational role. During the events at the Capitol, her engagement with Stewart Rhodes also points to prominent figures of the organization accepting a woman in this capacity. Whether this was due to needing ‘all hands-on deck’ in order to stop what many of the participants of January 6 saw as the ‘steal’ of the U.S. presidential election from Donald Trump or for other purposes, Watkins’ case embodies an important position in the planning and execution of the Capitol siege. Furthermore, after Rhodes was arrested for his involvement on January 6, Kellye SoRelle, a family lawyer from Granbury, Texas announced that she would be acting as the Oath Keeper’s interim leader

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subset” of the Oath Keepers. Sparling, Hannah, K. and Grasha, Keving. 2021. “Ohio Militias: Who are the Oath Keepers, Ohio State Regular Militia?” *Cincinnati.com*, January 21, 2021. <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2021/01/21/ohio-militias-who-oath-keepers-ohio-state-regular-militia/4231869001/>

<sup>192</sup> Cohen, Marshall. 2021. “Alleged Oath Keeper Ringleader in Capitol Siege Ordered to Stay in Jail Before Trial.”

<sup>193</sup> “Indictment.” 2021. *United States of America v. Elmer Stewart Rhodes III et al.* United States District Court for the District of Columbia. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1462481/download>

<sup>194</sup> John Caniglia. 2022. “New Charges Accuse Ohio Bartender of Sedition with Leader of the Oath Keepers in Attack on U.S. Capitol,” *Cleveland.com*, May 20, 2022.

<https://www.cleveland.com/nation/2022/01/new-charges-accuse-ohio-bartender-of-sedition-with-leader-of-the-oath-keepers-in-attack-on-us-capitol.html>

<sup>195</sup> Polantz, Katelyn. 2021. “Basic Training Discussions Part of Newly Indicted Capitol Riot Defendant Cases,” *CNN*, January 27, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/27/politics/capitol-riot-basic-training-oath-keepers/index.html>

<sup>196</sup> Margolin, Devorah and Chelsea Daymon. 2021. “Selfie and Siege.”

<sup>197</sup> Caniglia, John. 2022. “New Charges Accuse Ohio Bartender of Sedition with Leader of the Oath Keepers in Attack on U.S. Capitol.”

until Rhodes was released.<sup>198</sup> Prior to this position SoRelle served as the General Counsel for the organization.<sup>199</sup> Thus, as explored here, women in the Oath Keepers have taken on comparatively prominent roles in the group, most notably roles that collaborated with or are in leadership roles over male counterparts.

### ***Salafi-jihadism***

Although salafi-jihadist groups have historically struggled with defining women's participation in their organizations outside of patriarchal roles, they also recognize the strategic value women offer in the domestic sphere and operationally. Women also understand the benefits they offer to groups, with many readily taking on participatory roles to aid jihadist causes. Many women who join or are inspired by salafi-jihadism adhere to the group's conceptualizations of traditional gender roles as wives, mothers, and educators of the next generation. There are also several prominent cases of women challenging these assumptions, taking on roles often associated with men. These roles include recruiting individuals into organizations, disseminating propaganda, fundraising, traveling to offer their support to groups, and in some cases serving as operatives in attacks and plots.<sup>200</sup> American female supporters of salafi-jihadism have also utilized online environments as platforms to express their beliefs, spread propaganda, recruit, and fundraise.<sup>201</sup>

As Seran de Leede explains, "it often remains poorly understood how to interpret women's supportive and facilitative capabilities in waging jihad and, as a consequence,

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<sup>198</sup> "Granbury Lawyer Kelly SoRelle Says She is Now Acting President of the Oath Keepers," 2022. *CBS News*, January 14, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/dfw/news/granbury-lawyer-kellye-sorelle-acting-president-oath-keepers/>

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> See Alexander, Audrey. 2016. "Cruel Intentions."; St. Claire, Pat, Greg Botelho, and Ralph Ellis. 2015. "San Bernardino Shooter Tashfeen Malik: Who was She?", *CNN*, December 8, 2015.

<https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/06/us/san-bernardino-shooter-tashfeen-malik/index.html>; McKelvey, Tara and Boer Deng. 2022. "'All-American girl' Turned Jihadist Denied Bail," *BBC News*, February 4, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60254827>

<sup>201</sup> Halverson, Jeffrey R. and Amy K. Way. 2012. "The Curious Case of Colleen LaRose: Social Margins, New Media, and Online Radicalization," *Media, War & Conflict*. 5(2): 139-153; Swire, Sonnet and Evan Perez. 2022. "Kansas Women Led Female ISIS Battalion in Syria, Prosecutors Say," *CNN*, January 29, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/29/politics/allison-fluke-ekren-syria-isis-justice-department-charges/index.html>

how to assess women’s relevance for jihad.”<sup>202</sup> Therefore, looking solely from a group perspective can skew our understanding of women’s roles in salafi-jihadism. This can also be said for group rhetoric and propaganda on women that does not always reflect the actuality of women’s involvement in organizations.<sup>203</sup> For this reason, exploring how women have actually participated in these groups and movements is vital, and informs our understanding of women’s participation in salafi-jihadist extremism via their own agency.

### *Case: Al Qaeda*

One of the most notable cases associated with Al-Qaeda is that of Aafia Siddiqui, who played an operational role for the movement. Born in Pakistan, Aafia Siddiqui came to the United States in 1990 for her undergraduate studies at the University of Houston.<sup>204</sup> She later transferred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and went on to conduct her graduate studies at Brandeis University.<sup>205</sup> While in the Boston area, Siddiqui is alleged to have become involved in extremist causes,<sup>206</sup> and received firearms training.<sup>207</sup> After leaving the U.S. in 2002, Siddiqui is thought to have married an Al-Qaeda operative, Ammar al-Baluchi, a nephew of 9/11 planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.<sup>208</sup> During this period, Siddiqui is alleged to have helped Al-Qaeda smuggle weapons and people into the U.S. and U.K., as well as assisted with other operations.<sup>209</sup> In 2008, Siddiqui was arrested in Ghazni, Afghanistan by the Afghan National Police and

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<sup>202</sup> de Leede, Seran. 2018. “Women in Jihad,” p. 2

<sup>203</sup> Criezis, Meili. 2020. “‘Many Sisters Wish They Were Men’: Gendered Discourse and Themes in pro-ISIS Online Communities,” *Journal for Deradicalization*. 25(4): 35-74.

<sup>204</sup> Khodorkovsky, Natan. 2022. “Meet ‘Lady Al-Qaeda’ Aafia Siddiqui, Who Texas Gunman Demanded be Freed,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 16, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-692631>

<sup>205</sup> Scroggins, Deborah. 2005. “The Most Wanted Woman in the World,” *Vogue*. <https://archive.vogue.com/article/2005/3/the-most-wanted-woman-in-the-world>; Katherine Ozment.

2006. “Who’s Afraid of Aafia Siddiqui?” *Boston Magazine*, May 15, 2006.

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/2006/05/15/whos-afraid-of-aafia-siddiqui/>

<sup>206</sup> Scroggins, Deborah. 2012. *Wanted Women: Faith, Lies, and the War on Terror: The Lives of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Aafia Siddiqui*. Harper Collins.

<sup>207</sup> “Aafia Siddiqui Sentenced in Manhattan Federal Court to 86 Years for Attempting to Murder U.S. Nationals in Afghanistan and Six Additional Crimes.” 2010. *Federal Bureau of Investigation*.

<https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2010/nyfo092310.htm>

<sup>208</sup> “The 9/11 Commission Report.” 2004. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon The United States.; Clifford, Bennett. 2022. “The Colleyville Hostage Crisis: Aafia Siddiqui’s Continued Pertinence in Jihadi Terror Plots against the United States,” *CTC Sentinel*. 15(3): 1-10.

<sup>209</sup> Clifford, Bennett. 2022. “The Colleyville Hostage Crisis.”

according to the U.S. Department of Justice was found with, “numerous documents describing the creation of explosives, as well as excerpts from the Anarchist’s Arsenal ... descriptions of various landmarks in the United States, including in New York City,” as well as “substances that were sealed in bottles and glass jars.”<sup>210</sup> After being extradited to the U.S., Siddiqui was put on trial and found guilty, and sentenced to 86 years in federal prison for trying to murder U.S. citizens abroad, as well as six additional crimes.<sup>211</sup> It was one of the most significant sentences for a convicted salafi-jihadist woman perpetrator to date.

As noted above, some women associated with Al-Qaeda have sought to adhere to and promote the movement’s gendered policies. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s wife, Umayma al-Zawahiri’s, called on all women to wear hijabs and maintain their modesty and honor in public.<sup>212</sup> However, even Umayma al-Zawahiri acknowledged that some women desired to fight alongside men for the group’s cause. This includes American female supporters who have attempted to commit attacks on the homeland or abroad, inspired by Al-Qaeda.

As noted earlier, women can take top-down strategic messaging and interpret it to serve their needs. The case of Colleen LaRose offers interesting insights into the influence of online environments on the radicalization process of an American woman. LaRose’s journey into extremism took a tumultuous path,<sup>213</sup> from her conversion to Islam, finding more extreme interpretations of the religion online, and engaging with violent content that she watched and later began reposting.<sup>214</sup> LaRose started to use different

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<sup>210</sup> “Government’s Sentencing Submission.” 2010. *United States of America v. Aafia Siddiqui*. United States District Court for the Southern District of New York.

<sup>211</sup> “Aafia Siddiqui Found Guilty in Manhattan Federal Court of Attempting to Murder U.S. Nationals in Afghanistan and Six Additional Charges.” 2010. U.S. Department of Justice.

<https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2010/nyfo020310a.htm>; “Aafia Siddiqui Sentenced in Manhattan Federal Court to 86 Years for Attempting to Murder U.S. Nationals in Afghanistan and Six Additional Crimes.” 2010. FBI. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/newyork/press-releases/2010/nyfo092310.htm>

<sup>212</sup> al-Zawahiri, Ayman. 2009. “A Letter to the Muslim Sisters,” *Al-Sahab Media Foundation*, AQC.

<sup>213</sup> Shiffman, John. 2012. “Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, A Martyr is Made – Jane’s Jihad,” *Reuters*, December 7, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-jihadjane/special-report-from-abuse-to-a-chat-room-a-martyr-is-made-janes-jihad-idUSBRE8B60GP20121207>

<sup>214</sup> *United States of America v. Colleen R. LaRose*. 2014. *United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania*.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Colleen%20Larose%20Indictment.pdf> p. 3.; Picart,

pseudonyms, including “Jihad Jane,” “Fatima LaRose,” “Sister of Terror,” and “Ms. Machiavelli.”<sup>215</sup> LaRose’s indictment indicates that she allegedly became a leading recruiter for jihadist-aligned cells, focusing on European citizens who could travel easily and had physical appearances that could “blend in with many people” in order to evade detection in Europe and abroad.<sup>216</sup> By 2009, LaRose was in contact with her eventual co-conspirators, one of whom was an alleged Al-Qaeda operative.<sup>217</sup> By March 2009, LaRose was provided with a mission and was directed to assassinate Swedish artist Lars Vilks, who drew a cartoon of the prophet with a dog’s body.<sup>218</sup> While waiting for further instructions, LaRose continued to keep in contact with jihadist-aligned individuals online and posted jihadist content, eventually placing her on the FBI’s radar.<sup>219</sup> Once LaRose returned from Europe to the U.S., the FBI apprehended her upon her arrival.<sup>220</sup> Ultimately, LaRose’s story offers insight into an American woman’s Al-Qaeda-inspired radicalization and engagement process. Her case and that of Aafia Siddiqui highlight different ways women have worked with or been influenced by the movement.

### *Case: the Islamic State*

American women supporters of the Islamic State have entered the movement in several ways. For example, the case of Ariel Bradley highlights the roles of female online supporters and travelers. Bradley went from one extreme to another. Raised by a fundamentalist Christian mother,<sup>221</sup> Bradley allegedly converted to Islam based on a

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Caroline Joan S. 2015. “Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic’: The Roles of the Internet and Imagined Relations in the Self-Radicalization of Colleen LaRose (Jihad Jane),” *Societies*. 5(2): 354-383.

<sup>215</sup> See Picart, Caroline Joan S. 2015. “Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic.’”; “U.S. Sentences ‘Jihad Jane’ to 10 Years in Jail for Terror Plot,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 6, 2014. <https://www.rferl.org/a/jihad-jane-jail/25222150.html>

<sup>216</sup> Johnson, Carrie. 2010. “JihadJane, an American Woman, Faces Terrorism Charges.”

<sup>217</sup> Picart, Caroline Joan S. 2015. “Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic.”

<sup>218</sup> Halverson, Jeffrey R and Amy K Way. 2012. “The Curious Case of Colleen LaRose.”; Olsen, Jan M. 2021. “Swedish Artist Threatened for Muhammad Sketch Dies in Crash,” *Associated Press*, October 4, 2021.

<https://apnews.com/article/europe-accidents-sweden-lars-vilks-72926f7d6909e849f73ef212b3ed1d4c>

<sup>219</sup> Shiffman, John. 2012. “Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, A Martyr is Made.”

<sup>220</sup> Shiffman, John. 2012. “Special Report: Jane’s Jihad: Confessions, Jail and Unwavering Faith,” *Reuters*, December 10, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-jihadjane-four/special-report-janes-jihad-confessions-jail-and-unwavering-faith-idUSBRE8B90ER20121210>

<sup>221</sup> Hall, Ellie. 2015. “How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” *BuzzFeed*, July 20, 2015. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/woman-journey-from-chattanooga-to-isis>

crush she developed on a Muslim customer who frequented a pizza parlor where she worked.<sup>222</sup> Although this infatuation reportedly never developed into a serious relationship, Bradley began frequenting Muslim marriage sites where she eventually met an Iraqi man, got married to him, moved to Sweden where he resided, had a child, and began expressing more extreme interpretations of Islam.<sup>223</sup>

By 2014, Bradley and her family traveled to Syria to purportedly join the Islamic State.<sup>224</sup> As an online activist, Bradley expressed her support for the Islamic State on her Twitter and Instagram accounts, using the aliases of “Emarah bint Aljon” or “Umm Aminah.”<sup>225</sup> Additionally, in the aftermath of the 2015 Chattanooga attack on two military installations, Bradley posted on her Twitter account, “May Allah accept [the Chattanooga shooter] as *shaheed* [a martyr], *in sha Allah* [if God wills] this will make the camps of *Emaan* [the faithful] and *Kuffar* [nonbelievers] known within Chattanooga.”<sup>226</sup> Eventually, Bradley, her husband, and at least one of her children were killed in an airstrike while her U.S.-born, 8-year-old daughter was repatriated to the U.S. after Kurdish forces found her.<sup>227</sup>

Bradley, like others, showed support for the Islamic State by leaving the U.S. and traveling to join the movement in Syria and Iraq.<sup>228</sup> Other American women who have joined came from different backgrounds. Some were born Muslim, others converted; some traveled with families and children, others traveled alone.<sup>229</sup> Moreover, several young girls under the age of 18 traveled without their families.<sup>230</sup> Once in the territory of

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<sup>222</sup> Vidino, Lorenzo and Seamus Hughes. 2015. “ISIS in America”

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Hall, Ellie. 2015. “How One Young Woman Went from Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride.”

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Speckhard, Anne and Molly Ellenberg. 2021. “Rescued American Girl, 8, Says She Was Beaten and Abused in ISIS Camp,” *The Daily Beast*, August 5, 2021. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/rescued-american-girl-8-says-she-was-beaten-in-isis-camp>

<sup>228</sup> Cook, Joana and Gina Vale. 2019. “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’ II.”

<sup>229</sup> The Program on Extremism at George Washington University. 2022. “The Travelers.”

<sup>230</sup> Margolin, Devorah and Austin Doctor. 2022. “Thousands of Men, Women and Children Remain in Detention Because of Their Former Ties to ISIS.” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/02/thousands-men-women-children-remain-detention-because-their-former-ties-isis/>

the Islamic State, their experiences also differed.<sup>231</sup> While some women were more passive supporters, others rose to the inner circle of the movement. For instance, Allison Fluke-Ekren, a former teacher from Kansas who traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State, was charged with providing material support or resources to a terrorist group for her role in leading and training a female battalion, and recruiting for and planning an attack on a university campus in the U.S. on behalf of the Islamic State.<sup>232</sup> According to prosecutors, Fluke-Ekren offered military training in Syria to more than 100 women and girls, some as young as 10 to 11 years old, on behalf of the movement.<sup>233</sup> According to a witness in her case, Fluke-Ekren also expressed the desire to conduct an attack on U.S. soil, stating she could “go to a shopping mall in the United States, park a vehicle full of explosives in the basement or parking garage level of the structure, and detonate the explosives in the vehicle with a cell phone triggering device.”<sup>234</sup>

In addition to online activism and traveling to join the group, a final example of women’s varying support roles for the Islamic State is through more front-facing combat roles. In December 2015, Tashfeen Malik, along with her husband Syed Rizwan Farook, perpetrated the San Bernardino attack on behalf of the Islamic State, killing 14 and injuring over 21 individuals.<sup>235</sup> Malik had a history of receiving fundamentalist education due to her attendance at a hardline Islamic girl’s school in Saudi Arabia and her affiliation with the Red Mosque (*Lal Masjid*) in Pakistan,<sup>236</sup> which has a troubled past with

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<sup>231</sup> Margolin, Devorah and Charlie Winter. 2021. “Women in the Islamic State: Victimization, Support, Collaboration, and Acquiescence” *The ISIS Files*. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. [https://mena-studies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Women\\_in\\_the\\_Islamic\\_State.pdf](https://mena-studies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Women_in_the_Islamic_State.pdf)

<sup>232</sup> “Criminal Complaint Against Allison Fluke-Ekren.” 2019. *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/criminal-complaint-against-allison-fluke-erken/9679c73e-582c-42cf-90bd-840683ab96ba/?itid=lk\\_interstitial\\_manual\\_13](https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/criminal-complaint-against-allison-fluke-erken/9679c73e-582c-42cf-90bd-840683ab96ba/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_13); Weiner, Rachel. 2022. “Former Kansas Teacher is Accused of leading all-female ISIS brigade.” *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/29/kansas-woman-islamic-state-charge/>

<sup>233</sup> “American Woman Who Led ISIS Battalion Pleads Guilty.” 2022. *The United States Department of Justice*. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/american-woman-who-led-isis-battalion-pleads-guilty>

<sup>234</sup> Miranda, Shauneen. 2022. “A U.S. Woman Pleads Guilty to Leading an all-Female ISIS Battalion,” *NPR*, June 8, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/08/1103664950/fluke-ekren-guilty-isis-female-battalion>

<sup>235</sup> St. Claire, Pat, Greg Botelho, and Ralph Ellis. 2015. “San Bernardino Shooter Tashfeen Malik.”

<sup>236</sup> Fitzpatrick, Thomas M. 2018. “Global Radicalization and the San Bernardino Attack—Evolving Extremist U.S. Domestic Threat.” *International Relations and Diplomacy*. 6(9): p. 502.

extremist preaching.<sup>237</sup> Investigators later found that Farook had communicated with an individual online that the FBI suspected of having ties to international terrorism.<sup>238</sup> According to three U.S. officials, prior to the attack Malik posted a pledge of allegiance to (at the time) Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Facebook.<sup>239</sup> Four hours after the attack, Malik and Farook were both killed in a shootout with police, leaving behind their 6-month-old daughter.<sup>240</sup> Overall, women associated with the Islamic State participated in a variety of ways in support of the group— ideologically, financially, through travel, and by carrying out attacks in the group’s name.

### **Comparison**

Although their association with extremist groups spans different ideological perspectives, the roles played by women involved in far-right and salafi-jihadist circles are not wildly different. The cases explored above illustrate how far-right and salafi-jihadist women have seized their agency through participation in American violent extremism. These women see themselves as taking a moral stand for deeply-held beliefs and principles. Furthermore, women associated with far-right and salafi-jihadist extremism in the U.S. have assumed both passive and active roles while conforming to or challenging hierarchical and patriarchal power structures.

Although many organizations dictate “proper,” traditional roles for women in their ranks, some, like the Proud Boys, strongly express that women have no place in their organizations aside from being girlfriends, mothers, and wives. This can also be said for the official narratives of most salafi-jihadist groups, which dictate that a women’s place is in the home supporting her husband and family. However, women associated with and inspired by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State doctrine have proven otherwise, with supporters

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<sup>237</sup> Saleem, Aasim, Shamil Shams. 2015. “Pakistan’s ‘Most Radical Mosque’ Back in the Spotlight.” *Deutsche Welle*, November 20, 2015. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-most-radical-mosque-back-in-spotlight/a-18864603>

<sup>238</sup> Ahmen, Saeed. 2015. “Who Were Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik?” *CNN*, December 4, 2015. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/03/us/syed-farook-tashfeen-malik-mass-shooting-profile/index.html>

<sup>239</sup> Ahmen, Saeed. “Who Were Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik?”; Botelho, Greg and Ralph Ellis. 2015. “San Bernardino Shooting Investigated as ‘Act of Terrorism’,” *CNN*, December 5, 2015. <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/04/us/san-bernardino-shooting/index.html>

<sup>240</sup> Osborne, Samuel. 2015. “San Bernardino Shooting: Everything We Know About Tashfeen Malik,” *The Independent*, December 6, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/san-bernardino-shooting-everything-we-know-about-tashfeen-malik-a6762236.html>

like LaRose, Malik, and others embracing operational roles such as recruiting, training, and attack planning. While operating in the U.S., these women have greater opportunities to overlook organizational edicts on participation in violence, as they are inspired by the group but do not operate under their direct operational control. In other cases, women like Fluke-Ekren are given greater autonomy even under the control of the Islamic State, but solely over other women.

Furthermore, women in the far-right took some of the most active roles during the 2020 U.S. presidential elections and the events of January 6 than had been previously witnessed. For example, women in the Oath Keepers took on leading operational responsibilities during January 6. Although patriarchal power dynamics are commonplace in far-right and salafi-jihadist groups, some far-right organizations in the U.S. offer women greater scope to participate in public-facing and leadership roles, while women involved in salafi-jihadist movements engage in more auxiliary and operational responsibilities. This is often due to group ideology and strategic goals.

The Internet and social media have also played a defining factor in many of the cases examined here. Digital environments have allowed women in both movements to take on more prominent public-facing roles, reaching greater audiences, spreading ideologies, and connecting with like-minded individuals. Women involved in domestic extremism have also leveraged communication technologies in their attack planning both locally, as seen with Watkins, and more globally, as seen with LaRose. To some extent, the Internet has also been a factor in their radicalization.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge the varying experiences of women associated with violent extremism in America. While some have taken on more auxiliary or complementary roles, others have moved into operational or even leadership positions. These dynamics are often aligned with a group or movement's ideology and strategic goals, but in some cases they can be driven by the women themselves. Finally, key commonalities across both movements include women's agency in supporting extremist ideologies that often seek to promote gendered (and sometimes exclusionary) ideologies.

## Part III: The Clash

While groups have idealized the notions of women’s roles within their movements as explored in Part I, the actual experiences of women within violent extremism can manifest in different forms as explored in Part II. This section explores the third research question: in these male-dominated spaces, when women have broken through the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ to participate in violent extremism in America, how have groups responded?

Despite the very nature of the misogynistic ideologies that drive far-right and salafi-jihadist groups, there is a growing understanding among researchers that women have begun to play greater (and more public roles) within American violent extremist movements.<sup>241</sup> Women have been supporters, members, and in some cases perpetrators of violence.

The following section will explore how the groups and movements within far-right and salafi-jihadist ideologies examined above have responded to the expanding roles of women, which often challenge the roles offered by these ideologies.

### ***Far-Right***

As discussed extensively in this report, far-right ideologies are not monolithic. However, they do share several overarching themes, including anti-establishment beliefs that center around ingroup and outgroup attitudes that are exclusionary and dehumanizing. Moreover, many center around gendered beliefs, ascribing specific ideas to the roles men and women should play. Even for groups that do not hold strict gendered worldviews like some of the MVE groups, gender still plays a central part in their strategies. The following cases will explore when women challenge these gendered beliefs in the American far-right.

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<sup>241</sup> See González, Alessandra L., Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chernak. 2014. “How Women Engage Homegrown Terrorism,” *Feminist Criminology*. 9(4): 344-366.; Matfess, Hilary and Margolin, Devorah. 2022. “The Women of January 6th.”; and Santucci, Julia, Regina Waugh, and Hallie Schneir. 2021. “Gender and Right-Wing Extremism in America: Why Understanding Women’s Roles is Key to Preventing Future Acts of Domestic Terrorism,” *Just Security*. <https://www.justsecurity.org/75068/gender-and-right-wing-extremism-in-america-why-understanding-womens-roles-is-key-to-preventing-future-acts-of-domestic-terrorism/>

*Case: the Proud Boys*

As explored in Part II, there have been auxiliaries of Proud Boys' Girls composed of the girlfriends and wives of Proud Boys members. However, full membership in the group has been restricted and limited only to men.<sup>242</sup> The cases of LaRosa and Konold, both claiming to have had some level of support from Proud Boys chapters, marks a potential rift between Proud Boys chapters and the organization as a whole when it comes to women's roles in the group. Although women have been known to host Proud Boys gatherings for their male family members, the organization itself has been hostile towards women's auxiliaries,<sup>243</sup> making it clear that a woman's duty is to support her boyfriend, husband, son(s), and children, along with having babies. The national leadership does not offer a place for women in other capacities, especially in connection to its on the ground activities. Thus, while women seek to support the organization both actively and passively, active support—as displayed in the cases of LaRosa and Konold—is rare.

For example, on December 21, 2020, LaRosa created a transphobic Telegram channel named Proud Girls USA.<sup>244</sup> Later that day, an online statement posted on the ProudBoysUSA Telegram channel and other associated channels by purported Proud Boy's members responded by saying that "Proud Boy's Girls or Proud Girls are both ridiculous ideas" and they should not "ride our coattails." If women really wanted to support the group, they suggested that women instead "Get married, have babies, and take care of your family."<sup>245</sup>

In 2020, a channel named Proud Boys' Girls' appeared on Telegram, gaining an unfriendly welcome from Proud Boys accounts on the platform.<sup>246</sup> For instance, the Oklahoma Proud Boys posted a meme announcing "this is a men's club" while

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<sup>242</sup> Collman, Ashley. 2021. "A Woman Who Was Charged in Connection with the Capitol Riot Bragged About Being Recruited by the Proud Boys," *Business Insider*, February 17, 2021.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/capitol-riot-female-suspect-bragged-recruited-by-proud-boys-snapchat-2021-2>;

Hegeman, Roxana. 2021. "Woman Charged in Capitol Melee Says Proud Boys Recruited Her."

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Reid Ross, Alexander. 2020. "Proud Boys Are at War With Their Female Extremist Wing."

<sup>245</sup> Reid Ross, Alexander. 2020. "Proud Boys Are at War With Their Female Extremist Wing.;" Zidan, Karim. 2021. "Tara LaRosa."

<sup>246</sup> Reid Ross, Alexander. 2020. "Proud Boys Are at War With Their Female Extremist Wing."

commenting that “if you're not in a relationship with a Proud Boy, at worst, you're a groupie,” while another comment in relation to the Proud Boys' Girls' account claimed that “if you are a Proud Boy and you are involved in supporting Proud Girls you are fake and gay.”<sup>247</sup> Thus, while women associated with the organization seek to establish their own agency within the group, including well-known figures like LaRosa, the Proud Boys' strong misogynistic dispositions make this a difficult task.

Women who actively support the organization through auxiliary roles come under scrutiny, and even outright hatred, from male Proud Boys members, as seen in the case of LaRosa. Furthermore, women in more passive roles as ideological supporters and propagandists, seen in the case of the Proud Boys' Girls' social media accounts, are belittled for having a voice of their own. Yet, this has not stopped women from trying to gain some form of agency within a highly misogynistic group.

#### *Case: the Oath Keepers*

As previously mentioned, the Oath Keepers provide a somewhat different perspective on women involved in violent extremism. Although there is less of an apparent clash between the group and the women involved in it, the lack of Oath Keeper national leadership statements on women in the organization points to avoidance of the subject. This could be for several reasons, including deferring from gender narratives in order to be inclusive, casual misogyny, avoiding the topic to cater to more conservative members, or the national organization officially not seeing a place for women in it.

On the other hand, cases such as Emerick's and Watkins' display women in prominent Oath Keeper roles who have taken it upon themselves to be actively involved in organizational events. A lack of leadership backlash regarding their participation in representing the group in albeit different roles suggests that there is some level of acceptance of female involvement within the organization. Watkins' case may provide evidence for this since she was part of a group of Oath Keepers during the event on January 6, 2021, alongside the organization's leader, Stewart Rhodes. While the Oath Keepers have not provided an official stance on women in the organization, there seems to be some acceptance among its members at both the national and regional chapter levels.

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

### ***Salafi-jihadism***

While the far-right is more diversified in its gendered ideology, salafi-jihadism is more cohesive. Salafi-jihadists emphasize that women's participation is in the domestic sphere, in traditional gender roles, as wives, mothers, educators, and in the provision of non-military support such as preaching, recruiting, and fundraising. These groups are guided by classical jihadist doctrine that defines specific circumstances for which women can move from the private sphere and participate in more operational-based activities. While Azzam's teachings have guided much of this conversation, over time different groups have reinterpreted Azzam's writings to serve their own needs. More recently, women have also taken more active roles in violent and visible actions, especially in the form of suicide/martyrdom operations or enforcers. The following cases will explore when American women challenge these gendered beliefs in salafi-jihadism.

#### *Case: Al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda has remained relatively quiet on women's participation in support of the movement from the United States. As noted in Part I, the rhetoric surrounding women has often focused on women's victimization at the hands of Al-Qaeda's enemies. However, Aafia Siddiqui represents a unique case for the group. Al-Qaeda has not outright claimed that Siddiqui was ever an operative for the movement. Rather, Al-Qaeda has focused on Siddiqui's victimization at the hands of the United States and used her as a recruitment tool to motivate male followers.<sup>248</sup> For example, in 2010, Ayman al-Zawahiri released a speech titled "Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui?"<sup>249</sup> Through this speech and others, Al-Qaeda sought to simultaneously appeal to male supporters to defend women while also shaming men by highlighting women's accomplishments for the cause and encouraging men to follow suit. Thus, the group has sought to instrumentalize her actions for its own gain.

This fine line walked by Al-Qaeda is in line with findings by Nelly Lahoud, who argues,

"if jihadis are pushed by an internal debate on this issue, they would find themselves in a Catch-22 dilemma: if they insist on excluding women from

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<sup>248</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. "The Neglected Sex."

<sup>249</sup> al-Zawahiri, Ayman. 2010. "Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui."

combat, they would lose the credibility of their defensive jihad which provides a (classical) lawful umbrella to their ideology and actions; if they call on women to join them on the battlefield, they would face a different set of problems, not least a likely loss of any sympathy from culturally conservative Muslims and any possible recruits that they might hope to attract from this segment of population.”<sup>250</sup>

Al-Qaeda seemingly appeals to more conservative members of the population, playing up women’s victimization and the need to protect them, emphasizing men’s roles and actions in supporting the group, and downplaying women’s ideological and operational actions. That said, the movement is careful to remain vague on women’s efforts, for should the need require, they could call on women to support them. This is also important when it comes to supporters, especially in the U.S. context where female supporters adhering to Al-Qaeda doctrine can push boundaries since they maintain greater freedoms living in the U.S. While the group dictates roles for women, these orders can become malleable, particularly when the need arises for U.S. operatives.

### *Case: the Islamic State*

Like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State has tread precariously between its female supporters who want to take up action in the movement’s name and its more conservative base of supporters. This has forced the group to issue mixed messaging in response, wherein it “has praised or spoken ambivalently about women who carried out operations ... despite not wanting women to actively take up arms.”<sup>251</sup> By walking this fine line, the Islamic State has seemingly granted access to some women, while not opening the floodgates for women’s participation.

As noted in Part II of this report, several female followers of the movement have plotted or carried out attacks around the world, including Tashfeen Malik, one of the perpetrators of the 2015 San Bernardino attacks.<sup>252</sup> In response, the Islamic State emphasized that Malik’s actions were not mandatory and further argued that the conditions of defensive jihad were not met at the time of her attack, stating, “the brother’s blessed wife accompanied him despite the fact that combat is not even

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<sup>250</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. “The Neglected Sex.”

<sup>251</sup> Margolin, Devorah. 2019. “The Changing Role of Women in Violent Islamist Groups.”

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

obligatory upon her, but she did not want to lose the opportunity for shahādah.”<sup>253</sup> Despite this, the group did not condemn her actions and even framed her participation as voluntary and in support of the organization and its cause. The Islamic State even went so far as to note that through Malik and Farook’s attack, “the Islamic State had struck once again in the American homeland.”<sup>254</sup> Despite the attack not being organized or formally directed through the Islamic State, pro-Islamic State propaganda framed Malik’s voluntary actions for the movement’s gain. Moreover, the Islamic State described the attack in detail, even noting

“[a]s the operation took place, Tashfeen Malik made a post online reaffirming their bay’ah to Amīrul- Mu’minīn, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī (hafidhahullāh). She and her husband then engaged in a shootout with security forces and were killed, thereby attaining shahādah in the path of Allah. We consider them so, and Allah is their judge. Thus, the Khilāfah’s call for the Muslims to strike the crusaders in their own lands was answered once more, but on this particular occasion the attack was unique.”<sup>255</sup>

The article praises Malik and Farook, noting, “not only did they leave behind their comfortable lifestyle, but prior to the operation they left their baby daughter in the care of others knowing that they likely wouldn’t see her again in this life.”<sup>256</sup> As the Islamic State defines women’s most important roles as wives and mothers, the sacrifice to carry out jihad and leave behind a child highlights the highest commitment to the movement’s ideology.

Violent Islamists face a dilemma when praising women’s actions if carried outside the confines of a group or movement’s declaration of defensive jihad. Jihadist leaders have been reluctant to condemn women who successfully performed acts of jihad while also not encouraging other women to actively join their ranks. And it is clear that Malik’s attack on the U.S. benefited the movement. Furthermore, the Islamic State used the attack to encourage men to follow suit, stating, “[m]ay Allah accept the sacrifices of our noble brother Syed Rizwan Farook and his blessed wife, accept them among the shuhadā’, and use their deeds as a means to awaken more Muslims in America, Europe,

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<sup>253</sup> Dabiq 13. 2016. “Foreword: The Rafidah from Ibn Saba’ to the Dajjal.” *Al-Hayat*.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

and Australia.”<sup>257</sup> This offers important context that is vital in understanding the Islamic State’s strategy in response to women’s actions. The group was not calling outright for more attacks by women, but rather praising a woman’s actions as a means to inspire men. For the Islamic State, men are the idealized operational assets, and while women’s participation can be used under specific circumstances, women are meant to inspire men’s action. Yet, if a woman’s actions benefit the strategic cause of the group, the Islamic State will use this to its advantage.

### ***Comparison***

Bearing in mind the third research question, we see groups and movements reacting in different ways. On the far-right spectrum, the Proud Boys have publicly belittled and attacked women who have attempted to forge their own paths within the group, as seen in the case of LaRosa and the Proud Boys Girls’ social media account. On the other hand, the Oath Keepers have refrained from expressing their views on women, providing women with greater latitude in their choices of engagement. This includes taking on public speaking roles like Emerick as the public information officer for the Josephine County Oath Keepers chapter, or auxiliary responsibilities like Watkins before and during the events of January 6, 2021. The responses of these groups are in line with both their ideologies and their strategic goals. Far-right misogynistic groups like the Proud Boys that are seeking to create a new gendered order see the inclusion and action of women as directly opposed to their goals. Conversely, MVE groups like the Oath Keepers view the incorporation of women as a strategic asset, highlighting that both men and women buy into their ideological movement. However, it is important to acknowledge that this is not driven by western feminist values of gender equality, but rather often driven by casual misogyny.

Unlike the far-right cases explored above, in some ways, salafi-jihadist groups and movements utilize women’s engagement to their advantage. Although many do not outwardly condone or acknowledge women’s personal agency, movements like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State take women’s actions and twist them into narratives that support group ideologies and religious edicts and appeal to more conservative members. For Al-Qaeda, this can be seen in the case of Aafia Siddiqui. While Al-Qaeda never claimed her

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

as an operational asset, they framed her actions around narratives of victimization and shaming men into action. Similar framing can be seen from the Islamic State. Despite Tashfeen Malik claiming her attack in the name of the movement, the Islamic State never overtly claimed Malik as an Islamic State member. Rather, they accepted her actions in their name, framing her as an assistant to her husband during the San Bernardino attack and using her actions to inspire male members to follow suit. Both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's response to women's participation is in line with previous research that finds that salafi-jihadists have been unwilling to state that women could not participate in jihad unequivocally and have been reluctant to condemn, especially after the fact, attacks carried out by women, as this would belittle the organizations' operation and strategic goals.<sup>258</sup>

Far-right and salafi-jihadist groups and movements have responded differently to women's participation. The Oath Keepers, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and others have thought through their responses more strategically, not alienating female supporters in the same manner as the Proud Boys have. That being said, the Oath Keepers differ from Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. While the Oath Keepers have sought to incorporate women as spokespeople, members, and even leaders, Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have sought to instrumentalize women's participation in order to motivate male supporters.

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<sup>258</sup> Lahoud, Nelly. 2014. "The Neglected Sex."; Margolin, Devorah. 2019. "The Changing Role of Women in Violent Islamist Groups."

## Conclusions

This report examines the many ways in which women in the U.S. have been involved in violent extremism from both the far-right and salafi-jihadist perspectives. Although their roles and activities vary, women in violent extremism must contend with gendered stereotypes, patriarchal societies, and power dynamics with gendered beliefs, both overt and implicit, laying at the heart of far-right and salafi-jihadist ideologies.

As seen throughout this report, groups and movements associated with these extremist ideologies seek to define appropriate behaviors for both men and women, at times taking away women's agency or making it hard for women to undertake active, tactical, or leadership roles in organizations. This report found that how far-right and salafi-jihadist movements conceptualize women's roles within their groups centers around ideological drivers and organizational strategy. Groups driven by conservative gendered ideologies are more likely to adhere to gender segregation and the exclusion of women in their ranks. That said, far-right anti-government ideologies—although pervaded by casual misogyny—are more likely to incorporate women into their ranks while simultaneously viewing women as pawns to further the group's cause. It is important to acknowledge that within the violent extremist landscape in the United States, groups whose driving ideology is not conservatively gendered in nature are still influenced by gendered conceptions of the world. Furthermore, this report found that salafi-jihadist groups operate under a more cohesive gendered ideology than the far-right, which remains more fractured in its ideological outlook of the role of gender. But even while salafi-jihadists share a similar view to one another, they have different strategies for achieving these goals and thus are willing to incorporate women to different extents in order to achieve them.

As explored above, while groups' conceptualizations of gender roles drive women's participation, this has not hindered some women from forging their own path, attempting to do so, or succeeding in breaking down barriers. Although this can be challenging due to group gender dynamics and patriarchal power structures, women see themselves as contributing towards deeply-held values and ideals. In this capacity, some women have assumed complementary roles, while others have taken on operational, auxiliary, and even leadership roles. When considering women involved in far-right and salafi-jihadist extremism, the authors argue that some far-right organizations in the U.S. offer women greater scope to participate in public-facing and leadership roles, while

women involved in salafi-jihadist movements engage in more auxiliary and operational responsibilities. As discussed earlier, this is often due to group ideology and strategic goals. Nonetheless, at times the types of participation women become involved in can be driven by women themselves. Moreover, virtual environments and the Internet have aided women in their roles, allowing women to carve out a space for themselves in groups and movements across both ideologies.

Finally, this report found that far-right and salafi-jihadist groups respond to women's involvement in violent extremism in varying ways, often driven by their ideological and strategic goals. Whereas some organizations in the far-right turn a blind eye to women's participation in their groups, others are publicly vocal about the roles (or lack thereof) that women can have in their organizations. Of the far-right cases explored in this research, MVE groups like the Oath Keepers offer women greater freedoms to participate in roles they deem appropriate for themselves. On the other hand, women's participation in MVE groups is not driven by western feminist values or gender equality, but oftentimes casual misogyny. Unlike the far-right, salafi-jihadists exploit women's engagement to their advantage. Many salafi-jihadist groups refrain from outwardly acknowledging women's personal agency, yet they utilize women's participation in their propaganda, fashioning narratives that support group goals, ideologies, and religious edicts, along with their constituents. It is important to note that both far-right and salafi-jihadist groups are all misogynistic to some degree, causing women to be industrious in the means and methods they choose to engage. Thus, more often than not, women become pawns, assets, and propaganda tools for extremist groups who use rhetoric in different ways to explicitly influence their ideologies on women and manipulate security environments to their advantage. Women in violent extremism are also not averse to using gender dynamics to their advantage.

The findings of this report concur with those of scholars on gender and extremism such as Audrey Alexander, who argues that "by understanding how gender dynamics are ingrained in violent extremist organizations, those tasked with confronting these threats can more comprehensively address networks in their entirety."<sup>259</sup> By better understanding a group's driving dogma and evolving strategy regarding women, academics and practitioners are able to leverage this knowledge into well-informed

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<sup>259</sup> Alexander, Audrey. 2019. "Key Considerations: Forward Thinking About Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism," in *Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, & Violent Extremism*, The Program on Extremism, The George Washington University: p. 52.

policy and actionable strategies to counter and combat it. Thus, this report concludes with several points that policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders must consider as they examine women in violent extremism in America:

- Group ideologies and goals shape how women are incorporated (or not incorporated) in an organization's ranks. Understanding these factors will help establish women's participation in violent extremism, now and in the future.
- Groups espousing conservative gendered ideologies have a greater likelihood of adopting gender segregation, excluding women from their ranks. This makes it difficult for some women to participate in active, tactical, or leadership roles, while removing women's agency. However, far-right anti-government ideologies, while still misogynistic, are more likely to integrate women into their ranks. In light of this, MVE groups may incorporate women and present greater opportunities for them to engage in anti-government violence.
- Despite the gender norms and misogynistic barriers women face in violent extremist groups, women find ways to reinterpret conceptualizations of their roles. To some degree, women involved in violent salafi-jihadist extremism in the U.S. have greater opportunities to overlook organizational edicts on participation in violence, as they are inspired by groups but do not operate under their direct operational control. As a result, women operating in the U.S. are able to achieve greater personal agency in both their actions and deeds. Conversely, some far-right organizations in the U.S. offer women greater scope to participate in public-facing and leadership roles.
- From a counterterrorism perspective, underestimating women's participation in violent extremism is both dangerous and imprudent. Gender stereotypes of women being less dangerous than men are exploited by individuals and groups who understand how to leverage such narratives strategically, operationally, and tactically towards a group's intended goals. Furthermore, women in the U.S. have taken advantage of gender blindness, using this as a means to their advantage and decreasing their levels of accountability. As the cases explored above emphasize, while groups may have clear conceptualizations of women's roles and gender dynamics, women themselves can be inspired by groups and movements and reinterpret ideas on women's roles in order to shape their own actions. Thus, policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders should take a holistic approach when considering threats to the homeland by acknowledging women's agency and involvement in violent extremism.

